

4. THE SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LONE PARENTS

Introduction

So far we have explored the incidence, trends and routes into and out of lone parenthood. In this chapter we describe the social characteristics of lone parents. Previous research has provided some evidence that lone parents are more likely to come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, although that evidence is incomplete. Flanagan and Richardson's (1992) study of non-marital births in the National Maternity Hospital suggests that their "average social class" was skilled manual and McCashin's qualitative study of 53 lone mothers showed that 46 per cent had primary level education or less (1996). Hannan and Ó Riain's (1993) longitudinal study of school leavers found that 11 per cent of young women with no qualifications or Group/Junior Certificate became single mothers within five years of leaving school, compared to 1 per cent of those with Leaving Certificate or third level qualifications. McCashin (1993) presented data on the social characteristics of lone parents from the 1987 Household Budget Survey, while the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) (2000) reports results from the 1997 Labour Force Survey (LFS) which are also analysed here.

Much of the existing research on the relationship between lone parenthood and social disadvantage has focused on the young and unmarried. Less attention has been given to older lone parents who are separated, divorced or widowed, which in turn reflects a poor record of research on marriage breakdown or on patterns of entry into second relationships. In consequence, basic factual information about aspects of lone parenthood which are associated with marital breakdown is lacking. It is also difficult to trace the effects of rising educational levels and falling unemployment on the incidence of lone parenthood. It has been suggested in the past that poor employment prospects among early school leavers were a major contributor to lone parenthood among younger mothers (Hannan and Ó Riain, 1993). In those circumstances, one would have expected the boom in employment of recent years to have halted or reversed the rise in non-marital lone parenthood which occurred during the 1980s. But on the evidence of Chapter 3 above, that seems not to have come about, thus raising a question about the longer-term relationship between economic conditions and the incidence of lone parenthood.

It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to explore these complex issues in any depth, since they would require extended analysis and

complex data to illuminate. Here the objective is simply to build up a descriptive profile of lone parents from the most recently available data, drawing comparisons between lone parents in different marital status categories (single, separated/divorced and widowed) and between those and married parents.

Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for 1997 provide the most useful source for this purpose, since it contains a substantial sample of lone parents and collects information on the social class, education level, housing tenure, and labour market status of sampled households.¹⁹ Even in this source, however, the sample size for lone fathers is too small to allow detailed analysis, so we concentrate here on lone mothers. A further problem with the data is that because of their cross-sectional nature they do not always enable us to distinguish between that which precedes lone parenthood and that which follows from it. This limits the degree to which causal inferences can be drawn from descriptive characteristics. Poverty or unemployment, for example, might be causes of lone parenthood (for example, in that, lack of other opportunities may remove the incentive for young single women to defer childbearing). But they may also be consequences, in that, for example, lone parents might be less able to find suitable employment and may therefore become more reliant on state benefits. While both sets of factors are of interest because of what they tell us about the circumstances of lone parents, it would be desirable to be able to distinguish the antecedents from the outcomes of lone parenthood, something which is not possible with cross-sectional data.

The LFS contains a sufficient number of lone parents to allow us to build up a profile of their social characteristics and compare them with other categories of the population. The results should, however, be interpreted in light of the possible undercounting of younger lone parents living with their own parents discussed in the last chapter. The latest year for which LFS microdata are available is 1997.

Age

The age profile of lone mothers with children aged under 15 years differs markedly between the unmarried and the separated (Table 4.1). Unmarried mothers are generally young: over a third are aged under 25, and a further 27.7 per cent are aged 25-29. Separated mothers are a good deal older: only 1 per cent are aged under 25, almost half are in the age-range 35-44, and 20 per cent are aged over 44. Table 4.1 also shows that the age-profile of separated lone parents is quite similar to that of married

¹⁹ The 1997 Labour Force Survey includes a sample of 2,326 lone parents with children aged under 15 years. Of these, 91 per cent are lone mothers and 9 per cent are lone fathers. As noted earlier, some undercounting of lone parent families who live as sub-units in larger family households may occur in the data. In all tables weights are applied to correct for sample errors and gross up figures to population totals.

mothers (keeping in mind that we are talking here of mothers with at least one child aged under 15).

Table 4.1: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 by Family Status and Age (1997)

| Age | Married/ Cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|---------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| | | | % | | |
| 15 - 19 | 0.1 | 4.2 | 0.1 | – | 0.4 |
| 20 - 24 | 2.2 | 30.6 | 1.0 | – | 3.7 |
| 25 - 29 | 9.8 | 27.7 | 8.5 | 1.8 | 10.6 |
| 30 - 34 | 21.2 | 21.5 | 20.8 | 4.3 | 21.0 |
| 35 - 39 | 25.3 | 7.8 | 24.7 | 11.8 | 24.1 |
| 40 - 44 | 21.6 | 5.1 | 24.5 | 22.5 | 20.9 |
| 45 - 49 | 13.1 | 2.5 | 14.2 | 28.7 | 12.8 |
| 50 - 55 | 5.9 | 0.6 | 5.6 | 23.8 | 5.8 |
| 56 - 59 | 0.8 | – | 0.7 | 7.0 | 0.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,931 | 23,636 | 24,593 | 4,794 | 416,954 |
| Row % | 87.3 | 5.7 | 5.9 | 1.1 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

This similarity in age between separated and married mothers is somewhat surprising, as the time-lag from marriage to separation would lead one to expect separated parents to be older on average than the married. Two factors could account for the similarity. One is that couples who marry young may be more likely to separate (Heaton, 1991; Berrington and Diamond, 1999), thus counterbalancing the effect of the time-lag between marriage and separation as far as the age-profile of the separated is concerned. The other is that separation may cause mothers to cease childbearing at a somewhat earlier age than those who remain married. This would have the consequence that separated mothers would reach the stage of having grown-up children only (and thus of having moved out of the category we are interested in here) at an earlier age than those who stayed married. We lack the data to test these possibilities but it seems plausible that they both affect the age-profile of separated mothers.

Education

The variable that is most likely to capture information on individuals' social background prior to becoming lone parents is education level. For some young people education may have been disrupted by lone parenthood but the likelihood is that for the great majority education was completed before the onset of childbearing and so is unambiguously a prior condition.

Table 4.2 shows that lone mothers of all three types (unmarried, separated and widowed) have lower educational attainment than married/cohabiting mothers. For example, in all three groups of lone mothers, 28 per cent have primary education only, compared to 15.7 per cent of married mothers. Furthermore, unmarried mothers have slightly lower educational attainment than the separated, particularly in that fewer of the former have any third level education.

