

# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## Context

The family is normally regarded as a key institution in Irish life and is accorded a privileged place in the Constitution. Convulsive public debate has taken place over the years on key aspects of family policy and related sexual morality, as for example during the referenda on divorce and abortion which took place in the 1980s and 1990s (Hug, 1999). Questions about the role of public policy in strengthening family life and supporting families of different types have been important in a number of policy arenas, especially social welfare, health, family law and education (see, e.g. Commission on the Family, 1998).

In spite of all this interest, the level of systematic knowledge about the family in Ireland is limited and the data sources which might be used to generate that knowledge are underdeveloped. Major studies on the family have been carried out over the years, but these have been few and widely interspersed and no comprehensive original studies are available for recent times.<sup>1</sup> Research reflecting particular policy concerns has come to the fore in recent years and has tended to focus on family patterns that are problematic from a policy perspective rather than on family life in general. This focus has produced valuable work, such as, e.g. McCashin's (1993, 1996) work on lone parent families and the pioneering study by Mahon and her colleagues (Mahon *et al.*, 1998) on crisis pregnancy, but many important areas remain unexplored. For example, there has been virtually no analysis of the sharp fall in fertility which has occurred in Ireland since the early 1980s nor of the changing role of marriage in family formation. Information on the situation of children in families is particularly poor, though the recent government announcement of a National Children's Strategy and a planned National Longitudinal Study of Children may point to improvements on this front in the future. Similarly, even though data on incomes indicate that the large two-parent family accounts for a large proportion of the children in poverty (Callan *et al.*, 1996, p. 92), the large family has virtually disappeared off the agenda for family research in Ireland, in contrast to the position of three decades ago when it was pointed to as a major concern (see, e.g. Walsh, 1968).

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## Objectives

It is in the context of the under-developed state of family research in Ireland that the present study was initiated. It is intended primarily as a

<sup>1</sup> The best-known studies deal with the family in rural Ireland and none of these are recent (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940/1968; McNabb, 1964; Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Hannan, 1979). No general study of the family in urban Ireland has been carried out since Humphreys' study of the late 1940s (Humphreys, 1966). For a recent general overview of the family in twentieth century Ireland, see Kennedy (2001).

scoping exercise focusing on the present information and knowledge base for policy analysis in areas connected with the family in Ireland. Its objectives are:

1. To identify and describe the major different paths to new family formation in Ireland over the period 1987-1997, based on existing data and focusing particularly on family types which are of major concern from a social welfare point of view (such as one-parent families and large two-parent families).
2. To explore existing data sets from a family studies point of view, draw out key family related and policy relevant findings which they can yield, and identify those data gaps which need to be filled through further data collection.
3. Draw out the implications of the findings for public policy, focusing both on substantive policy and on improvements in data collection needed to guide policy in the future.

Three key substantive topics are examined in the report – fertility decline, the rise in lone parenthood, and trends in household and family size, with special reference to the continued incidence of large family households. For each topic, the report aims to describe recent trends in Ireland and locate those trends in comparative international perspective, examine cross-sectional variations in Ireland (to the extent that available data will allow) and draw implications, particularly in regard to needs for future data collection and research.

## 2. DECLINE IN FERTILITY

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### Introduction

The decline in fertility is one of the most significant social changes to occur in Ireland in recent decades. This decline has implications for social policy at two fundamental levels. First, it has a strong bearing on the welfare of families. In the days of high birth rates (which lasted until the 1960s in Ireland), large family size was a cause of concern because of its links with poverty, poor health, overcrowding and other stresses (Walsh, 1968; Kent and Sexton, 1973). Today, the large family has become rare, and certain kinds of pressures on both children and parents have eased as a result (see Chapter 4 below). However, concern has shifted to newly problematic aspects of fertility patterns. The most common such concern is the partnership circumstances (and sometimes the ages) of parents. Though fewer children are born today, a much larger share of them are born outside of marriage, and many of the parents of those children are relatively young. As we shall see further below, at least some non-marital births occur to parents who are in quasi-marital unions or marry after the birth takes place, so that non-marital childbearing does not always lead to lone parenthood. Nevertheless, the concern is that rising non-marital childbearing has contributed to a major increase in lone parenthood and thus to the stresses on both parents and children which lone parenthood can often lead to, particularly in the case of those who are not well off or lack the backup needed to cope with raising children. This in turn poses questions about how public policy should respond to the welfare needs of families in such circumstances.

The second broad significance of present fertility rates arises at the population level. Here the concern is what falling fertility means for future population size and structure. Major regions of the world, particularly eastern and southern Europe and Japan, now have total fertility rates<sup>2</sup> (TFRs) which are so low (below 1.5) that those regions are already faced with rapid population ageing and may soon face the prospect of substantial population decline, even if one allows for some recovery in birth rates in coming years and substantial volumes of inward migration (UN, 2000). The worry is that these developments in turn could seriously threaten long-term economic growth and social provision (World Bank, 1994).

The importance of these issues, and the different ways they manifest themselves in different countries, suggest that it is useful to examine them in the Irish case and to try to locate Ireland in an international

<sup>2</sup> The total fertility rate is the average number of births a woman would have during her reproductive life if she were exposed to the fertility rates occurring across childbearing age-groups of women in a particular year.

comparative context. This is what the present chapter aims to do. It takes a range of aspects of fertility patterns – total fertility rates, family size and the propensity to form families, the proportion of births occurring outside marriage, and mothers’ ages at birth – and examines how recent trends on these indicators in Ireland fit into the broad picture in developed countries. The overall objectives within which this aim is pursued are to outline what can be said on the topics in question on the basis of available data, to identify the main data gaps which need to be filled in the future, and to point to implications for policy which can be drawn on the basis of existing knowledge.

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### International Fertility Trends

By the early 1990s, replacement level fertility (that is, a TFR of approximately 2.1) had become the upper limit of fertility virtually throughout the developed world. It is now steadily emerging in the developing world also, having already arrived in many parts of Asia (China, Thailand, North and South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong). The United Nations estimates that in 1998, 45 per cent of the world’s population lived in countries with TFRs at or below replacement level and its central projection is that that proportion will have risen to 75 per cent by 2018 (United Nations, 2000, p. 27).

However, despite the universal movement towards low fertility, significant cross-national differences remain. Among developed countries, total fertility rates in the mid-1990s ranged from a low of 1.22 in Italy to a high of 2.07 in the United States (most countries of eastern Europe, whether they could be counted as “developed” or not, also fell within that range, mainly clustered towards the lower end). The EU average was 1.45. The TFR in the US is boosted by the fertility of Hispanic women, which in 1999 stood at 2.89, but even among non-Hispanic white women the TFR in 1999 was 1.85, which was high by European standards.

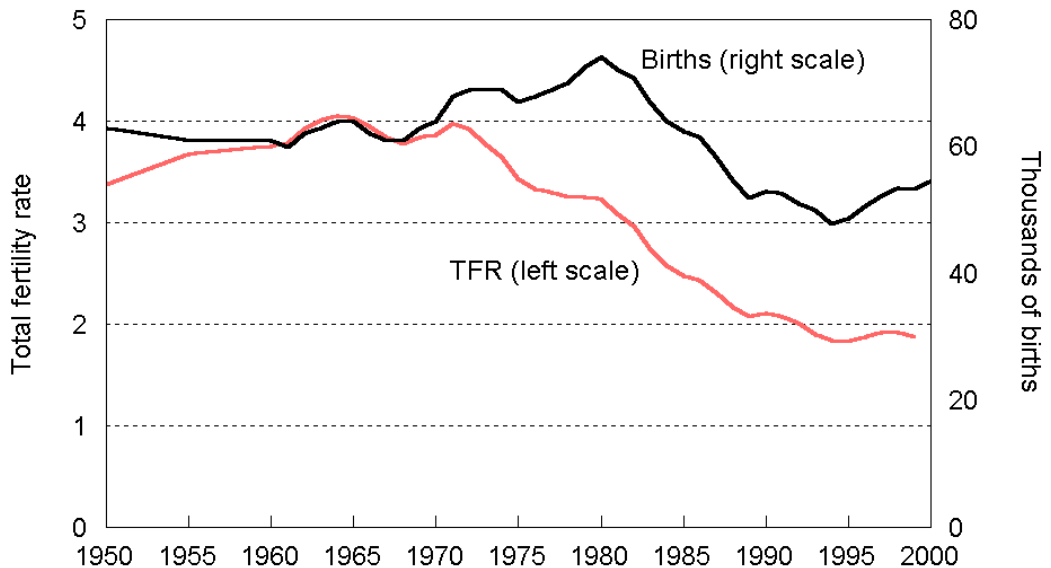
From an historical perspective, this cross-national range in fertility seems small, amounting to a fertility differential of less than one child per woman between the highest and lowest fertility rates across developed countries. However, in relative terms, it means that the TFR in the US today is 70 per cent higher than that of Italy and 43 per cent higher than that of the EU. California, the most populous state in the United States (32 million people) had a TFR in 1998 of 2.2 (80 per cent higher than Italy), and Texas, with a population of 19 million people, has a TFR of 2.4 (double that of Italy) (National Centre for Health Statistics, 2000). Taking major regional differences in the US into account, therefore, the highest TFR in the developed world is now double that of the lowest.

This present-day *relative* differential among developed countries is as wide as it has been at any time over the past half-century and has major significance for the broad evolution of population in the countries concerned. Low fertility countries such as Italy and Japan are at present on a course towards rapid population ageing and sharp population decline by the middle of the present century, while the US population is on course for continuing population growth and more restrained ageing of the population (UN, 2000). If these diverging trends persist, they are likely to have major implications for social and economic differentiation across countries in the present developed world over coming decades.

## Fertility Trends in Ireland

Figure 2.1 presents trends in Ireland in two indicators of fertility – the number of births and the TFR – for the period 1960-2000. These two indicators moved in different directions and at different tempos over the period, reflecting shifts in the balance between the number of births and the number of women of childbearing years. During the 1950s, the number of births in Ireland fell slightly but because of decline in the population of women in childbearing years, the TFR rose. From the late 1960s to 1980, the opposite happened – births increased, but because the female population increased faster, the TFR turned downwards and fell from 3.87 in 1970 to 2.08 in 1989. By the early 1990s, the decline in the TFR had begun to bottom out. Despite a further dip in 1993-95, the overall trend for the 1990s has been reasonably flat, even though the number of births increased by 14 per cent between 1994 and 2000.

**Figure 2.1: Number of Births and Total Fertility Rate in Ireland, 1960-2000**



Sources: CSO Annual and Quarterly Vital Statistics Reports, Council of Europe (2000).

Since the 1950s, the level of fertility in Ireland has consistently been high by European standards, in keeping with the image of the Irish demographic regime as an outlier in Europe (Coleman, 1992). However, if the comparative range is extended to include other regions of the developed world, Irish exceptionalism becomes less clearcut. At certain points – particularly the start and end of the period between 1950 and 2000 – fertility rates in the United States, New Zealand and (at the start of the period only) in Canada and Australia have also been high by European standards and have fallen more or less in the same range as those in Ireland.

Figure 2.2 illustrates these comparisons. In 1960, as Figure 2.2a shows, when the Irish TFR was just below 4, few countries in Europe (the Netherlands and Portugal being the main instances) had TFRs even barely above 3.0 and the average for the later EU region was 2.69 (UN, 2000b; New Cronos 2001). The Irish TFR was thus over 40 per cent higher than

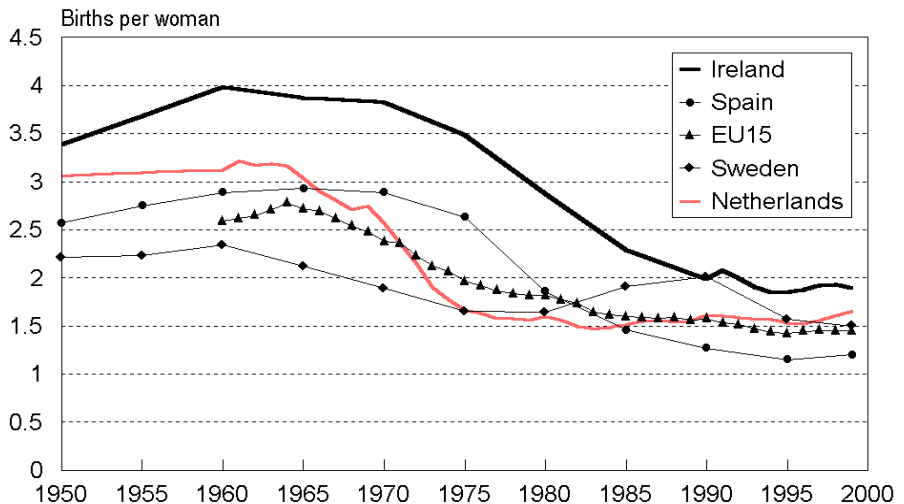
the average for the later EU and 66 per cent higher than that of Sweden, which then represented the lower limit TFR in western Europe. After 1960, fertility decline proceeded sooner and faster in the rest of Europe than in Ireland, so that Ireland's outlier position first became more pronounced. Then decline in the Irish TFR set in during the 1970s and 1980s, placing it on a course of convergence toward the European average. However, convergence halted with the bottoming out of the decline in the Irish TFR in the 1990s, so that at its lowest point (1.84 in 1995), the Irish TFR was still 30 per cent higher than the EU average and 60 per cent higher than the TFR in Spain, which by then represented the lower limit in Europe (and indeed in the world).