However, the educational profile of women in different family statuses needs some further elaboration because of the confounding effects of age (in general, younger adults have higher educational attainment than older adults). Widows are generally older than the other groups and so would be

expected to have lower education on that count alone, while unmarried mothers are younger and so would be expected to have higher education. The relatively low educational attainment of unmarried mothers revealed in Table 4.2 may thus understate their true level of disadvantage since it does not control for the effects of age.

Table 4.2: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| Education | Married/ cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| | | | % | | |
| Primary / None | 15.7 | 28.3 | 28.9 | 30.3 | 17.1 |
| Intermediate/Group Certificate | 28.0 | 36.4 | 31.9 | 35.1 | 28.8 |
| Leaving Certificate | 35.8 | 26.2 | 25.2 | 22.7 | 34.4 |
| Third-Level Non-University | 12.7 | 6.3 | 8.4 | 7.6 | 12.0 |
| University | 7.9 | 2.8 | 5.6 | 4.2 | 7.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,931 | 23,636 | 24,593 | 4,794 | 416,954 |
| Row % | 87.3 | 5.7 | 5.9 | 1.1 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 examine this issue by presenting data on educational levels among women aged 20-24 and 35-44 separately. The age group 20-24 is of interest since it is the modal age group for unmarried mothers, while the age group 35-44 is the modal age group for the separated. These tables also extend the picture by presenting comparisons not just among mothers in different family circumstances but also with women who are not married and have no children. It thus gives some indication of how educational level affects the decision to remain outside of marriage and childbearing, as well as the routing of those with children into different parental circumstances.

For women aged 20-24, unmarried motherhood is strongly related to low educational attainment – just over 50 per cent have an Intermediate Certificate or less, compared to 17 per cent of the whole age group. In addition, being a *married* mother at this age is also linked to educational disadvantage, though not as strongly as in the case of unmarried mothers – 27 per cent of married mothers in this age group have Intermediate Certificate education or less. Those who are unmarried and without children, by contrast, have considerably higher educational attainment – only 10 per cent have Intermediate Certificate or less, while over one-third have at least some third level education.

Table 4.3: Women Aged 20-24 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| | Married/cohab with children | Unmarried with children | Unmarried, no children | Total |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------|
| | | | | |
| Primary /None | 7.8 | 17.2 | 2.5 | 4.7 |
| Intermediate/Group Certificate | 19.2 | 33.2 | 8.0 | 12.3 |
| Leaving Certificate | 52.7 | 38.3 | 54.8 | 53.1 |
| Third-Level Non-University | 13.6 | 8.7 | 20.0 | 17.8 |
| University | 6.5 | 2.5 | 14.7 | 12.1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 29,422 | 10,084 | 97,119 | 136,625 |
| Row % | 21.5 | 7.4 | 71.0 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Among those aged 35-44, the key comparisons are between the married, the separated and the unmarried childless (unmarried mothers and the widowed accounted for small proportions of this age group in 1997 and will not be referred to further here). The evidence from Table 4.4 reinforces the inference drawn earlier that lower education attainment may increase the risk of separation. Separated mothers in this age group are roughly twice as likely to have primary education only as either married mothers or those who are single and childless and they are little more than half as likely to have third level education. Those who are single and childless have somewhat higher levels of education than the rest: 16 per cent have a university education, compared to 9.3 per cent for the whole age group, while 16.8 per cent finished with an Intermediate or Group Certificate, compared to 26.8 per cent for the total age group.

Table 4.4: Women Aged 35-44 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| Education | Married/ cohab with children | Lone parent | | | Unmarried no children | Total |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------|---------|
| | | Unmarried* | Separated | Widowed* | | |
| Primary /None | 14.0 | 41.6 | 29.6 | 20.0 | 16.3 | 15.6 |
| Intermediate/ Group Certificate | 27.8 | 27.0 | 31.5 | 42.0 | 16.8 | 26.8 |
| Leaving Certificate | 36.2 | 19.0 | 26.6 | 25.8 | 35.5 | 35.2 |
| Third-Level Non- University | 13.3 | 7.4 | 7.3 | 8.3 | 15.2 | 13.0 |
| University | 8.7 | 5.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 16.0 | 9.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 170,509 | 3,082* | 12,099 | 4,794* | 26,315 | 213,629 |
| Row % | 79.8 | 1.4 | 5.7 | 0.8 | 12.3 | 100 |

* The numbers of sample cases on which these estimates are based are small and the estimates are therefore liable to error.

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Social Class

The social class profile of parents in different family circumstances is of considerable interest but is difficult to establish. One problem is the lack of data on occupational position among women who are in full-time home duties. For married or co-habiting women in that position, it is common to ascribe social class on the basis of spouse's or partner's occupation (or, in the case of LFS data, on the basis of the occupation of the person with the highest class category in the household). For lone mothers – the category of particular interest here – spouses and partners (or other occupied persons in the household) are usually lacking and so social class cannot be ascribed. Even in the case of those lone mothers who have an occupation in their own right it is uncertain whether that occupation is a reliable guide to “true” social class position. Women's occupational positions are generally lower than those of men and lone mothers in

particular, by virtue of their family circumstances, may be constrained into accepting jobs which are below their underlying occupational potential. Thus, it is not always clear what current occupational position of such women should be taken to indicate.

Table 4.5: Mothers with Children Under 15 Years by Family Status and Social Class (1997)

| Social class | Married | Lone parent | | | Total |
|--|----------|-------------|-----------|---------|----------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| Higher professional/ managerial | 11.4 | 3.0 | 5.0 | 5.4 | 10.8 |
| Lower professional/ managerial | 18.6 | 11.4 | 17.2 | 13.6 | 18.2 |
| Other non-manual | 19.7 | 21.1 | 25.2 | 22.0 | 20.0 |
| Skilled manual | 18.6 | 7.7 | 5.7 | 12.7 | 17.7 |
| Semi-skilled manual | 22.1 | 35.6 | 28.7 | 21.5 | 22.7 |
| Unskilled manual | 9.7 | 21.1 | 18.3 | 24.9 | 10.5 |
| Total | 100* | 100* | 100* | 100* | 100* |
| Number | 354,044* | 11,951* | 13,392* | 2,750* | 382,137* |
| "Unknowns" as per cent of each family status category | 2.7 | 49.4 | 45.5 | 42.6 | 8.4 |

* Excluding "unknowns".