Figure 2.2b shows that in the late 1950s, the "new world" countries – the US, Canada, New Zealand and (to a slightly lesser extent) Australia – were clustered around the TFR levels found in Ireland. Fertility in those countries declined sharply in the 1960s but by the 1980s that decline had levelled off and, in the US and New Zealand particularly, had turned into modest recovery. By the 1990s, the TFRs in the US and New Zealand had stabilised at levels slightly above those in Ireland, where they remain today. The TFR in Australia had fallen somewhat lower (to 1.75 in 1998), while Canada (1.6 in 1998) had dropped to well within the range common in Europe.

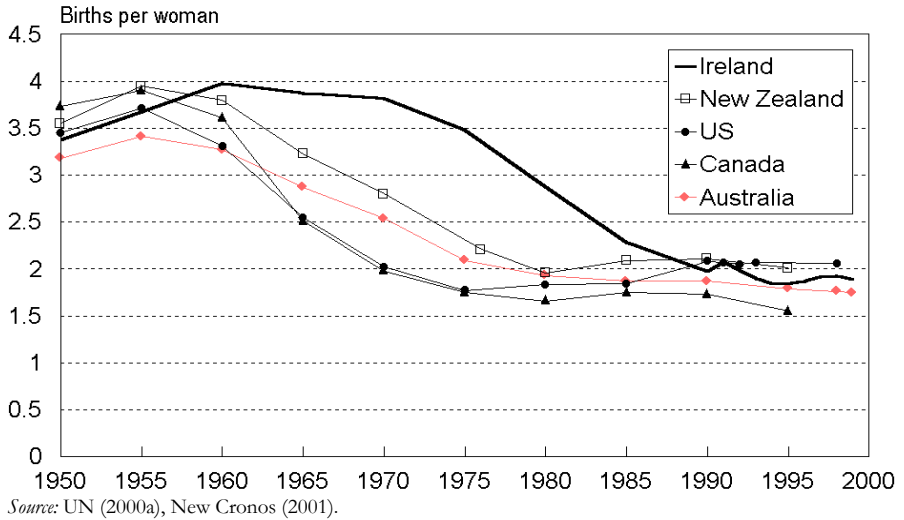
Looking at total fertility rates, therefore, the common image of Ireland as an outlier case characterised by uniquely high fertility levels is only partially borne out by the record over the second half of the twentieth century. Irish TFRs have consistently been high by *European* standards over this period but at certain points have been quite similar to the fertility levels of the "new world" countries of North America and Australia/New Zealand (the closest similarities being with the United States and New Zealand both at the beginning and end of this period). As in those latter countries, the TFR in Ireland has fallen by a half or more since the early 1960s but that decline has bottomed out in recent years. The

**Figure 2.2: Ireland's TFR in Comparative Perspective, 1950-2000**

**2.2a. Ireland and Europe**



## 2.2b. Ireland and the “New World” Countries



present TFR in Ireland is low by Irish historical standards and is marginally lower than in the present-day United States or New Zealand. But it is reasonably high in comparison to the very low rates that have emerged in Europe.

Just as Ireland is now closer to the United States than to Europe in regard to total fertility rates, the long-term population prospects arising from those fertility rates are also closer to those of the United States. The UN's latest "medium-variant" projections of world population (UN, 2000a) assume that Ireland's edge in fertility rates over the rest of Europe will continue for the foreseeable future and, as in the case of the United States, will be enough (in combination with modest inward migration) to sustain continuing population growth. According to those projections, Ireland will be the only European country to have a larger population in 2050 than it has today, with an increase of the order of 25 per cent, compared to an EU decline in excess of 10 per cent – and a decline in Italy of over 25 per cent (UN, 2000b, p. 8).

### Childbearing Patterns

Although Irish fertility *levels* (as measured by TFRs) closely matched those of the United States and New Zealand both around 1960 and again in the 1990s, the patterns of family formation and childbearing which gave rise to those fertility levels were distinctively different in the earlier part of the period. They have lost much of that distinctiveness since then.

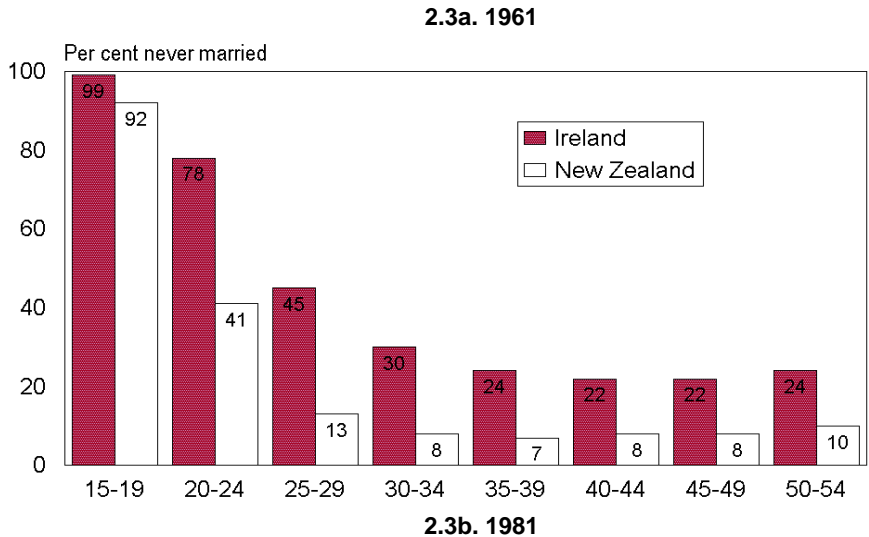
In Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, family formation and childbearing patterns were unique in that marriages were few (i.e. many adults remained single) but families were large, a combination which had been a feature of Irish reproductive patterns since the late nineteenth century (Guinnane, 1997; United Nations, 1990). Since then the distinctive Irish pattern of a low incidence of marriage and high marital fertility has evolved towards a more standard pattern for developed countries in which union-formation is generally higher than it was in Ireland in the past but family size is lower. This evolution is a major part of the story of Irish

fertility trends over the past half century. The new patterns which have emerged in recent years are not easy to track, since one of their features is a growth in the number of non-marital unions, a type of family formation which is poorly tracked in the available demographic data. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace the general outlines of what has happened and to gain some indirect indications of the more clouded developments.

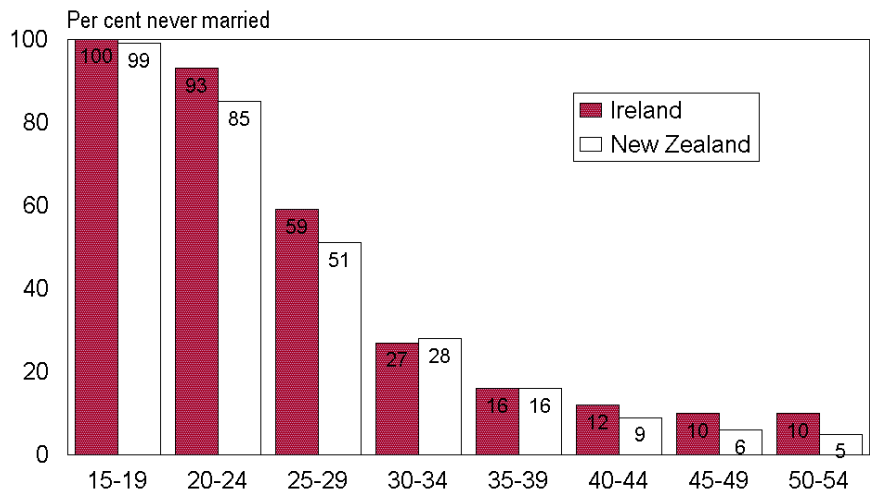
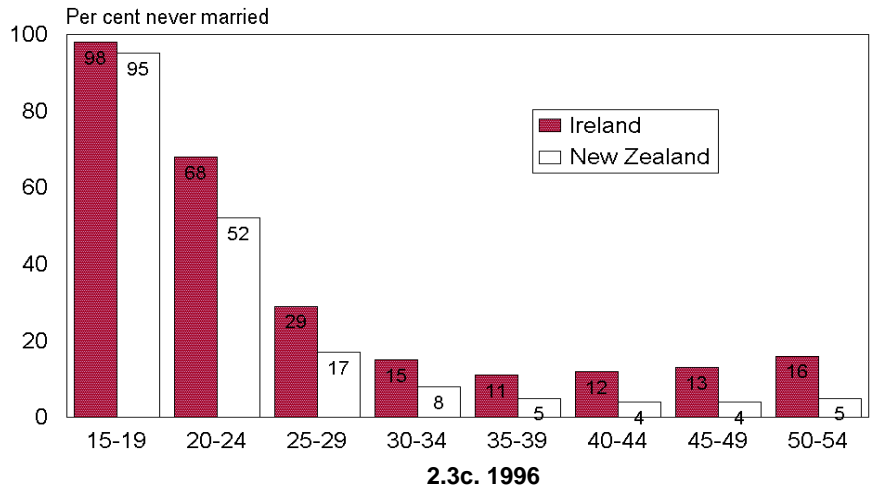
**MARRIAGE**

The role of shifting marriage patterns in Irish fertility trends since the 1960s can be illustrated through a comparison with New Zealand. New Zealand in the 1960s was one of those countries which had fertility rates which were quite close to those of Ireland but which had sharply contrasting marriage patterns. In 1961, New Zealand’s level of marriage (like that of the United States) was exceptionally high by the standards of the developed world while Ireland’s was exceptionally low. At age 30-34, for example, only 8.1 per cent of women in New Zealand in 1961 were still single, compared to 29.6 per cent in Ireland (Figure 2.3a). Over the following two decades, Ireland had something of a marriage boom, in contrast to the rest of the developed world where the post-war marriage boom was by then played out and a decline in marriage was setting in (UN, 1990). By 1981, the proportions of women remaining single had fallen in Ireland while, in New Zealand, singlehood had risen among women aged between 20 and 30. In general, though, the proportions remaining single were still larger in Ireland (Figure 2.3b).

**Figure 2.3: Proportions Never Married, Ireland and New Zealand, 1961, 1981, 1996**





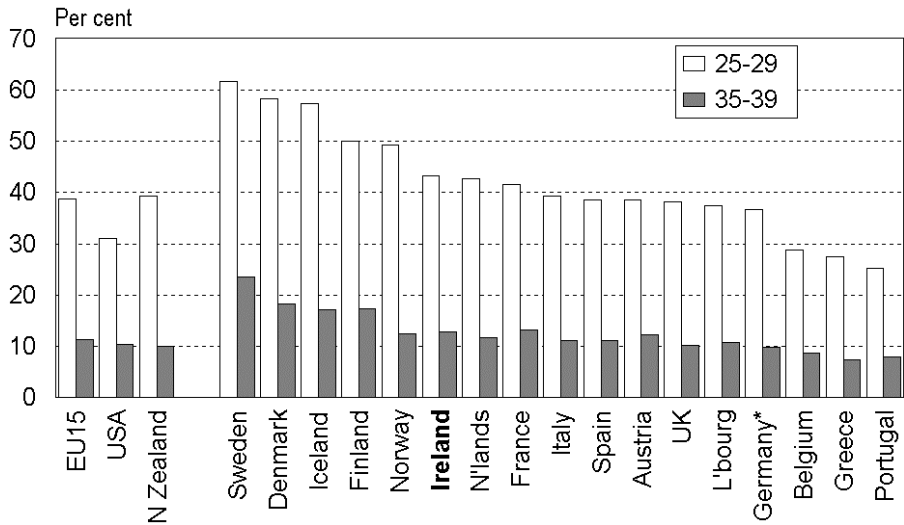


Sources: Census 1996 (Ireland); Statistics New Zealand.

By 1996, the marriage boom in Ireland was well past and the incidence of non-marriage had risen sharply again (Figure 2.3c). Up to age 30-34, the proportions never married were higher in 1996 than they had been in 1961. A similar trend had continued in New Zealand, with the result that the former divergence in proportions remaining single between New Zealand and Ireland had all but disappeared by 1996.

A broader international picture is summarised in Figure 2.4 for 1990/91, referring to women in the age-groups 25-29 and 35-39. This shows that, by the 1990s, the only real outliers as far as non-marriage was concerned were the Scandinavians – Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland. Ireland's level of non-marriage by that time was unexceptional. Non-marriage in the US was somewhat less common than in Europe, though more recent data suggest that the gap may be closing (US *Statistical Abstract*, 1998).

**Figure 2.4: Proportions Never Married Among Women Aged 25-29 and 35-39, Selected Countries, 1990/1991**



\* excl. former GDR.

Source: New Cronos (2001).

The implications of the recent rise in non-marriage for the level of family formation has to be interpreted in the light of the declining importance of marriage in this area. In the past, in Ireland as in other countries, marriage was the dominant gateway to family formation – couples did not live together or have children before they married. Today, that is no longer the case, a point which will emerge clearly below in connection with the rise and normalisation of non-marital childbearing. Thus, while it is clear that marriage has become less popular in recent years across a wide range of countries, it is more difficult to establish whether and to what extent other types of family formation – e.g. through non-marital unions and through solo parenthood – have provided compensating alternatives. As we will suggest further below, a knowledge of the extent and nature of these possible alternatives is a pressing requirement for the understanding of present trends in family formation in Ireland. It is here that some of the main gaps in the Irish data pointed to by the present report arise.

## Birth Order

As a counter-balance to the low incidence of marriage in Ireland in the 1960s, family sizes were extremely large by the standards of virtually all other western countries. This aspect of Irish fertility receded from that point on, but it did so quite slowly and it was only in the 1990s that family sizes in Ireland ceased to be significantly larger than the international norm. Comprehensive direct data on the numbers of children born to women are lacking in Ireland, and so we have to rely on data on birth orders from birth registration sources in order to track family size.<sup>3</sup> Using

<sup>3</sup> Up to 1981, the Census of Population provided the closest approximation to a comprehensive measure of family size by means of periodic enquiries on numbers of children born to married women. However, as these enquiries did not extend to single women and widows, the resulting measures were not in fact fully comprehensive. Such enquiries have not

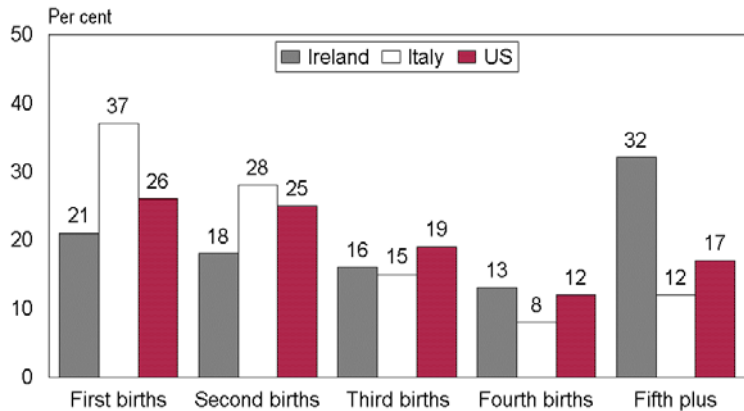
data from this source, Figure 2.5 illustrates the evolution of family size in Ireland by comparing the distribution of Irish births by birth order with those of two other indicative countries – Italy, which represents a low fertility European country, and the United States, a high fertility “new world” country where family sizes were at the outer limit of what was found in developed countries outside of Ireland (in New Zealand, another high fertility new world country, available data on birth orders relate only to legitimate births to current unions and so cannot be compared directly with Ireland).

In Ireland in 1960, one-third of births were fifth births or higher. This was an extraordinarily large proportion by the standards of the developed world and pointed to an incidence of large families that was quite unique to Ireland at the time (Figure 2.5a). The typical pattern elsewhere was that first births outnumbered fifth-plus births, but in Ireland there were almost one and a-half times as many fifth-plus births as first births. Even in the US, where the overall TFR in 1960 was close to that of Ireland, fifth-plus births were little over half as significant in relative terms as in Ireland.

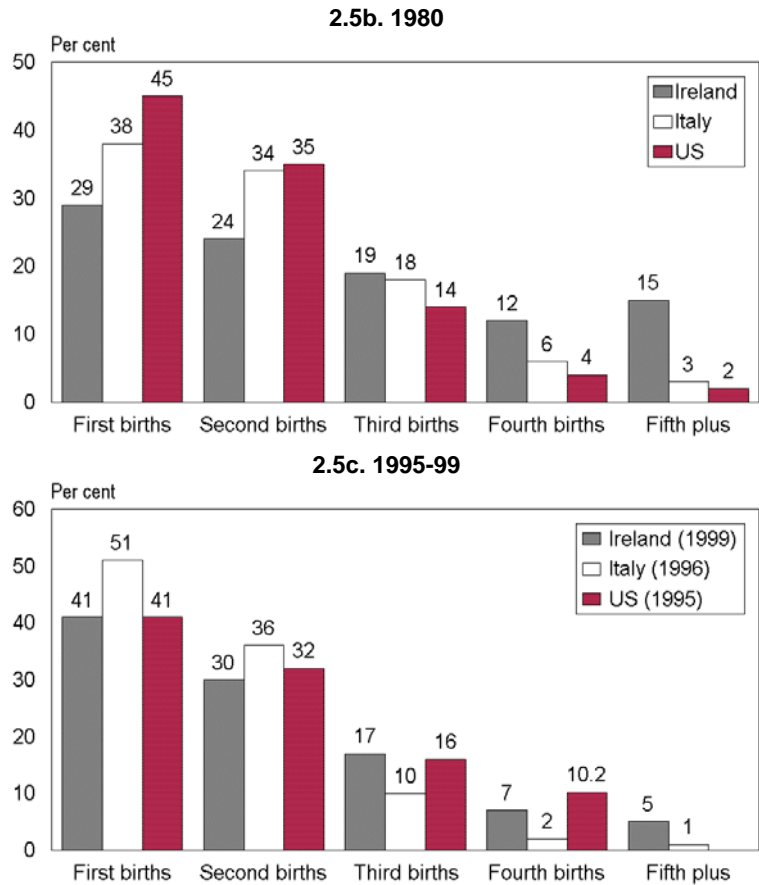
By the 1980s, fifth-plus births had fallen to 15 per cent of the total in Ireland, but this was still significantly ahead of the corresponding proportions in Italy and the US, where births of this order had dwindled to insignificance (Figure 2.5b). It was not until the late 1990s that higher order births in Ireland dropped to

**Figure 2.5: The distribution of births by birth order, Ireland, Italy and the United States, 1960, 1980 and 1995-99.**

**2.5a. 1960**



been included in the Census since 1981 and no more adequate measure has taken their place. Birth registration data on birth orders provide the other major source of information on this issue but the available data do not allow for an analysis of the social correlates of mothers' family sizes and, equally important, they provide no information on the numbers or characteristics of women who have no children. The lack of information on childlessness is a particularly important gap in our knowledge of trends in family formation.



Source: UN Demographic Yearbook 1965, Table 16; Council of Europe (2000); UN (1997).

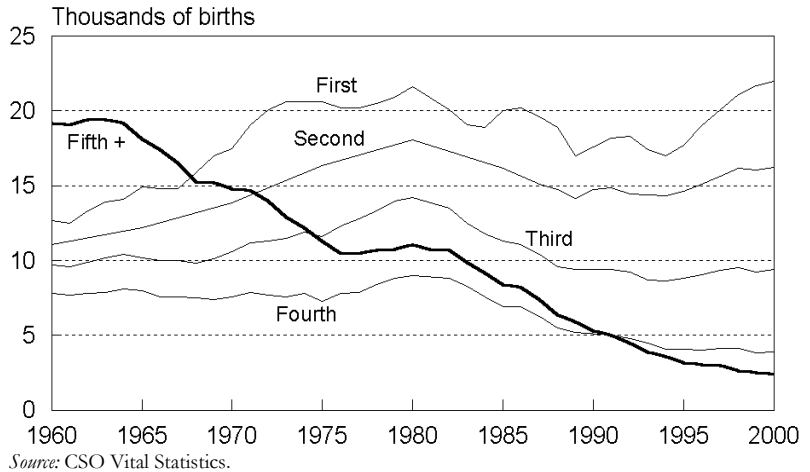
something approximating normal levels for developed countries (Figure 2.5c). Even then, however, Ireland was at the upper limit for fourth order births or higher (by the mid-1990s, Ireland, Poland and Cyprus were the only European countries where fourth-plus births exceeded 10 per cent of total births – UN, 1997). Italy represents the opposite extreme. There 86 per cent of births were first or second order births and even third births had dwindled to low levels.

### New Family Formation

Given the continuous decline in family size indicated by the falling numbers of higher order births, a question arises as to how fertility rates have stabilised in Ireland in the 1990s. The answer is indicated in Table 2.6 which shows the dominant role of lower-order births, particularly first births, in driving overall birth numbers in the 1990s. First, second and third births rose up to 1980 but then showed a more-or-less steady decline up to 1994. Since 1994, however, a sharp increase has occurred in first births. These rose from 17,009 in 1994 to 21,997 in 2000, an increase of almost 29 per cent in six years. That increase has followed through to

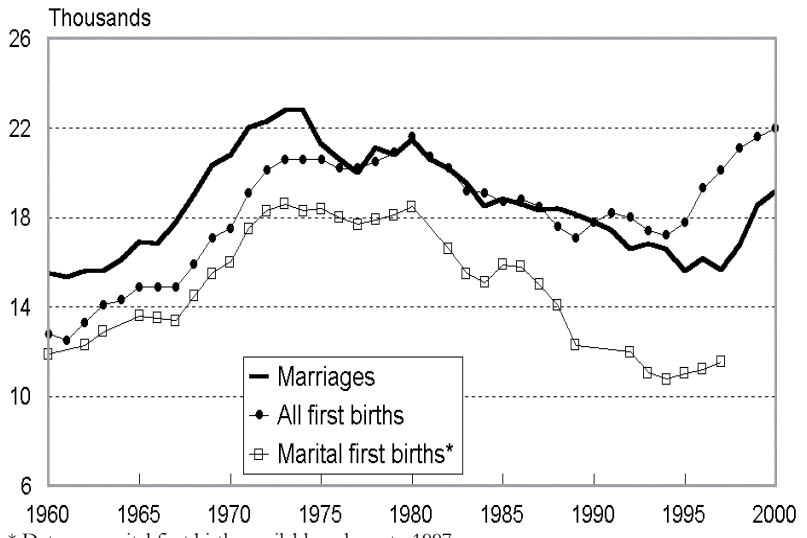
some extent and with a certain lag into second births. The surge in first births was such that by 2000 their number had risen to the highest level on record, barely exceeding the previous peak achieved in 1980. If we were to take first births as an indicator of new family formation, we can conclude from these figures that the latter half of the 1990s has witnessed a boom in new family formation. That boom is the force lying behind the stabilisation of birth numbers over the recent period, since it compensated for the continuing decline in higher-order births.

**Figure 2.6: Number of Births by Birth Order in Ireland, 1960-2000**



There is a coincidence between the timing of the surge in new family formation since 1995 and the boom in the economy which had just got underway by that time. It is, therefore, tempting to conclude that rapid economic growth was one of the factors lying behind the growth in new families. Improved economic conditions may have encouraged couples (or women who had children as lone parents) to start families, even though at the same time it may have discouraged existing couples from having a fourth or even a third child to the degree that their predecessors had done as recently as the 1980s and 1970s. It is also possible that inward migration contributed to the increase. However, no information is available which would allow us to examine its role in contributing to the boom in first births of the late 1990s.

Figure 2.7 expands on the changing relationship between marriage and new family formation by showing the trends for marriages, first births, and first births within marriage since 1960 (data on the former two items are available up to 2000 and on the latter item up to 1997). From 1960 to the mid-1970s, the trend in first births followed at a one to two year lag behind the trend in marriages. This reflected the normal family formation pattern at the time in which marriage usually came first and first birth followed some time afterwards. That pattern began to change from the mid-1970s onwards as non-marital first births increased in number. By the early 1990s, there were more first births than marriages. The upsurge in first births from 1994 widened the gap with marriages even further.