Keeping these qualifications in mind, Table 4.5 shows the social class profile of mothers with children aged under 15 in the main family status categories. Among the three categories of lone mothers – unmarried, separated and widowed – between 40 and 50 per cent are of "unknown" social class for reasons just outlined, compared to 2.7 per cent of married mothers. Among the remainder, lone parents have a somewhat lower social class profile than married mothers: fewer are located in the higher professional/ managerial class and more are located in the semi-skilled and unskilled manual classes (particularly in the case of unmarried mothers). Due to the cross sectional nature of the data we are unable to establish whether these differences arise because lone parents tend to come from lower social class backgrounds or whether the experience of lone parenthood leads to downward social mobility.

Housing Tenure

A further social characteristic of lone parents to be considered is housing tenure. Table 4.6 shows that unmarried mothers are over-represented both in local authority rented housing (43.8 per cent) and the private rented sector (30.4 per cent). Taking these two tenure categories together, three out of four unmarried mothers are in rental accommodation (note that, in the Labour Force Survey, unmarried mothers living as sub-families in larger households – e.g. with their own parents – are coded according to the tenure of the household head). Separated mothers are also over-represented in local authority housing and to a lesser extent in the private rented sector, though neither tenure is as prominent for separated mothers as unmarried mothers. Again, causal connections are difficult to draw here, since it is impossible with the present data to distinguish tenure situations which are the *result* of lone parenthood from those which existed as a prior condition.

Table 4.6: Mothers with Children Under 15 Years by Family Status and Housing Tenure (1997)

| | Married | Lone parent | Total |
|--|---------|-------------|-------|
|--|---------|-------------|-------|

| Housing tenure | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | | % | | |
| Local authority rented | 8.0 | 43.8 | 32.4 | 19.7 | 11.6 |
| Private rented | 4.6 | 30.4 | 11.6 | 2.2 | 6.5 |
| Owner occupier with mortgage | 64.4 | 15.8 | 39.1 | 22.4 | 59.7 |
| Owner occupier without mortgage | 22.5 | 9.4 | 16.0 | 55.3 | 21.7 |
| Other | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 360,458 | 23,284 | 24,378 | 4,723 | 412,843 |

Source: LFS (1997), microdata.

Labour Market Status

Combining solo parenting with employment in the absence of comprehensive state supported childcare is difficult and means that the participation of lone parents in the labour market is often contingent on informal sources of support (Russell and Corcoran, 2000). The low levels of educational attainment among lone parents compounds this problem as many are unable to command wages sufficient to cover private childcare costs. The emotional needs of children and the loss of secondary benefits such as rent allowance are also cited by lone parents as barriers to employment (ibid. pp. 19-20).

Table 4.7: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 Years by Family Status and Usual Employment Status (1997)

| Usual employment status | Married/ Cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| | | | % | | |
| At work | 41.5 | 36.1 | 41.6 | 31.4 | 41.1 |
| Unemployed | 1.7 | 12.0 | 3.7 | 1.8 | 2.4 |
| Student | 0.2 | 1.6 | 0.8 | 0.5 | 0.3 |
| Home duties | 55.7 | 49.4 | 52.7 | 66.0 | 55.3 |
| Other | 0.8 | 0.9 | 1.1 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,882 | 23,636 | 24,594 | 4,794 | 416,906 |
| Activity rate | 43.2 | 48.1 | 45.3 | 33.2 | 43.5 |

* Source LFS (1997), based on principle economic status.

In the light of these difficulties it is perhaps surprising that the gap in the employment rates between married/cohabiting and lone mothers is narrow. The employment rate of all three groups of lone mothers together is 38.2 per cent compared to 41.5 per cent for married mothers. However, much of the increase in employment among lone mothers in the 1990s is due to the impact of the Community Employment (CE) programme, for which persons on Lone Parents Allowance became eligible in 1994. From a base of almost zero in 1994, the numbers of lone parents on CE schemes rose to 8,200 in 1997 (Deloitte and Touche, 1998). Assuming that most women on CE schemes define themselves "at work", and making some allowance for the numbers of lone fathers likely to be included in those numbers, this would mean that over one-third of the lone mothers who were at work in 1997 were employed on CE schemes.

Part-time hours and in some cases directly provided childcare make CE attractive to lone parents. The high take-up CE among lone parents

also reflects eligibility criteria,²⁰ and the greater financial benefits of CE for lone parents than for married parents. In 1997, it was estimated that a lone parent with two children on a CE scheme would receive a total income (combining CE income and one parent benefits) of £217.15, whereas a married parent with two children on CE would receive only £156.35 (Deloitte and Touche, 1998, p.13). While some positive employment effects of CE have been observed for women (Denny *et al.*, 2000), the existing evidence suggests that CE is not particularly effective in funnelling lone parents into mainstream employment, which is its avowed purpose (DFSCA, 2000). However, it may also need to be evaluated in welfare terms. In that context it is of clear benefit to lone parents, both as a boost to income and as a means to escape the confines of the home. On the other hand, it also discriminates in favour of lone parents as against married parents in ways that may not reflect differences in welfare need and that may amount to a disincentive to joint parenthood. It therefore needs to be evaluated carefully in welfare terms as well as labour market terms, particularly in regard to the distinctions it draws between lone parents and joint parents.

The *activity* rates of lone mothers (that is, the employment rate plus the unemployment rate) stands at 45 per cent, which is actually higher than the corresponding rate for married/cohabiting mothers (43 per cent). This is due in part to the higher rates of unemployment experienced by lone mothers, particularly never married lone mothers. Activity rates are lowest among widowed lone parents and highest among unmarried lone parents. However, these comparisons are complicated by the age and educational profile of these different groups of women.

To take account of these background differences we construct a regression model to identify the impact of marital status on mothers' employment net of age and education. The first regression model shows that even controlling for age, education and number of children under 15 years, unmarried lone mothers are more likely to be active in the labour market than married/cohabiting mothers. The figures in the "odds" column show that unmarried lone mothers are 52 per cent more likely to be in the labour market than married/cohabiting women of the same age, educational level and with the same number of children. Separated lone mothers are found to be 39 per cent more likely to participate than married mothers with similar characteristics. Widowed lone mothers are the only group for which lone parenthood depresses participation in the labour market.

Table 4.8: Logistic Regression of Labour Force Participation Among Mothers

| Variable | B | Odds | S.E. | Sig |
|----------|---|------|------|-----|
|----------|---|------|------|-----|

²⁰ Women eligible for CE include the long-term unemployed, those in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment and those who are qualified adult dependants of men who are long-term unemployed. Therefore, the majority of married women will not be eligible.

| | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-----|------|
| Age (ref age<25) | | | | |
| 25-34 | .41 | 1.50 | .02 | .000 |
| 35-44 | .42 | 1.51 | .02 | .000 |
| 45+ | -.20 | 0.82 | .02 | .000 |
| Education (ref=none/primary) | | | | |
| Intermediate Certificate | .51 | 1.67 | .01 | .000 |
| Leaving Certificate | 1.13 | 3.10 | .01 | .000 |
| Third Non-university | 2.00 | 7.39 | .01 | .000 |
| University | 2.48 | 11.88 | .02 | .000 |
| No. of children (ref=1 child<15) | | | | |
| 2 under 15 | -.29 | 0.75 | .01 | .000 |
| 3 under15 | -.64 | 0.53 | .01 | .000 |
| 4 or more under 15 | -1.11 | 0.33 | .02 | .000 |
| Marital status (ref=marr/cohab) | | | | |
| Never Married | .42 | 1.52 | .02 | .000 |
| Widowed | -.06 | 0.94 | .03 | .055 |
| Separated | .33 | 1.39 | .01 | .000 |
| Constant | -1.29 | | .02 | .000 |

Source: LFS (1997) (weighted data).

A similar model can be estimated to explore the probability of being employed (compared to not being employed i.e. inactive or unemployed). This shows that when age, educational level and number of children are controlled, unmarried lone mothers are just as likely to be employed as married/cohabiting mothers. Separated lone mothers are more likely to be employed than married mothers and widows are significantly less likely to be employed than the reference group. Therefore, although these three groups of lone mothers experience similar constraints they have rather different employment rates. The low employment rates of widows follows from their lower participation rates, however, unmarried mothers appear to experience greater difficulty *within* the labour market than separated mothers. One possibility is that unmarried lone parents have additional disadvantageous characteristics that are not measured in our model for example lack of work experience. A further possibility is that because of their lower average age, unmarried mothers are less likely to qualify for Community Employment schemes than separated lone mothers.

Table 4.9: Logistic Regression Model of Employment Among Mothers

| | B | Odds | S.E. | Sig |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Age (ref=under 25 years) | | | | |
| 25-34 | .52 | 1.68 | .02 | .000 |
| 35-44 | .58 | 1.78 | .02 | .000 |
| 45+ | -.01 | 0.99 | .02 | .610 |
| Education (ref= none/primary) | | | | |
| Intermediate Certificate | .56 | 1.75 | .01 | .000 |
| Leaving Certificate | 1.19 | 3.29 | .01 | .000 |
| Third Non-university | 2.06 | 7.86 | .01 | .000 |
| University | 2.46 | 11.70 | .02 | .000 |
| No of children (ref=1 child<15) | | | | |
| 2 under 15 | -.27 | 0.77 | .01 | .000 |
| 3 under15 | -.61 | 0.54 | .01 | .000 |
| 4 or more under 15 | -1.06 | 0.35 | .02 | .000 |
| Marital status (ref=marr/cohab) | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---------------|-------|------|-----|------|
| Never Married | .03 | 1.03 | .02 | .109 |
| Widowed | -.09 | 0.91 | .03 | .007 |
| Separated | .24 | 1.27 | .01 | .000 |
| Constant | -1.58 | | .02 | .000 |

* *Source* LFS (1997) (weighted data).

Conclusions

While there is reason to believe that the link between non-marital childbearing and low education and poor employment prospects may be less pronounced than in the past, the association between lone parenthood and social disadvantage remained strong at least until 1997. The lack of more recent data makes it difficult to trace the impact of improved economic conditions on lone parenthood in more recent years, though there is no indication that it has caused the upward trend in lone parenthood to halt or reverse.

Both non-married and separated lone mothers are found to have significantly lower levels of education than married mothers. Low qualifications are likely to frame the opportunity structures for young women and may make parenthood a more attractive option, even in the absence of a stable long term relationship.

For the separated low education may indicate a lack of resources within the family which can put a strain on marriage relationships. Our analysis could not explore the decision making processes that led to births outside stable relationships or marriage dissolution. Nevertheless, it does highlight one of the social structural conditions in which these decisions are made.

Lone parents were also found to be disproportionately located in the lower social classes and in local authority housing. However, because we have information only for one point in time the direction of causality implied by this pattern is not clear. For example, we cannot tell whether lone parents are drawn from working class families or whether lone parenthood leads to downward social mobility. An additional problem is that many lone parents are not in employment (and by definition do not have a partner in employment) and therefore are not categorised by social class in the data.

Lone mothers now have a higher level of labour market participation than other mothers of the same age and educational background, partly because they are more likely to report themselves as unemployed and partly because of their high rate of participation in Community Employment (CE) schemes. There has been a very rapid increase in the participation of lone mothers since 1995 but that too is largely a product of CE, as 1994 was the first year in which lone parents became eligible for participation in CE (the terms of their participation allowed them to retain portion of their Lone Parent allowance so as to help cover the cost of childcare). Only in the high unemployment rates of lone mothers do we get a sense of the disadvantage experienced by this group in the labour market.

While government policies appear to have been effective in increasing the labour supply of lone mothers it seems these policies or the change in labour market status has done little to change family formation behaviour. For lone parents dependent on social welfare there is an incentive to remain without a partner, primarily because benefits for the mother

(including the additional payments for the child) will be reduced pound for pound for any earnings the partner has, or if the partner is unemployed their joint benefit income will be less than if they both claimed separately. The favourable terms available to lone parents who work in CE schemes may also act as a disincentive to partnership. The incentives change for those in mainstream employment who have earnings above income threshold, since the income tax incentives encourage marriage.

It is difficult to say how far these incentives influence family formation behaviour. Qualitative research suggests that welfare and tax incentives play only a minor role in decisions about relationships and family (McCashin, 1996; Russell & Corcoran, 2000). Nevertheless, the incentive structure outlined above may have some influence on partnership behaviour, if not fertility behaviour. The recent review of benefits for lone parents concluded that it was not possible to design benefits for this group without giving an incentive towards lone parenthood unless there was a radical change towards an individualised welfare system. Such a system would focus “on income support rather than contingency, possibly allied to a system of universal child support” (DSFCA, 2000, p. 138).