**Figure 2.7: First Births, Marriages and Marital First Births in Ireland, 1960-2000**

However, in 1997 the number of marriages began to increase sharply. They rose from 15,631 in 1997 to 19,168 in 2000, a 23 per cent increase, thus tracking the sudden upward movement in first births which had begun two years earlier. Detailed data from marriage registrations have not been available since 1996 (for the first time since the early 1950s, the Annual Vital Statistics Report for 1997 contained no data on marriages, as the necessary returns were not available from the General Register Office). It is therefore difficult to say what the post-1997 increase in the number of marriages entails. It may be due in part to the introduction of divorce early in 1997. The increase in marriages from 1997 is commensurate with the number of divorces granted by the courts and may have arisen in part because those already in second unions were thereby enabled to formalise their second relationships through marriage. It may also simply reflect a changed approach to the sequencing of marriage and childbearing, with a greater tendency among couples to have a child first and marry afterwards, rather than *vice versa*.

### Births Outside Marriage

The proportion of births taking place outside marriage has shown an unbroken upward trend over the past three decades in Ireland, reaching 32 per cent in 2000 (Fig 2.8). All other western countries have also shown an increase on this front but they have done so at different rates and from different starting points in different countries.

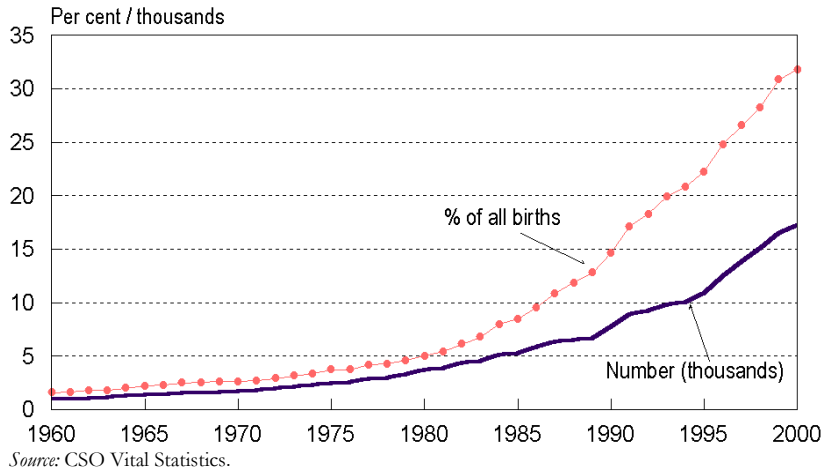
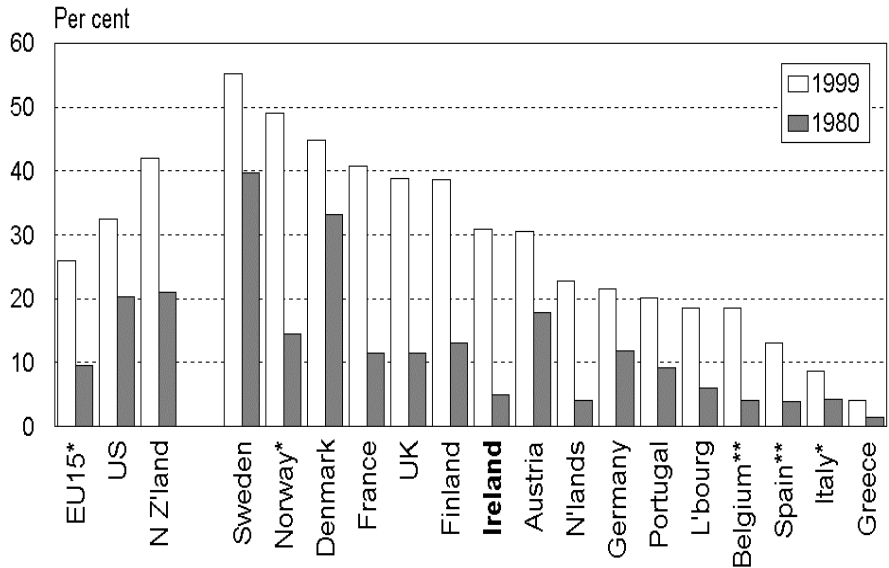
**Figure 2.8: Non-marital Births in Ireland, 1960-2000**

Figure 2.9 compares the changes cross-nationally since 1980, as this has been the period of particularly rapid growth in non-marital childbearing in Ireland. Some countries have long had low levels of non-marital births and despite recent upward movements continue to do so by international standards (see especially Greece and Italy in Figure 2.9). Others have soared from relatively low to high percentages. Norway, for example, showed a large absolute increase between 1980 and 1996 (from 14 to 48 per cent of births, an increase of 34 percentage points). Ireland showed a five-fold *relative* increase (from 5 to 25 per cent of births) over the same period. Some countries already had high proportions of births taking place outside marriage in 1980 (especially Denmark and Sweden), but even these have shown increases since then. The US had a relatively high proportion in 1980 (third to Sweden and Denmark in Figure 2.9) but its increase since then has been comparatively modest, so that it is now only a short way above the mid-point for the EU. (Within the US, racial differences on this indicator are enormous: among white Americans, 22 per cent of births occurred outside marriage, compared to 69 per cent among blacks and 42 per cent among Hispanics – National Center for Health Statistics, 2000, p. 47).

Ireland's position on this indicator was low in 1980 and was similar to the levels in Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy (Figure 2.9). By the mid-1990s, those countries no longer clustered together. The value for Ireland was three times that of Italy, while the other countries in the group were spread between the Italian and the Irish values. At the same time, despite the sharp increase in the value for Ireland by 1996, it was still only at the average for the EU. However, though Ireland was "average" in EU terms by 1996, one can hardly take that to mean that Ireland has converged towards an international norm on this front. The extent of the cross-country dispersion, and its tendency to widen rather than narrow in recent years, means that an international norm on this front scarcely exists.

**Figure 2.9: Births Outside Marriage, 1980 and 1999: International Comparisons**



\* 1998 \*\*1997

Sources: New Cronos (2001), US Statistical Abstract, Statistics New Zealand.

The social significance of high proportions of births occurring outside marriage is difficult to interpret and is likely to vary from country to country. Non-marital births often occur to cohabiting couples rather than to solo mothers. In Sweden, for example, where the incidence of non-marital births is extremely high (at over 50 per cent of all births), the incidence of genuine solo births (that is, to women not involved in a stable relationship) was quite low: only 7 per cent of Swedish mothers in the age-range 25-29 in the early 1990s had a child before entering their first long-term union (Kiernan, 1999). Across nine European countries, births to solo mothers generally accounted for between 5 and 12 per cent of all births (*ibid*). Thus the level of solo births is lower and less variable across countries than the level of non-marital births.

Systematic information on this question is lacking for Ireland, so it is difficult to interpret the full social significance of recent rises in non-marital fertility in Ireland. However, studies of women who were pregnant outside marriage have shown that such women live in a wide range of partnership circumstances. In the most recent large-scale study (Mahon *et al.*, 1998), which gathered information on over 2,000 women who were pregnant in 1996, 35 per cent of the sample were unmarried but only 11 per cent described themselves as “single” (that is, as uninvolved in any ongoing relationship). Over 25 per cent (that is, over two-thirds of those who were unmarried and pregnant) reported that they were in a stable relationship of some kind (7.5 per cent cohabiting, 9 per cent “going steady” and 9 per cent “engaged”). This echoes Flanagan and Richardson’s (1992) earlier study of unmarried pregnant women, which found that 18.5 per cent of the women were living with the child’s father.

However, this fact itself does not have clearcut implications, since it is uncertain how far non-marital cohabitation can be considered the functional equivalent of marriage. Cohabitation is less stable than marriage, and it appears also that unions which commenced in non-marital cohabitation and subsequently entered marriage are less stable than those



which commenced as marriages. A US study showed that the proportion of unions surviving ten years was 59 per cent in the case of married couples who had never cohabited compared to only 30 per cent of couples who started out in cohabitation, whether or not they subsequently married (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). In Europe, marriages that follow on from a period of cohabitation generally do not seem to be less stable than marriages that started out in marriage, but cohabitations that do not soon convert into marriage do seem less stable. This is particularly so in Britain, where, in the early 1990s, 92 per cent of married families survived for at least five years after the birth of their first child compared to only 48 per cent in the case of cohabitees (Kiernan, 1999). Apart from the greater instability of cohabiting relationships, they may also be less cohesive in other ways – for example, in that they may practice a lesser degree of income-pooling than married couples do (Blau, 1998).

### Age Patterns of Fertility

Figure 2.10 illustrates the range of international patterns in the age-structure of fertility by plotting age-specific fertility rates for two of the lowest fertility countries in the developed world (Italy and Greece) and two of the highest (the US and Ireland). The age distributions for Italy and Greece are quite similar. They reflect something approaching a standard pattern for very low fertility countries – the age-distribution is near-normal and peaks in the age-range 25-29 years. However, the US and Ireland diverge from that pattern in quite different directions. The US distribution is skewed towards the younger ages. Teenage fertility is extremely high in the US – almost four times higher than the corresponding rate for the EU and ten times greater than the rate in the lowest-fertility countries. The fertility rate for 20-24 year olds is also a multiple of that for EU countries.

**Figure 2.10: Age-specific Fertility Rates, Selected Countries, c. 1995**



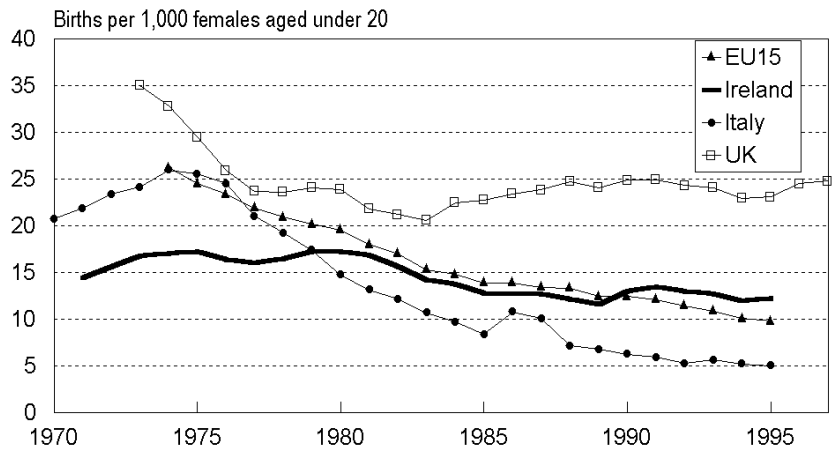
Irish age-specific fertility rates, on the other hand, are skewed towards the older ages: the rate for 30-34 year old women is particularly high, while that for 35-39 year-olds is also quite elevated. Thus, while US and Irish fertility rates may be quite similar in their overall levels (as measured by

the TFR), they are quite different as far as the distribution of mothers' ages at birth is concerned.

### TEENAGE FERTILITY

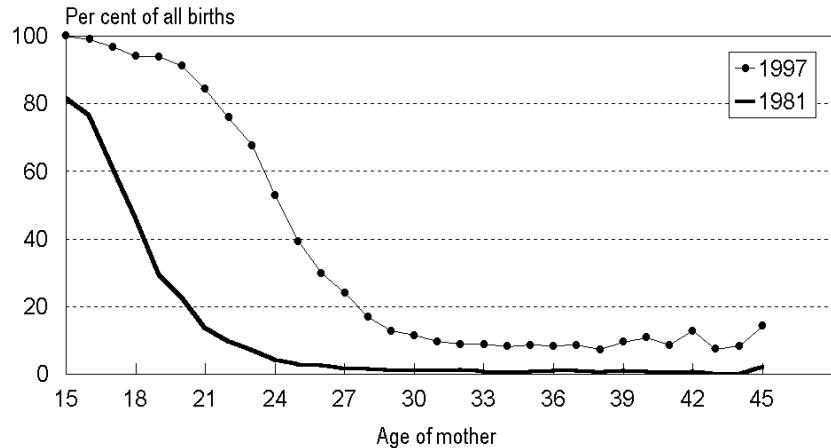
In some countries, particularly the United States and Britain, much of the concern about age-patterns of fertility focuses on the high rates of birth to teenage mothers. In Ireland, by contrast, the skewing of births towards older age-groups of women would lead one to expect a relatively low level of teenage births. Figure 2.11 shows comparisons on this issue for Italy (where teenage fertility is low), the UK (which is the highest in Europe), the EU and Ireland. The US rate is not shown on this graph partly because of problems of comparability in the data (relating to the way age is classified) and partly because the rate is so high it would lie outside the graph (the US teenage fertility rate is almost double the UK rate). Teenage fertility in Ireland declined slightly in the early 1980s and has stabilised since then. It is now close to the EU average but is only half the UK level, which has an exceptionally high level of teenage births.

**Figure 2.11: Teenage Fertility Rates, 1970-1995**



The level of teenage childbearing in Ireland cannot therefore be regarded as high, either by the standards of other countries or of Ireland's own recent past. However, those few who become parents at an early age are likely to experience multiple disadvantages: Hannan and Ó Riain (1993) found that early parenthood was concentrated among those with low educational attainment, those with greater unemployment experience and those from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and was associated with social isolation and psychological distress (the latter only among single mothers).