An additional way of removing these disincentives is to assist lone parents to earn a living wage. The evidence outlined here suggest that increased employment among lone parents has not reduced claims for one parent benefits. Instead lone parents appear to supplement their benefits with low paid employment. This pattern is likely to be influenced by the earnings disregard and the need to work part-time. Policies such as the National Minimum Wage and the Directive on Part time Work, which gives part-time workers the right to pro-rata benefits, together with actions to improve the skills and educational deficits of lone parents and to provide affordable childcare, are crucial to increasing working lone parents’ chances of becoming fully independent of social welfare.

5. HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY SIZE

Introduction

Chapter 2 above examined trends in family size by reference to the number of births to mothers. Here we turn to the family as a co-residential unit and to the related matter of household size. The present chapter provides a brief overview of trends in these areas. The primary focus is on a topic that has been largely neglected in recent years – the continuing significance of households containing large family units.

In the formative years of social policy provision in Ireland, much of the concern about what were seen as problematic family types focused on the large family. The Commission on Emigration discussed this issue in 1954, acknowledging the “virtually world-wide ... awareness of certain material disadvantages which accompany large families” (Commission on Emigration, 1954, p. 99). However, the Commission was unwilling to question Catholic teaching on the desirability of large families and rejected the view that “the relatively large family pattern in this country makes for a general condition of poverty”. Walsh (1968) offered a different perspective on this question in the 1960s. His analysis of census data on completed fertility in 1961 showed that, among mothers who had married at age 20-24, over half of their children were in families of seven children or more, while among those who had married at age 25-29, over a third of their children were in families of seven children or more (Walsh, 1968, p. 7). His concern was not only that so many children were in large families but that the “cost of family formation was greatest among those who can least afford to pay”. This was indicated in the Irish case by concentration of large families among the rural and poorer urban classes (*ibid.* p.8). Kent and Sexton (1973) corroborated Walsh’s concern with findings showing that large family size had a strong negative effect on the physical development of a sample of Dublin children.

Though family size declined steeply from the 1960s onwards, the body of poverty research which commenced on the basis of the 1973 Household Budget Survey and was carried forward with the 1987 Poverty Survey and the Living in Ireland Surveys of the 1990s showed that family size continued to have a strong bearing on poverty. In fact, as the large families became less prevalent, the risk of poverty among those which remained grew sharply. In 1973, according to data from the Household Budget Survey, families comprised of two parents and four or more children had more or less the same poverty risk (16 per cent) at the 50 per cent relative income line as the population as a whole. By 1987, however, poverty risk among such families had risen to 35 per cent and by 1994 to

38 per cent, which was double the risk of the population as a whole (Callan *et al.*, 1996, p. 89).

Here we will first set the context by outlining general trends in household size in Ireland in recent decades. Then we will turn to a social profile of large households, and more particularly of large families (that is, family units comprised of parents and children).

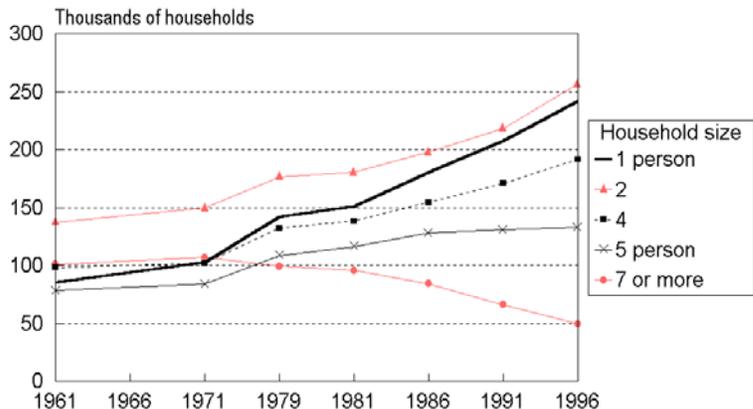
Trends in Household Size

The average size of household declined by one person – from 4.1 to 3.1 persons – over the twenty-five years from 1971 to 1996. Much of this decline was driven by a sharp reduction in the number of very large households (7 persons or more) and a sharp increase in the number of one-person households. As Figure 5.1a shows, the number of households with seven or more persons halved between 1971 and 1996 (falling from 101,000 to just under 50,000 over the period), while the number of one-person households rose two and a half times (going from 102,000 to over 241,000 over the same period). However, along with one-person households, all other household sizes with less than seven persons (particularly those with two and four persons) increased in number over the period.

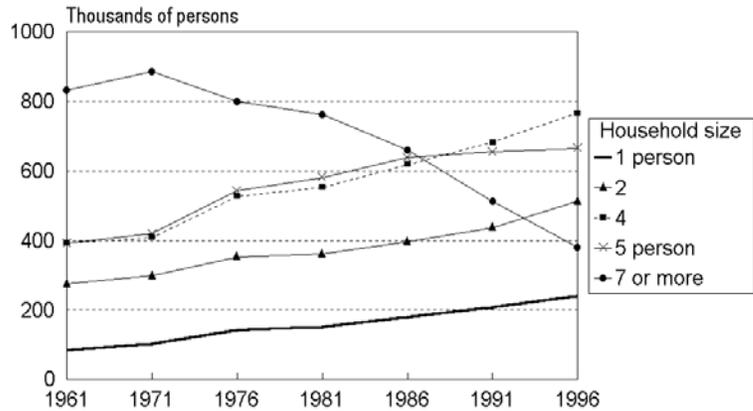
When we take account of the numbers of people involved, the decline in the large household is even more marked. In 1971, over 880,00 people (31 per cent of the total population) lived in households of seven persons or more, compared with 380,000 in 1996 (11 per cent of the population). Viewed in these terms, the significance of the growth in one-person households is somewhat reduced: though such households accounted for 21 per cent of all households in 1996, they contained only 6.9 per cent of the population (241,800 people).

Figure 5.1. Trends in Household Size, 1961-1996

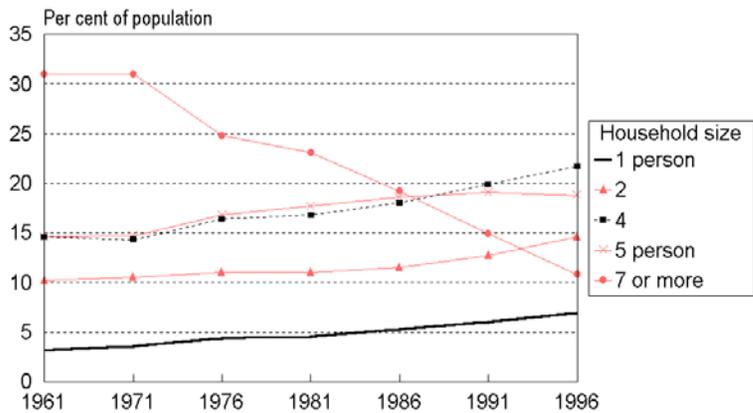
5.1a Number of Households by Household Size



5.1b Number of Persons by Household Size



5.1c Per cent of persons by household size



Source: Censuses of Population, 1961-1996

Children and Family Size

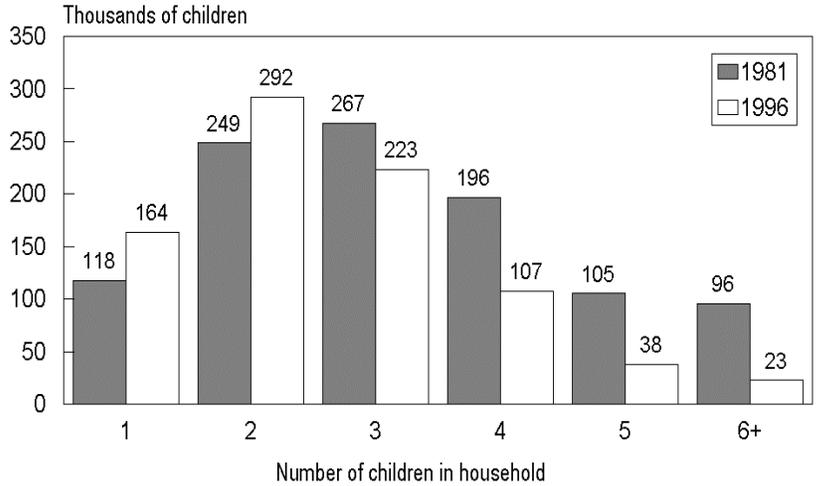
From a policy point of view, it is particularly important to know of the distribution of children by family size, since the poverty risks associated with large household size arise particularly in connection with family households containing large numbers of children. In 1996, there were almost 170,000 children aged under 15 in families of four or more children of that age (that is, leaving out of consideration those families of four or more children where some of the children were aged 15 or over). Of these, 107,000 were in four-child households, 38,000 in five-child households and 23,000 in six-child households (Figure 5.2). These numbers represented a sharp decline in the extent of large families, as they amounted to less than half the numbers of children in families of four children or more which had been present in Ireland in 1981 (in that year, 397,000 children lived in families with four children or more, representing 38 per cent of all children).

Nevertheless, even in 1996 children in large families still accounted for a substantial share of all children. Almost 20 per cent of children aged under 15 in 1996 lived in families of four or more children, while 7.2 per cent lived in families of five or more children. These proportions can be compared with the proportion of children in another family category which is now more to the forefront in policy concern – those living in

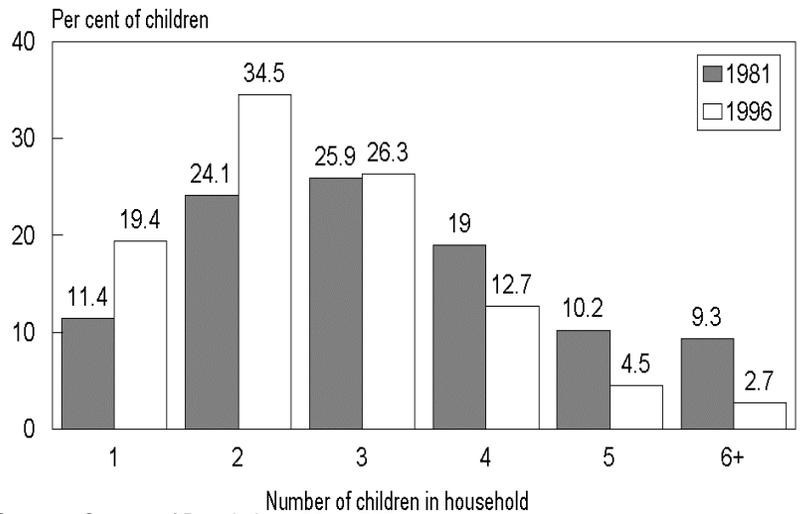
lone parent families, who in 1997 amounted to approximately 12 per cent of children aged under 15.

Figure 5.2: Distribution of Children Aged 0-14 by Number of Children in Household

5.2a. Numbers



5.2b. Per Cent



Sources: Census of Population 1981, 1996

These figures suggest that while the large family occupies a much less prominent place in the family landscape in Ireland than it did in the past, it has by no means disappeared. Given that large families are a relatively

high-risk category as far as social disadvantage is concerned, they therefore continue to merit attention on that account.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The data in Table 5.1 suggest that larger families are more likely to experience labour market and social disadvantage than other families with children, and that these problems are most pronounced in families with five or more children. Because the data are cross-sectional it is not possible to establish with certainty which factors precede family size and which followed from it. For example, those from the lower manual social classes with poor labour market prospects may have more children either because of socio-cultural factors or because having a large family may increase labour market difficulties (e.g. large families may be associated with longer durations of unemployment because of the higher wages needed to support dependants and the higher social welfare benefits they would receive if the main wage-earner were unemployed). Previous research suggests that both processes are likely to operate.

The educational achievement of parents comes closest to a measure of social background, as in most cases education will be completed prior to family formation. The analysis shows that the mother's of large families are more likely to have no qualifications than other mothers. This is especially true of women with more than five children under the age of 15, over a quarter of whom have only primary level education.

The social class of heads of households with four children does not differ significantly from other families. However, those with five or more children are distinctive, having a high proportion located in the unskilled manual class. A similar pattern is noticeable for the employment status of the head of household, the main divergence occurs when we consider families with five or more children: heads of households in this group are more than twice as likely to be out of work than heads of households with children in general.

The association between large families and labour market characteristics is most pronounced when we consider the proportion of workless households. Unlike the activity status of head of household this measure is likely to tap into the barriers to employment facing mothers of large families (alongside the possible selection effects). Large families create a very high demand for unpaid labour in the home which is usually performed by women while the costs of childcare are similarly multiplied.