**Figure 2.12: Age-patterns of non-marital fertility in Ireland, 1981 and 1987**



Source: New Cronos (2001).

While fertility among teenagers and women in their early 20s is not high in Ireland and has been declining, it is clear from Figure 2.12 that it differs sharply from fertility among women in their late 20s and 30s in that it is much less likely to take place within marriage. Among women up to age 21, over 90 per cent of births take place outside of marriage. That percentage drops sharply as women age, so that by the early 30s, less than 10 per cent of births take place outside of marriage. It is not clear why non-marital fertility is much more prevalent among younger than older women but it is clear this age-pattern is an important aspect of the relationship between marriage (or non-marriage) and childbearing.

## Conclusions

The total fertility rate (TFR) in Ireland dropped sharply during the 1980s but in the 1990s stabilised at levels that are close to the upper edge of the range for developed countries. This stabilisation at upper bound TFRs is somewhat surprising as Ireland in the 1990s was marked by rapidly rising demand for female labour, rising costs for childcare, low state support for families with children and a housing shortage. These factors together might be expected to have caused Irish fertility rates to continue converging downwards towards the European average. Yet the strong convergence trend of the 1970s and 1980s more-or-less halted in the 1990s. Irish fertility now lies below but closer to the more vibrant fertility levels of the United States and New Zealand than to the EU average. In common with the US and New Zealand (and in contrast with the EU), Irish fertility rates are just about high enough to sustain continuing population growth, assuming that the balance of migration will be inward rather than outward over the years to come.

Alongside the changing *levels* of fertility in Ireland, other aspects of childbearing patterns have also changed radically in Ireland. One is the move away from the long-standing Irish pattern of imbalanced marriage rates combined with large family size. In the 1960s, Irish women either had no children at all (because they never married) or they had lots of children. Births to women with five children or more were extraordinarily common up to the mid-1960s but were counterbalanced by the high

incidence of childlessness associated with widespread non-marriage. The overall fertility rate which emerged from these contrary features was only moderately high. Though it was elevated by European standards, it was similar to the rate prevailing in the early 1960s in the new world countries of the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Higher order births declined from the mid-1960s onwards but this decline was counterbalanced by a surge in first and second births which lasted up to 1980. The high rate of new family formation indicated by the growth in lower order births was the main driving force in the Irish baby boom of that period. Family formation as measured in this way fell during the 1980s as the number of first births declined. However, by the mid-1990s a recovery had begun. Between 1994 and 2000, there was a 29 per cent increase in first births. This recent surge in new family formation was not sufficient to recreate a fertility boom of the scale of the 1970s, but it was enough to halt the long slide in fertility rates which had taken place since 1980, thus resulting in the bottoming out of fertility decline in the latter part of the 1990s.

A further much-commented on feature of recent Irish fertility trends is the rapid increase in non-marital fertility. The proportion of births taking place outside of marriage tripled in the 1980s (from about 5 to 15 per cent) and doubled again in the 1990s, so that by 2000 it had reached 32 per cent. However, little is known of the partnership circumstances of the women who gave birth outside marriage. Patterns from other countries, along with a limited body of Irish evidence, would suggest that large proportions are in quasi-marital unions and that many may enter formal marriage after the birth of their children. The rise in non-marital fertility, therefore, does not entail as radical a move away from marriage as might first appear, but it does imply a change in the sequencing and significance of marriage in family formation. This is a topic we return to in the next chapter in connection with lone parenthood.

As far as data needs are concerned, the broad outlines of recent developments in fertility in Ireland can be depicted from available information, but there is much that is clouded by the lack of basic information. In some respects, the data situation has deteriorated rather than improved in recent years. Enquiries on the fertility of marriage which were periodically included in the Census of Population up to 1981 have not been repeated in subsequent years and nothing has since been put in their place. Registration data on births provide considerable information, but associated data drawn from marriage registration have not been provided for any year since 1996. Because of delays in processing returns in the General Register Office, the office responsible for marriage registration, the Annual Vital Statistics Report for 1997 contained no data on marriage, the first time this had occurred since the present system of marriage registration was introduced in 1952. Ireland has never had a fertility survey. No major survey of family patterns has been published since the 1970s. In consequence, over the past two decades, there has been a major gulf between the level of interest and debate about family issues in Ireland and the level of information which might throw light on those issues. The final chapter below suggests some improvements in data collection which might fill these and other gaps in information identified in the present chapter.

# 3. LEVELS AND PATTERNS OF LONE PARENTHOOD

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## Introduction

In one sense, there is nothing new about lone parenthood in Ireland, least of all its frequency. A child born in Ireland in 1900 was just as likely to spend some of his or her childhood in a household lacking a parent as a child born today – and the risk of such an experience for children was likely to have been much greater the further back in time one goes. In 1926, 12 per cent of children under 15 years of age had lost one (or in some cases, both) parents to death (*Census of Population, 1926*, Vol. X, p. 86). This percentage is remarkably similar to the percentage of children in the 1990s who were living in lone parent families (as is detailed further below).<sup>4</sup> As the ravages of premature mortality had declined by the early 1900s compared to preceding historical levels, the incidence of parentless children was likely by then to have been relatively modest by historical standards. Thus, taking a long historical view, the risk that a child in Ireland today will live for a time with at least one parent absent from his or her household would seem to be no higher – and perhaps a good deal lower – than in earlier eras.

However, there are other senses in which present day patterns of lone parenthood are quite new. The most obvious is that premature death of a spouse/parent is no longer the main cause of lone parenthood. Premature death of parents has not disappeared altogether but it has been replaced by non-marital childbearing and marital breakdown as the main source of parenting alone. The trends in non-marital births, a source of lone parenting that has risen rapidly in recent years, have been described in detail in the previous chapter. However, it is important to reiterate that only a subset of these births result in lone parenthood. Many occur in two-parent families where the partners are in quasi-marital relationships, though information is lacking on the numbers of cases where this is so.

These new routes of entry into lone parenthood have given rise to considerable debate from a policy point of view. Both marital breakdown and (in most cases) pregnancy outside a stable relationship (Mahon *et al.*, 1998) typically are crisis events, as was and remains the case with entry into widowhood through the death of a spouse. However, lone parenthood arising from non-marital births and marital/relationship breakdown differs from that arising from widowhood in that the so-called absent parent today is often only partly absent from the child's life. He

<sup>4</sup> As there was also likely to have been a certain incidence of desertion and separation among parents in 1926, it is probable that the percentage of children living without at least one parent was somewhat greater in 1926 than in 1996.

(and the absent parent usually is a “he”) normally lives apart from the children and their mother but may to varying degrees sustain a relationship with them and take part in joint parenting – none of which is possible when premature death is the cause of a parent’s absence. In these circumstances, the character of lone parenthood and its significance for children is determined not only by the manner in which it came about but also by the long-term relationships which the two parents maintain between each other and their children as time goes on. That is, it is shaped by the degree to which lone parenthood should in fact be properly regarded as a particular form of continuing joint parenthood – a particularly strained or fractured form, perhaps, but nevertheless one in which some degree of jointness can be and often is present.

The paths of entry into lone parenthood and the nature of the ongoing relationship between resident and non-resident parents give this family type a particular interest from a policy point of view, since the role of policy in influencing how adults behave in such circumstances is often thought to be crucial. Concern about that role has been at the centre of the much public controversy in this area in Ireland, especially in regard to divorce, while in other countries (especially the US and Britain) there has been intense public debate about the possible role of welfare in promoting lone motherhood and undermining “traditional family values”.

It is beyond the scope of the present account to examine these broader questions to any extent. Its objective, rather, is limited to describing and assessing the present information base which is relevant to such questions. This chapter and the next summarises what can be said on the basis of existing information about broad patterns of lone parenthood and points out the many areas on which little or no knowledge is currently available. The present chapter first considers the conceptual and measurement problems which arise in dealing with lone parenthood. It then turns to the trends in the levels of lone parenthood, the main routes of entry into lone parenthood (referring particularly to marital breakdown since trends in non-marital birth have been covered in the previous chapter), and exits from lone parenthood. The number of children in lone parent households is then explored, and Irish levels of lone parenthood are placed in an international context. The following chapter turns to the characteristics of lone parents and asks what kind of people are most likely to experience lone parenthood.

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## Conceptual and Measurement Issues

**I**nterpreted literally, the concept of lone parenthood could embrace a wide diversity of family types, ranging from the elderly widow living with a grown-up son or daughter to a young unmarried mother living with her infant child (McCashin, 1993). For policy purposes, however, the concept is usually limited to situations where there is a non-cohabiting parent living with dependent children. While this definition might seem relatively straightforward, it poses a number of challenges and difficulties.

### LONENESS

The most fundamental difficulty is that it assumes that there is only one lone parent per lone parent family – that is, the parent who lives with the

children. In practice, as already mentioned, children in lone parent families normally have two parents (the exception arises in the case of widowhood where the second parent has died and so is absent in an absolute sense). In some cases, the second parent may have no more than a biological relationship with the child or children and may take no part in their ongoing parenting (not even to the extent of providing financial support). In that case, the definition of lone parenthood by reference to the “active” parent who lives with the children makes a great deal of sense.

In other cases, however, various degrees of jointness may be present in the parenting activity of the two parents. The children may be “dependent” on both parents (even an absent parent who has little day-to-day contact with children may provide financial support to them).<sup>5</sup> The children may divide their residency between the parents, living for different portions of the week, of the year or even of their childhood with one or other of the two parents. Even if the jointness is unbalanced, in the sense that one parent is far more central and active in the children’s lives than the other, it may still be misleading to define the situation as if the second parent did not exist at all.

The implication is that, in referring to lone parenthood, it is something of an oversimplification to rely excessively on a simple dichotomy between lone parenthood and joint parenthood. It may be more realistic to think of a continuum ranging from the highly stable, tightly integrated two-parent family through various stages of apartness between the parents and between one or other of them and their children, through to the other extreme (most evident in widowhood) where one parent is totally and irrevocably absent. Such a concept may be overly complex to incorporate into routine data collection on the population (such as the Census of Population or Quarterly National Household Survey) but the crudity of existing data on lone parenthood and the need to complement routine sources on this subject with periodic investigations of a more focused and informative nature need to be kept in mind.

## DEPENDENCY

Another difficulty lies in the definition of dependent children. Dependency usually implies some emotional or economic reliance upon another person, and the dependence of children upon their parents may last well beyond what are normally considered the childhood years. It may also extend across household boundaries, in that a child may be dependent, either materially or emotionally, on a parent who lives in another household. In practice, most data sources and research in this area only count children still living with their parent(s) as dependent. There is

<sup>5</sup> Recent research by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) (2000) suggests that only 21 per cent of recipients of the One Parent Family Payment were receiving maintenance (30 per cent among separated parents and 19 per cent in non-married cases). Additionally, Swinburne (1999) showed that the average value of maintenance received by unmarried parents was £24 per week. The proportion receiving maintenance may well be higher among those who are not claiming state benefits but there is no information on this.

less consistency in the age cut-off applied which will become apparent in the following analyses.<sup>6</sup>

Identifying a “non-cohabiting parent” may appear more straightforward than identifying dependent children, but there can be ambiguity about when cohabitation begins or ends. For example, does a boyfriend staying over a few nights a week constitute cohabitation? In the national surveys used here cohabitation is self defined, in that the information comes from respondents’ descriptions of relationships with others in the household. In contrast Social Welfare figures on lone parenthood entail official definitions of (non) cohabitation.

### **MARITAL STATUS**

A definition of lone parenthood which is based entirely on living arrangements and does not refer to marital status means that never married parents are grouped together with those who are separated, divorced and widowed. A trend towards grouping all *de facto* lone parents together in this way has emerged in administrative data in recent years and mirrors policy reform in this area. The amalgamation of benefits for different categories of lone parents into one single payment was instigated in part to get away from moral categorisation of lone parents and to focus instead on the common needs of those raising children alone.

While there are good policy reasons for treating lone parents as a single group in relation to financial support, in our analysis we distinguish between never-married, separated/divorced and widowed lone parents. These categories point to alternative *routes into* lone parenthood. They reflect different demographic phenomena (non-marital birth rates, divorce/separation rates, and death rates), which may well have different antecedents and different implications for the evolution of the families involved.