Table 5.1: Characteristics of Large Families, 1997

| | Large families | | All families with children under 15 |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | With 4 children under 15 | With 5 or more children under 15 | |
| Number of families (% of all families) | 25,400 (5.9) | 11,200 (2.6) | 433,633 (100) |
| Number of children (% of all children) | 101,800 (11.8) | 60,900 (7.1) | 859,900 (100) |

| | | | |
|---|------|------|------|
| Mothers – per cent who have primary education only | 16.6 | 26.0 | 13.3 |
| Household heads – per cent in unskilled manual class | 5.8 | 11.1 | 5.1 |
| Household heads – per cent with no stated occupation | 10.2 | 18.4 | 9.2 |
| Families – per cent with no one in the family at work | 20.9 | 34.3 | 16.4 |
| Per cent in local authority housing | 18.5 | 28.9 | 12.8 |

Source: 1997 LFS micro-data.

Finally, more large families are concentrated in social housing than other families with children. This may follow from the high level of worklessness in these households outlined above. However, entitlement to social housing is in part based on family size therefore this result may be partially an artefact of the eligibility system.

Conclusion

As was pointed out in Chapter 2, higher-order births remained more common in Ireland than in other developed countries until the 1990s. As the consequences of these higher-order births are still working their way through the family system, Ireland still has significant numbers of households comprised of large families. This is of some interest from a policy point of view, since, as already mentioned, the risk of poverty among large families appears to have grown as their numbers have become fewer in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, about 20 per cent of children aged under 15 lived in families of four or more children, which compares with about 12 per cent of children living in the other major poverty-prone family type, the lone parent family. Compared to the average of all families, large families are considerably more likely to have a mother with primary education only and a household with a weak labour market position. While the situation of many large families is likely to be unproblematic, substantial proportions are likely to be at risk of various forms of disadvantage.

Given the continuing decline in higher order births in the 1990s, the incidence of large families will decline steadily with time. However, they will remain a significant feature of the Irish family system for some time to come and so should not be forgotten in future debates about social provision for families in this country.

Appendix Table 5A: Number of Households by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total households |
|------|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|------------|------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| | Number of households | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1961 | 85,388 | 137,287 | 116,876 | 98,233 | 78,432 | 59,213 | 40,903 | 26,207 | 15,620 | 9,571 | 4,370 | 4,302 | 676,402 |
| 1971 | 102,787 | 149,467 | 115,781 | 102,195 | 84,035 | 64,971 | 43,714 | 27,022 | 16,118 | 10,346 | 4,401 | 5,526 | 726,363 |
| 1979 | 142,193 | 176,664 | 131,093 | 132,063 | 108,596 | 77,318 | 45,871 | 25,515 | 13,411 | 7,488 | 3,225 | 3,589 | 867,026 |
| 1981 | 151,328 | 180,610 | 133,313 | 138,417 | 116,385 | 80,320 | 46,351 | 27,200 | 10,575 | 5,681 | 2,933 | 2,941 | 896,054 |
| 1986 | 180,793 | 198,048 | 144,835 | 154,675 | 127,844 | 83,941 | 44,322 | 23,219 | 8,517 | 4,167 | 2,048 | 1,895 | 974,304 |
| 1991 | 207,564 | 218,524 | 157,840 | 170,896 | 130,886 | 77,188 | 36,763 | 18,423 | 5,765 | 2,766 | 1,256 | 1,213 | 1,029,084 |
| 1996 | 241,838 | 256,795 | 179,819 | 191,812 | 133,011 | 70,246 | 31,939 | 10,065 | 4,362 | 3,351 | – | – | 1,123,238 |

Appendix Table 5B: Number of Persons by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total persons |
|------|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|------------|---------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| 1961 | 85,388 | 274,574 | 350,628 | 392,932 | 392,160 | 355,278 | 286,321 | 209,656 | 140,580 | 95,710 | 48,070 | 51,624 | 2,682,921 |
| 1971 | 102,787 | 298,934 | 347,343 | 408,780 | 420,175 | 389,826 | 305,998 | 216,176 | 145,062 | 103,460 | 48,411 | 66,312 | 2,853,264 |
| 1979 | 142,193 | 353,328 | 393,279 | 528,252 | 542,980 | 463,908 | 321,097 | 204,120 | 120,699 | 74,880 | 35,475 | 43,068 | 3,223,279 |
| 1981 | 151,328 | 361,220 | 399,939 | 553,668 | 581,925 | 481,920 | 324,457 | 217,600 | 95,175 | 56,810 | 32,263 | 35,292 | 3,291,597 |
| 1986 | 180,793 | 396,096 | 434,505 | 618,700 | 639,220 | 503,646 | 310,254 | 185,752 | 76,653 | 41,670 | 22,528 | 22,740 | 3,432,557 |
| 1991 | 207,564 | 437,048 | 473,520 | 683,584 | 654,430 | 463,128 | 257,341 | 147,384 | 51,885 | 27,660 | 13,816 | 14,556 | 3,431,916 |
| 1996 | 241,838 | 513,590 | 539,457 | 767,248 | 665,055 | 421,476 | 223,573 | 80,520 | 39,258 | 36,861 | – | – | 3,528,876 |

Appendix Table 5C: Percentage Distribution of Persons by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| % of population | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1961 | 3.2 | 10.2 | 13.1 | 14.6 | 14.6 | 13.2 | 10.7 | 7.8 | 5.2 | 3.6 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 100.0 |
| 1971 | 3.6 | 10.5 | 12.2 | 14.3 | 14.7 | 13.7 | 10.7 | 7.6 | 5.1 | 3.6 | 1.7 | 2.3 | 100.0 |
| 1979 | 4.4 | 11.0 | 12.2 | 16.4 | 16.8 | 14.4 | 10.0 | 6.3 | 3.7 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.3 | 100.0 |
| 1981 | 4.6 | 11.0 | 12.2 | 16.8 | 17.7 | 14.6 | 9.9 | 6.6 | 2.9 | 1.7 | 1.0 | 1.1 | 100.0 |
| 1986 | 5.3 | 11.5 | 12.7 | 18.0 | 18.6 | 14.7 | 9.0 | 5.4 | 2.2 | 1.2 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 100.0 |
| 1991 | 6.0 | 12.7 | 13.8 | 19.9 | 19.1 | 13.5 | 7.5 | 4.3 | 1.5 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 100.0 |
| 1996 | 6.9 | 14.6 | 15.3 | 21.7 | 18.8 | 11.9 | 6.3 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.0 | – | – | 100.0 |

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study provides an overview of what can be learned from the existing knowledge and information base for policy analysis in certain areas connected with the family in Ireland. It takes place in the context of considerable policy interest in various aspects of family behaviour combined with a poor record of research and data collection in the field. The study aims to summarise the main outlines of what can be said on the basis of present knowledge about major trends in family formation in Ireland, identify the main gaps in the data which need to be filled, and draw implications.