### **LONE PARENT FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS**

Even when a usable definition has been established, measuring the incidence of lone parenthood remains problematic. Lone parents live in a variety of different household settings. Some head their own households, others live with parents or other relatives, and yet others are accommodated in hostels or other institutional settings. While lone parents in independent households can be readily identified in censuses of population and household surveys, those in alternative living arrangements are more difficult to identify and enumerate. This problem arises because data collection often focuses on households rather than family units and so can undercount family units that co-reside with other family members. Sources such as the Labour Force Survey, Household Budget Survey and the Census of Population report on household structure by identifying a particular “reference person” (who is sometimes labelled the “household head”, even though they may not have claimed that status themselves) and

<sup>6</sup> The age cut-off may vary for children who are seen to be economically dependent. For example, the DSCFA definition for benefit purposes, has a cut-off of 18 years, but this is increased to 22 years for children in full-time education.



establishing the relationship of other members to him or her. The relationships between the other household members are not systematically identified and so have to be inferred from their common relationships to the reference person. In most cases, such inferences are unproblematic but in other cases the relationships involved are unclear. Thus, for example, information collected on a household may indicate that it contains one or more young women who are identified as the daughters of the reference person (or “household head”) and an infant who is described as the grandchild of the reference person but there may be no indication whether the infant is the child of any of the daughters or not.<sup>7</sup> This practice makes it difficult to identify and count lone parent family units in cases where that family unit is part of a larger household containing, for example, the parents and siblings of the lone parent.

An alternative source of information on lone parenthood are the administrative records on social welfare recipients. These data include all lone parents who are claiming the One-Parent Family Payment, regardless of their living arrangements. However these records exclude lone parents who are not entitled to welfare payments because their income from earnings and/or maintenance payments exceed the means-test limits.

In the light of the sampling and measurement limitations of the available sources of data on lone parenthood in Ireland our strategy in this chapter is to compare statistics from a variety of sources while making explicit any weaknesses that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

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## Incidence and Trends in Lone Parenthood

It is well known that the number of lone parents has been rising rapidly, as this trend has been the topic of considerable public and policy debate (e.g. FitzGerald, May 1999; Commission on the Family, 1998; DSFCA, 2000a; Swinburne, 1999). Given the shortcomings in Irish data on family composition, formation and dissolution, establishing the exact dimensions of this demographic change is difficult. Therefore, we present several different sets of figures on lone parent families which provide a range of estimates. The three largest sources of data on lone parents in Ireland are the Census of Population, the annual Labour Force Surveys (up to 1997) and the social welfare statistics (relevant data are also collected in the Quarterly National Household Survey initiated in Winter 1997 but these have not yet been released). In addition, detailed data are available from the Living in Ireland Surveys (LII), though the smaller sample size in this survey means that it provides only limited representation of lone parent families. The LII is the Irish version of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) which was initiated in 1994 with a sample of 4,048 households.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) there is an attempt to deduce these relationships from the information on relationship to the household head. The Quarterly National Household Survey, which has replaced the LFS since 1997, includes a relationship matrix for all household members which rectifies this problem. However, no family data has been published or released from this source. A full relationship matrix is also available in the Living in Ireland Surveys (see below) but the number of lone parents in the sample is relatively small.

Each of these sources shows an inexorable rise in the number of lone parents since the 1980s. The LFS figures in Table 3.1 suggest that in 1989 there were 39,500 lone parents in Ireland and that by 1997 this figure had reached over 58,000, which represents an increase of almost 50 per cent in only eight years. The percentage of families with children under 15 that are headed by lone parents was almost 14 per cent in 1997, up from 9 per cent in 1989.<sup>8</sup>

The Census identifies a somewhat higher number of lone parents with children under 15 (Table 3.2). For example in 1996 an extra 3,312 such families were counted in the Census compared to the 1996 LFS. Therefore, in the 1996 Census a somewhat higher proportion of families with children under 15 years are found to be headed by lone parents compared to the LFS estimate for the same year. Nevertheless, both sources show a steep increase in both the absolute numbers and proportions of lone parents.

**Table 3.1: Labour Force Survey Data on Lone Parents with Children Aged Under 15, 1989-1997**

	Families with children <15	Lone parents with children <15	LP as % of families with children <15
1989	432,550	39,500	9.1
1990	422,100	37,400	8.9
1991	423,300	41,400	9.8
1992	433,400	44,600	10.3
1993	431,550	46,000	10.7
1994	447,300	47,200	10.6
1995	424,100	49,800	11.7
1996	419,850	52,800	12.6
1997	424,100	58,100	13.7

Source: LFS (1989-97).

Figures for lone parents with children under 15 for 1989-92 are cited in DSFCA (2000b).

**Table 3.2: Census Data on Lone Parent Families, 1981-1996**

	Families with children <15	Lone parent families with children <15	LP as % of families with children <15
Census 1981	413,067	29,658	7.2
Census 1986	423,316	36,353	8.6
Census 1991	411,884	44,071	10.7
Census 1996	405,699	56,112	13.8

Table 3.3 compares the most recent estimates of the incidence of lone parent families from the LFS (1997), the Census (1996) and the LII (1997). It shows two relevant indicators – the proportion of all *children* aged under 15 who live in lone parent families and the proportion of *families* who are of that family type. In general, the estimates from the three sources are reasonably similar to each other, though the LII produces slightly higher

<sup>8</sup> We calculate this figure by assuming that number of two-parent *families* is half the number of married *individuals*. The fact that the LFS is a household survey supports this assumption.

estimates than the other two sources. This might be due to sampling error or to the more complete coverage in the LII of lone parent families living as sub-units within larger households. In each of the three sources, the percentage of children living in lone parent families is slightly lower than the percentage of families headed by lone parents. This suggests that on average lone parents have slightly fewer children than couples. We explore this question in greater detail below.

**Table 3.3: Three Measures of Incidence of Lone Parent Families, 1996-1997**

	Percentage of children under 15 in lone parent families	Lone parent families as a % of families with children <15
LFS 1997	11.6*	13.7
CENSUS 1996	12.0	13.8
LII 1997	14.8*	14.5

\* weighted by household weights.

Social welfare records provide a different source of information on the numbers of lone parent families and it is informative to compare social welfare figures with those from the LFS and Census. The data in Table 3.4 show the numbers in receipt of payments for lone parents with dependent children between 1984 and 1999. For social welfare purposes a dependent child is defined as a child aged under 18 or up to 22 years if in full-time education.<sup>9</sup> These benefits have taken a variety of forms over the time period: in 1984 separate payments were made for deserted wives, unmarried mothers and prisoners wives, and widows, but by 1999 most of these payments had been amalgamated into the One Parent Family Payment (OFP).

**Table 3.4: Numbers in Receipt of Benefits for Lone Parent Families**

	Payments to lone parents with dependent children <sup>1</sup>
1984	27,967
1985	29,979
1986	30,933
1987	33,726
1988	35,403
1989	37,268
1990 <sup>2</sup>	41,285
1991	45,122
1992	49,542
1993	53,440
1994 <sup>3</sup>	58,799
1995	64,845
1996	68,882
1997 <sup>4</sup>	77,673
1998	83,316

<sup>9</sup> The age limit was 18 for all children until 1989. In 1989 it was raised to 19 for those in full-time education, and this limit was increased to 20 in 1990, 21 in 1991, and 22 in 1992.

1999

87,131

*Source:* Statistical Information on Social Welfare Services, various years.

<sup>1</sup> Counts all those with receipt of benefits for lone parents with dependent children, such as One Parent Family Payment, or its antecedents – Lone Parent's Allowance, Deserted Wife's Benefit/Allowance, Unmarried Mother's Allowance, and Prisoner's Wife's Benefit/Allowance, Widow's Contributory and Non-contributory Pensions. Some of those receiving Deserted Wives Benefits or Widow's Pensions do not have dependent children so these have been excluded.

<sup>2</sup> 1990 Lone Parents Allowance introduced to replace UMA, DWA, PWA and WNCP.

<sup>3</sup> 1994 Widow's Contributory Pension was extended to include men.

<sup>4</sup> 1997 One-Parent Family Payment replaces LPA and DWB.

In 1984, 28,000 individuals with dependent children were claiming benefits as lone parents, but by 1999 the number of claimants had risen to over 87,000, which represents an increase of over 200 per cent (or 59,164 families). However, these administrative figures are a product of policy as well as demographics. The period 1984 to 1999 was one of considerable welfare reform. Changes in the eligibility rules for lone parent benefits feed into the figures presented in Table 3.4. For example, in 1990 the Lone Parent's Allowance replaced existing means-tested schemes for different categories of lone parents and was made available to lone fathers. This resulted in an increase the number of claimants over and above the real increase in the number of lone parent families. Similarly, the large increase in the number of claimants between 1996 and 1997 partly reflects the introduction of the One-Parent Family Payment. The higher earnings disregards associated with the OFP meant that more working lone parents were eligible to claim benefits, while the publicity surrounding the new scheme may have increased take-up among the eligible population. Therefore, the trends revealed in these figures reflect not only the trends in the number of lone parents in the State but also the widening scope of the eligibility rules to lone parent benefits. Nevertheless, even leaving aside years in which there were major policy changes, the social welfare statistics again show that the number of lone parent claimants has increased significantly over the 1980s and 1990s.

The social welfare figures for 1996 are significantly higher than the LFS and Census counts for the same year (68,900 compared to 52,800 and 56,100 respectively). This discrepancy can be partially attributed to the different age cut-offs for child dependants.<sup>10</sup> However, it also raises the possibility that the count of lone parents in the social welfare statistics is somewhat inflated. This latter likelihood arises particularly since the social welfare count includes only those lone parents who are eligible for lone parent benefits and so would be expected to be *lower* rather than higher than Census or survey estimates. LII data suggest that about three out of four lone parents in both 1994 and 1997 were receiving lone parent benefits (Table 3.5). In consequence, the social welfare count of lone parents should amount to only about three-quarters of the total population of lone parents. The large numbers in the actual social welfare count, relative to Census and survey estimates, is not consistent with this expectation. The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

<sup>10</sup> Census and LFS data are available only in pre-coded age groups so it is impossible to produce an estimate for parents with children aged under 18 so as to make a more accurate comparison.

(DSCFA) is concerned that fraudulent claims by cohabiting parents may inflate their statistics. There is little hard evidence on the extent of such fraud and less than 3 per cent of claims are terminated annually for this reason. Nevertheless, the present data support the possibility that excessive numbers are claiming OFP benefits. The DSCFA note that in 1999, 4 per cent of OFP recipients made claims for additional children which indicates suspected cohabitation (2000, p. 98).

Table 3.5 also presents LII data on the reciprocity rates among different types of lone parents in 1994 and 1997. Although the sample numbers are small (1994 N = 249; 1997 N = 175) and therefore liable to considerable sampling error, it is interesting from a policy point of view to investigate which groups among lone parents are more or less likely to claim lone parent benefits. The proportion of lone fathers receiving lone parent benefits increased dramatically between 1994 and 1997, reflecting welfare reforms that extended eligibility to men. Separated lone parents were least likely to receive benefits in both years which suggests that social welfare figures provide only limited coverage of this group. As we would expect reciprocity rates are lower amongst lone parents in employment. The increase in earnings disregard is likely to account for the rise in the percentage of employed group receiving lone benefits between 1994 and 1997. The results also show that there is a strong relationship between level of education and reliance on lone parent benefits. Fewer than half of lone parents with university degrees are in receipt of these payments compared to over three-quarters of those with no second level qualifications.

**Table 3.5: Receipt of Lone Parent Benefits Among Different Groups of Lone Parents with Children Under 18 Years**

	% Receiving Lone Parent Benefits	
	1994	1997
Lone Mothers	80.3	73.3
Lone Fathers	4.9	73.3
Separated/Divorced	59.5	53.0
Widowed	79.4	94.1
Never married	87.4	84.9
Employed	40.4	63.4
Not employed	87.2	83.8
Primary education	79.0	76.5
Inter/Junior Certificate	79.5	77.8
Leaving Certificate	69.4	65.5
Third level non-university	69.1	48.3
University	45.4	42.6
All	76.3	73.3

*Source:* Living in Ireland Surveys (1994) and (1997).

## Lone Mothers or Lone Fathers?

The great majority of lone parents are female: 91 per cent of lone parents identified in the LFS 1997 are women, as are 84 per cent of those in the 1996 Census. A further breakdown of the Census figures shows that some groups of lone parents are more female dominated than others. Nearly all the never-married lone parents are female (97 per cent), compared to 87 per cent of separated lone parents, 80 per cent of the

widowed and 72 per cent of those who describe themselves as married. The latter group includes cases where the partner was temporarily absent on Census night and, therefore, are not genuinely lone parents; if this group is excluded 85 per cent of lone parents are mothers. Even fewer lone parent families headed by a father are identified in the social welfare statistics on lone parenthood (DSCFA) 2000. In 1999, 97 per cent of those receiving the One-Parent Family Payment and 91 per cent of recipients of the widow(ers) contributory pension were female.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, in most cases where there is a non-resident parent, that parent is the father. Based on the 1997 Labour Force Survey figures there were at least 48,229 fathers who did not live with their children. This estimate is inferred from the count of lone mothers and therefore excludes non-resident fathers in cases where the mother has entered a new relationship and is no longer picked up in the count of lone parents. It thus undercounts the numbers of fathers not living with their own children, though by how much we cannot say. As we mentioned earlier, current data can tell us very little about the characteristics of this group or about the extent or nature of their involvement in their children's lives. The non-coverage of non-resident fathers in lone parent families and their role in their children's lives must be counted as a major weakness in the data base on family life in Ireland today.

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## Routes into Lone Parenthood

As mentioned earlier the growth in lone parenthood arises from several different processes which are associated with different pathways into lone parenthood. One of the major factors sustaining the growth of lone parenthood has been the increase in non-marital births outlined in Chapter 2. However, it is also important to establish the contribution of marriage breakdown and widowhood and how changes in these phenomena have affected the trends described above.

Due to the differences in definitions and measurement techniques outlined earlier, our four major sources of information on lone parents produce different estimates of their composition by marital status.<sup>12</sup> The Census and the LFS data suggest that marital breakdown is the most common route of entry into lone parenthood, with non-marital births accounting for the second largest category. The proportion of widows/widowers stands at about 12 per cent in both sets of data. However, both the Census and the LFS are likely to under-represent lone parents living with their own parents and, since these are largely unmarried, may underestimate the proportion of lone parent families accounted for by unmarried mothers.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of this group do not have children but there is no separate information on the sex composition of those with children. Recipients of Widow(ers) Non-contributory Pension with children were transferred to OPFP in 1990.

<sup>12</sup> A small number of lone parents in the LFS and the LII describe their marital status as "married" even though they are not living with a partner. It is likely that these cases involve *de facto* separations where there has been no legal change of status, so they have been included in the "separated" category. The proportion of married lone parents is much higher in the Census, which can arise from a partner being temporarily absent on Census night, therefore this group have been excluded.

Social welfare statistics and the LII accord somewhat greater importance to unmarried lone parents. The latter two sources suggest that the unmarried are the most numerous group among lone parents, representing more than half of those with children under 18 years. The LII figures show that if we consider parents with younger children, the proportion represented by unmarried lone parents increases even further. Separated parents are the second most common group. These estimates too must be interpreted with caution as our earlier analysis suggests that separated lone parents are under-represented in the social welfare statistics, while the LII figures are based on a relatively small sample of lone parents. If we adjusted the social welfare statistics on the basis of the results on non-claimants this would lead to a more equal division between those entering lone parenthood through marital breakdown and non-marital births.

**Table 3.6: Estimates of Marital Status of Lone Parents**

	Census 96	LFS 1997	Living in Ireland 97		Social Welfare 97**
	Parent<50*	Child<15	Child<15	Child<18	Child<18***
Never Married	34.9	41.8	67.9	56.1	55.0
Separated	52.7	46.6	27.0	29.7	35.5
Widowed	12.4	11.6	5.1	14.2	9.5

\* The published Census figures count parents with offspring of all ages. We set an age cut-off of 50 years for the parent to exclude cases where the child is likely to be over 15 years. Excludes married lone parents.

\*\* Calculated from *Statistical Information on Social Welfare Services* (1997). The total includes those with dependent children claiming Widow's Contributory Pension and Deserted Wife's Benefit. If restricted to OFP claimants the figures are: 74 per cent unmarried, 23 per cent separated and 3 per cent widowed.

\*\*\* Or aged 18-22 in full-time education.

As we might expect, the importance of these different pathways into lone parenthood has changed over time. Even in the space of ten years, widowhood has become a much less common cause of lone parenthood, while separations and especially non-marital births have increased in significance. The 1986 Census showed that 20.2 per cent of lone parents aged under 50 were unmarried, 32.3 per cent were separated and 47.5 per cent were widowed.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that the marital status of the stock of lone parent social welfare claimants is quite different to the composition of the new intake of claimants. A survey of 1,000 new claims for One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) (DFSCA, 2000) found that 90 per cent were unmarried, 10 per cent were separated and none were widowed.<sup>14</sup> This

<sup>13</sup> Calculated from special tabulations reported by McCashin (1993). As in the case of the 1996 data we have excluded married lone parents from the analysis.

<sup>14</sup> The absence of widowed lone parents arises in part because those who are eligible for insurance benefits can claim the Contributory Widows/Widowers Pension instead of OFP and so many would not be included in the sampling frame. New applicants cannot apply for Deserted Wives Benefit so separated lone parents are properly represented in the sampling frame.

survey also found that 78 per cent of new claimants were aged under 23 years and 3 per cent of the never married group had previously been in a cohabiting relationship. The higher proportion of never married individuals in the inflow to the One Parent Family Payment compared to the stock of recipients suggests that the exit rate from OFP is higher for the never married group than separated lone parents, and that the duration of claims is longer for the separated group.

### TRENDS IN MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN

The relatively high proportions of separated individuals especially among younger lone parents may be somewhat surprising given the dramatic rise in non-marital births reported in the preceding chapter, and what appears to be, by international standards, a relatively low rate of marriage breakdown in Ireland. There are no comprehensive statistics on marriage breakdown in Ireland. Instead we must make do with information on the current marital status among the population. The numbers of separated and divorced individuals reported in the Census and the LFS are presented below (Table 3.7). These figures show a steady increase in numbers since the 1970s. The latest Census in 1996, recorded 87,800 divorced or separated persons living in Ireland compared to less than 8,000 in 1979.

As Fahey and Lyons (1995) point out, these statistics are a measure of the stock of separated or divorced individuals and therefore cannot provide a measure of the rate of marriage breakdown. For this we would need to know in addition the rate of outflow from this category through emigration, death or the formation of second unions. However, the change in the stock figures can give us a lower bound for the number of additional separations from year to year. Based on the number of successful applications for barring orders, judicial separations, separation agreements and other family law procedures such as maintenance orders, Fahey and Lyons (1995) estimated that there were 3,335 marriage breakdowns in the legal year 1993-94, affecting 6,670 persons. The change in the stock figures for the same period was 4,900 persons.

**Table 3.7: Changes in the Number of Separated/Divorced Individuals 1979-1997**

	000s			
	M	F	All	Per 1000 married Persons
<b>1979</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>6.1</b>
1981	5.1	9.0	14.1	11.5
1983	8.3	12.8	21.1	16.2
1984	8.5	15.9	24.4	18.3
1985	8.0	17.2	25.2	19.0
<b>1986</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>37.2</b>	<b>28.6</b>



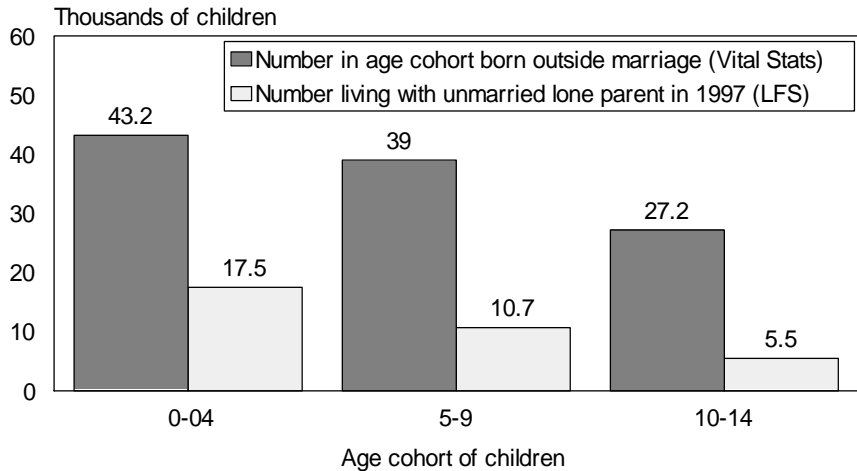
1987	11.2	20.6	31.9	23.7
1988	11.9	24.6	36.5	26.9
1989	12.8	25.0	37.8	28.1
1990	14.2	25.5	39.7	29.7
<b>1991</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>55.1</b>	<b>41.4</b>
1992	20.1	34.2	54.3	39.7
1993	20.4	37.7	58.0	42.2
1994	22.9	40.1	62.9	45.7
1995	25.2	42.8	68.0	49.3
<b>1996</b>	<b>35.7</b>	<b>52.1</b>	<b>87.8</b>	<b>64.7</b>
1997	31.2	51.8	83.0	59.7

*Source:* (1979), (1986), (1991) and (1996) (in bold) – Census; other years – Labour Force Survey.

### NON-MARITAL BIRTHS AND LONE PARENTHOOD

The trends in non-marital births were described in detail in the last chapter. We stressed there that a significant but indeterminate number of non-marital births were to couples in non-marital unions. As a way of estimating the proportion of non-marital births that result in the formation of lone parent families, we compare the number of children born outside marriage in particular years with estimates of the numbers living with unmarried lone parents in subsequent years (Figure 3.1). In the four years from the start of 1993 to the start of 1997, for example, 43,200 children were born outside marriage. However, according to the LFS data in 1997, only 17,500 children aged zero to four years were living with unmarried lone parents in that year, which is only 41 per cent of the children born outside marriage in the relevant time period. Some of the difference between the two figures may be due to sampling errors in the LFS. There may also have been some inward and outward migration from the population within the four year period which would affect the final total. Nevertheless, the figures suggest that over half the children born outside of marriage between 1993 and 1997 were living in two-parent families by 1997. This could have arisen either because the mother was already cohabiting when the child was born or because she entered cohabitation or marriage soon after the birth.

**Figure 3.1: Accumulated Numbers Born Outside of Marriage in Period 1982-1996 Compared with Number of Children Living with Unmarried Lone Parents in 1997, Classified by Age Cohort**



*Sources:* Derived from CSO Vital Statistics and LFS (1997) microdata.

## Exits from Lone Parenthood

The significance of lone parenthood in demographic and social terms depends in part on how long family members spend in this family status. If a significant proportion of lone parents eventually marry (or re-marry in the case of those who are separated or divorced), the implications are different than if lone parenthood is a long-term state. In particular, the question of how lone parent families evolve has implications for the income and service supports needed by these families, and consequently for state spending. Qualitative research (Russell and Corcoran, 2000) has highlighted that lone parents often experience practical and emotional barriers to forming new relationships. These barriers include loss of benefits and consequently a loss of economic independence, concern for the emotional impact on children, and lack of opportunities for meeting new partners. This would suggest a low rate of re-partnering especially among those dependent on state benefits.

Research based on those claiming the One-Parent Family Payments suggests that the duration of lone parenthood is quite diverse, being long term in many cases but relatively short term in others. In a survey of 5 per cent of awards to never married mothers during 1988, Swinburne (1999) found that 52 per cent were still claiming ten years later and the average duration of claims was 7.5 years. A similar survey of separated claimants who first received benefit in 1991 found that 47 per cent were still claiming eight years later and the average duration over the eight years was 5.6 years (reported in DFSCA, 2000).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The duration of claims is significantly higher than that found in analysis of administrative data in the UK and US. Over half of lone parents came off benefits within three years in the UK (Noble *et al.*, 1998) and within twelve months in the US (Greenberg, 1993). These studies also highlighted the complexity of transitions among this group.

The transition of lone parent's benefits can be due to a variety of reasons including re-partnering/marriage, increase in means, children reaching age 18, or emigration. Therefore, an exit from benefit reciprocity does not necessarily represent an exit from lone parenthood. Swinburne found that in the majority of cases (67 per cent) the claim ended because the claimant married or began cohabiting, and an additional 4 per cent ended because the child had left the home or turned 18 years. This means that 32 per cent of the original sample had entered a partnership over a ten year period, or an average of 3 per cent a year.

There is no published evidence on whether the reasons for ending benefit claims were the same for separated lone parents. The legal restrictions on divorce and remarriage that were in place until 1997 suggests that the proportion remarrying would have been extremely low, though these restrictions may have caused the numbers cohabiting to be higher.

A limitation of the studies just cited is that they are concerned with the duration of welfare claims rather than lone parenthood *per se*. It is possible to obtain additional information on the longitudinal development of lone parent families using the Living in Ireland surveys. In 1994, there were 249 lone parents with children aged under 18 in the LII sample. One year later in 1995, 76 per cent of this group were re-interviewed and of these, 91 per cent were still lone parents.<sup>16</sup> Only 4.4 per cent had entered a more traditional family form through marriage or cohabitation. This return to a more typical family form is less common than in the UK where the rate of re-partnering was found to be approximately one in ten over an 18 month period (Ford *et al.*, 1995). In the remaining 4.5 per cent of cases, the change in status was due to children reaching the age of 18. Therefore, over a twelve month period there were relatively few transitions out of lone parenthood.<sup>17</sup> Returning to the same individuals in 1997, it was found that of the original group who could still be traced, 71 per cent were still lone parents, 15.4 per cent were married or cohabiting and 14 per cent no longer had a child age under 18 living with them. The figures suggest that around 5 per cent of lone parents enter partnerships every year, which is slightly higher than Swinburne's findings (1999). The lower re-partnering rate found by Swinburne may be due to his longer time-frame, indicating that the rate of exit decreases over time. Alternatively, it may indicate that benefit receipt discourages re-partnering.

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### Size of Lone Parent Families

Our analysis of the proportion of children under 15 years being raised by lone parents suggested that this group have smaller families than married couples. As a further test of this proposition we examine the number of children among married/cohabiting, single and separated

<sup>16</sup> A 76 per cent re-interview rate in the second year of the survey meant that attrition among lone parents (i.e. 24 per cent) was higher than for the sample as a whole, which was 18 per cent.

<sup>17</sup> It might be argued that the missing lone parents are more likely to have formed new relationships as this might be a cause of changes in location. However only 22 per cent of the non-respondents had moved and could not be traced, other non-responses were due to refusals or unavailability.

mothers classified by age-group, using LFS data (Table 3.8). Widowed mothers were excluded because of small sample numbers. The LFS only records children who are still living with their parents. Therefore, we do not consider mothers over the age of 40 who are more likely to have children who have left the family home. It should be noted that our results do not necessarily represent *completed* family size, since all of the age-groups examined are still within the childbearing ages.

In each of the four age categories never married lone mothers are found to have significantly fewer children than separated lone mothers and married/cohabiting mothers. The difference in family size between unmarried and married mothers is most pronounced in the 35-39 age group where additional births are least likely. In this age group nearly 60 per cent of lone mothers have only one child compared to 12 per cent of married/cohabiting mothers, and the average number of children is 1.6 among lone mothers and 2.7 amongst the married or cohabiting group. The family size of lone parents is closest to that of their married counterparts amongst the 20-25 age group, perhaps because the latter are still only in the early stages of family building. It should be noted that because the LFS is likely to undercount lone mothers who do not head their own household and since access to social housing is in part determined by the number of children, it is possible that these figures overstate the number of children among never married lone mothers. A more fully representative sample of never-married lone mothers might, therefore, accentuate the difference in fertility patterns between these and other mothers in the same age group.

Separated lone mothers aged 25-34 are found to have a greater number of children than married women of the same age. Perhaps this indicates that having more children than average at an early age increases the risk of marital breakdown. In the 35-40 age group the size of family does not differ significantly between separated and married mothers.

On the basis of these figures we would suggest that having a birth outside of marriage and entering lone parenthood leads to lower fertility than would be the case if the women involved had married or formed a long-term cohabiting relationship. In that sense, non-marital fertility could be said to have a depressing effect on overall fertility. On the other hand, if the alternative to having a child as an unmarried lone mother is not to have a child at all, then of course non-marital fertility provides an addition to overall fertility. As we shall see in the next chapter, never-married lone mothers are disproportionately drawn from the lower social class and educational attainment categories, groups which in the past would have married early and so had higher fertility. On the one hand, therefore, one could say that the growing proportion of fertility which takes place outside of marriage, or (as may also be possible) outside of long-term quasi-marital relationships, is likely to have had a negative effect on overall fertility levels. On the other hand, one could equally say that it counter-balances the negative fertility impact which would arise if the women involved had chosen not to have children at all.

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## International Comparisons

Before we move to discussing the social profile of lone parents in Ireland we consider how the incidence of lone parenthood in Ireland compares to that in other countries. In Chapter 2 we saw that in 1996 the rate of non-marital births in Ireland was close to the average for the EU. Comparing rough estimates of the rate of marital breakdown in Ireland in 1994 to international statistics on the crude divorce rate, Fahey and Lyons (1995) suggested that Ireland is grouped with the low divorce countries of the Mediterranean. If the divorced/separated are considered as a percentage of the ever married population (excluding widows) Ireland ranks somewhat higher than the Mediterranean countries but is still a long way below the UK and Sweden (*ibid.* p. 109). Since non-marital birth rates and marital dissolution rates are important determinants of national levels of lone parenthood, the cross-national figures on these two factors suggest that the incidence of lone parenthood in Ireland should be at, or below the EU average. However, we do not have comparative figures on a further determinant of lone parent numbers – rates of exit or re-partnering.

The Eurostat figures for 1991 and 1996 based on labour force survey data are consistent with this expectation: the rate of lone parenthood in Ireland is shown to be just below the EU average. Both sets of figures exclude Sweden, which has one of the highest

**Table 3.8: Number Of Children (Any Age) by Age and Marital Status of Mother**

No. of children	Mother 20-24 years			Mother 25-29yrs			Mother 30-34yrs			Mother 35-39		
	<i>Couple</i>	<i>Single LP</i>	<i>Sep. LP</i>	<i>Couple</i>	<i>Single LP</i>	<i>Sep. LP</i>	<i>Couple</i>	<i>Single LP</i>	<i>Sep. LP</i>	<i>Couple</i>	<i>Single LP</i>	<i>Sep. LP</i>
1	60.5	79.1	31.3	45.0	69.7	21.6	24.9	54.0	20.3	12.4	59.9	17.6
2	27.9	16.7	26.6	37.9	20.4	36.3	42.7	26.6	40.6	37.1	24.4	32.9
3	9.5	3.0	42.1	12.1	8.2	29.8	21.8	11.1	22.9	29.7	10.9	23.9
4	1.5	1.2		3.8	0.8	11.5	7.4	5.8	9.2	13.0	2.7	10.0
5	0.2			1.1	0.9	0.8	2.0	1.4	5.0	4.6	0.7	9.9
6	0.4						1.3	1.1	2.0	3.2	1.5	5.6
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Unweighted N.</i>	311	282	9	1,371	255	80	3,103	197	213	3,846	90	265
<i>Mean</i>	1.5	1.3	2.1	1.8	1.4	2.3	2.2	1.8	2.5	2.7	1.6	2.8

*Source:* Labour Force Survey (1997), microdata. Percentages based on weighted data.

rates of non-marital births and a high rate of lone parenthood.<sup>18</sup> These sources also show that Ireland has higher levels of lone parenthood than the Southern European countries, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The incidence of lone parent families is significantly higher in the UK and Scandinavia than in the other EU countries.

Results from the European Community Household Panel suggest that the percentage of lone *mothers* in Ireland is higher than the unweighted European average. This may in part be due to the absence of data for Finland, Sweden and Austria, which if included would raise the average, but this is not the full cause since the ECHP also alters Ireland's position relative to Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. This divergence could arise because the ECHP data refer to lone mothers rather than lone parents, but only if lone parenthood in Ireland was more concentrated among women than in other countries. There is some evidence to show that this is true (Bradshaw *et al.*, 1996: Table 2.1). Since the ECHP figures are based on smaller sample sizes and run counter to our expectations based on international non-marital birth rates and divorce/separation rates, our inclination is to place more weight on the Eurostat results.

**Table 3.9: Estimates of the Incidence of Lone Parenthood in EU Countries**

	1 Eurostat 1996 as % of Families with dep. Children	2 Eurostat 1991 as % of Families with Child < 15	3 ECHP 1994 Lone Mothers as % of Mothers 16-60 years	4 ECHP 1994 Children of Lone Parents as % of All Children (<18)
UK	23	19	16.3	15.5
Denmark		20	15.4	11.2
Finland	17			
France	15	11	11.3	10.7
Belgium	15	15	11.3	12.2
Austria	14			
Germany	13	15	10.0	10.5
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>12.5</b>
Portugal	12	9	8.4	8.5
Netherlands	11	12	9.3	9.0
Luxembourg	11	12	-	5.6
Italy	11		7.3	6.6
Spain	8		6.6	6.4
Greece	7	6	5.3	5.1
EU	14	13*	10.5*	10.3*

1. Bradshaw *et al.* (1996).

2. Eurostat (1998), excludes lone parents who live with their own parents, dependent children are defined as under 25 and economically inactive or unemployed.

3. Pederson *et al.* (2000).

4. Authors own analysis.

\* Unweighted mean of country scores (i.e. does not take account of differences in country's population).

## Conclusions

Within a long-term historical perspective the current level of lone parenthood in Ireland is not as exceptional as some commentaries might suggest, since premature death among parents caused high levels of parental absence in the past. Nevertheless, taking a shorter time-frame the

<sup>18</sup> Figures from national sources show that lone parent families made up 18 per cent of families with children aged under 18 in Sweden in 1990 (Bradshaw *et al.*, 1996).

rise in lone parenthood has been a significant development in family structure in recent decades. The early death of one partner is now a much less common cause of lone parenthood than it was in the past. It has been overtaken in importance by marital breakdown and non-marital births.

Existing data on lone parenthood tend to lump the “new” forms of lone parenthood (those caused by non-marital births and marriage breakdown) together with the “old” (that caused by widowhood), even though there are important differences between the two. The fundamental difference is that in the new forms of lone parenthood the “absent” parent is usually still alive and in many cases may maintain some form of relationship with both the principal active parent and the children. However, the standard concept of lone parenthood rests on a simple dichotomy between lone and joint parenthood, and data are collected accordingly. The available data thus provide no information on the differing degrees of “loneness” which may characterise lone parent families, that is, on the extent and nature of the relationship which may exist between the “absent” parent and his or her children and former partner.

Census figures show that the number of lone parent families almost doubled between 1981 and 1996. Our estimates from different sources suggest that these families now account for around 14 per cent of the families with children under 15 years, and that between 12 and 15 per cent of children are being raised by a lone parent. These figures are close to the EU average. The four main sources of data examined here disagree on the relative importance of non-marital births and marriage dissolution as routes into lone parenthood. The Labour Force Survey and the Census suggest that marriage dissolution is the principal route of entry, while Social Welfare and the Living in Ireland Survey data point to non-marital births. Each of these data sources are incomplete in various ways, though more complete data may soon be available (particularly from the Quarterly National Household Survey conducted by the Central Statistics Office).

One of the biggest gaps in knowledge concerns the duration and developmental paths of lone parenthood through the family cycle. Some of the available information suggests that only a minority of lone parents enter or re-enter two-parent family forms: longitudinal data from the LII suggest that around 5 per cent of lone parents per year over a three-year period made the transition into partnerships, while a study of social welfare data suggested a lower yearly average (3 per cent) for such transitions over a 10 year reference period (Swinburne, 1999). However, rates of entry (or re-entry) into two-parent family forms may depend on the type of lone parenthood. Never-married lone parents seem to be more likely to make this transition than the separated or divorced.

In addition to the lack of information about the frequency and timing of exits from lone parenthood, there is a complete gap in the data about *who* lone parents form new partnerships with. This gap is particularly significant in the case of unmarried lone parents since it is unclear whether they more commonly form partnerships with the fathers of their children rather than new partners.

Information on the duration and evolution of lone parent families is essential from a policy perspective. If, as some of the sources suggest, lone parenthood typically extends over a long period, the consequences for the



incomes and related resources of the families concerned could be severe. It also means that practical and emotional demands of raising children alone will be a relatively long-term experience, and the need for support in this role will be ongoing. On the other hand, lone parenthood may be only a transitory phase for some, with the possible consequence that the stresses associated with it may only be short term.

A less obvious consequence of recent rises in lone parenthood has been the reduction of fertility among some groups of women. Never married lone mothers have fewer children than married women. Given that lone mothers typically have lower educational attainment and lower social class background than the average of all mothers (see next chapter) it is arguable that many of this group in the past would have married early and so had higher fertility. If this is considered alongside what appears to be a relatively low rate of re-partnering, the possibility that births to non-cohabiting mothers depress fertility is strengthened.

As far as future data requirements are concerned, the key gaps to be filled which have been pointed to here are as follows:

- Information on the “absent” parent and the degree to which he or she participates in joint parenthood with the principal active parent;
- The incidence and circumstances of lone parents who live as sub-units within larger households (e.g. with their own parents);
- Information on the evolution of lone parent families over time, including information on entry (or re-entry) into joint parenthood and, in the case of never-married lone mothers, whether the man they form a marriage or partnership with is the father of the existing child(ren);
- More detailed information on marriage breakdown and divorce.

In some instances, data on these issues are collected but have not yet been made available to researchers – as is the case with data on household structure collected since 1998 in the Quarterly National Household Survey. Otherwise, however, new data sources are needed. Ideally, the dynamics of lone parent family formation and dissolution would be best served with large-scale longitudinal data, which is costly to collect and yields information only over the long term. Alternatively, a *large cross sectional survey which includes retrospective information on respondent’s life history* would make this sort of analysis possible. Such a survey could also include information on the role of “absent” parents in lone-parent families.