In considering trends in family formation, it focused on three main issues – decline in fertility (Chapter 2), the growth and pattern of lone parenthood (Chapters 3 and 4), and changes in household and family size, with particular reference to the persistence of large family households (Chapter 5). Here, we first summarise the main descriptive findings of the study, then outline the main data gaps which need to be filled, and finally make some brief comments on policy implications.

Fertility Decline

The general outlines of fertility decline in Ireland are well-known – the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) halved between the early 1970s and the early 1990s and the total number of births fell by one-third between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. But remarkably little investigation has been carried out on the details of the decline or on its causes or effects. Data on the subject are remarkably poor. Ireland has never had a comprehensive fertility survey. General data on sexual activity and contraceptive use hardly exist, though a recent study on crisis pregnancy and abortion has filled important gaps (Mahon *et al.*, 1998). The inquiry on marital fertility which was periodically included in the Census of Population was last carried out in 1981. Birth registration data, which are limited in many respects, have provided the only regular source of information on fertility patterns since then. In consequence, the level of information and understanding about this highly important aspect of social change in Ireland in recent decades is low.

On the basis of existing data, a number of outstanding features of the fertility decline can be pointed to:

- ◆ A twenty-year rapid decline in Irish fertility rates halted in the early 1990s and since then has bottomed out. In some respects the bottoming out is the more surprising of these developments since it occurred at a level which leaves Ireland at the top of the European

fertility table. Many factors would seem to make Ireland less fertility-friendly than some other European countries – the relatively low level of public support for families with children, the poorly developed and underfunded childcare system, rapidly rising demand for female paid labour, and rapidly rising house prices. Yet the recent flat trend and high level (relative to Europe) in the Irish TFR does not reflect the *comparative* impact one might expect from such factors.

- ◆ Although Irish fertility (with a TFR of 1.89 in 1999) is virtually the highest in Europe, it is lower than that of the United States (at 2.08 in 1999), the US level being over 40 per cent higher than the EU average. The high US level is partly accounted for by Hispanic fertility (the Hispanic TFR in the US in 1999 was 2.98) but even for non-Hispanic white women, the TFR is reasonably high compared to Europe (at 1.85). As in Ireland, public policy in the US is not especially supportive of families with children, yet US fertility rates are significantly stronger than in Europe. This adds to the puzzle about the determinants of fertility rates and particularly about the effectiveness (or lack of it) of family-friendly public policy in preserving fertility from decline to very low levels.
- ◆ A surge in new family formation has occurred in Ireland since 1994, indicated by a 29 per cent increase in first births in the period 1994–2000. The number of first births in 2000 was the highest on record in Ireland, marginally exceeding the previous peak reached in 1980. This boom in first births was followed two years later by a sharp increase in marriages, which rose by 23 per cent between 1997 and 2000, though it is unclear what the relationship between these two developments is. Some of the increase in marriages may have been due to the introduction of divorce in 1997, which would allow partners in second unions to terminate their first marriages and formalise their second relationships. In any event, the increase in new family formation is the main positive force in Irish fertility in recent years and is the principal reason for the bottoming out of long-term fertility decline in the latter half of the 1990s.
- ◆ The fertility rate in Ireland in the 1990s has been kept up by the fertility levels of women in their 30s, which are high by European standards and have risen in recent years (US fertility, by contrast, is sustained by high fertility among those in their late teens and early 20s). Fertility rates for Irish women in their teenage years and 20s have continued to decline and are now close to the European norm. The age group 30–34 overtook the age group 25–29 as the dominant childbearing group in the first half of the 1990s, and by 1999 their fertility rate was 7.2 per cent higher than it had been in 1991. It is difficult to predict whether women now in their 20s will follow the pattern of relatively high fertility found among the present cohort of women in their 30s.
- ◆ The rapid increase in the share of fertility occurring outside of marriage which began in the 1980s has continued unabated through the 1990s and in 2000 it accounted for 32 per cent of all births. In the 1980s, non-marital fertility was associated with early school-leaving and poor employment prospects among young mothers, and similarly poor prospects among the young fathers who in better circumstances

might have become the husbands of the mothers in question. However, the decline of these factors in the 1990s (as reflected in rising educational participation and falling unemployment) has not caused a corresponding slowdown in the growth of non-marital childbearing. Rather, births outside of marriage have increased among older as well as younger mothers, though they are still much more characteristic of women under rather than over age 25. This might indicate that the social character of non-marital childbearing is now different from what it was even a decade ago, as its links with low education and poor employment prospects may be less pronounced than they were. However, the unavailability of suitable data since the late 1980s means that no up to date analysis is possible to establish if this is so or to identify the factors driving the continued rising share of non-marital fertility in overall fertility.

- ◆ Though marriage remains central to family formation in most cases, its role is less dominant and less clearcut than it once was. Despite recent increases in marriage, marriage rates are low by historical standards, much family formation now takes place outside of marriage (as evidenced in the high incidence of non-marital fertility) and marriage breakdown has increased. However, much remains to be investigated about these changes. It appears that large proportions of those who begin childbearing outside of marriage subsequently enter marriage, though the exact proportion has not been fully quantified and little is known about the incidence, timing, determinants or effects of such trajectories. The social correlates and consequences of marriage breakdown have likewise been little explored.

Lone Parenthood

The incidence of lone parenthood rose sharply in the 1980s and 1990s. It now arises primarily because of non-marital childbearing and marital breakdown, with the widowed accounting for a small share of lone parents with dependent children. Though different sources yield somewhat different estimates of the incidence of lone parent families, they now appear to account for about 12 per cent of children aged under 15 and about 14 per cent of families with children of that age. There are significant differences in the count of lone parent families between Census and survey data on the one hand and social welfare data on the other, in that the latter point to a substantially higher incidence of lone parent families. The available data are not detailed enough to allow for a full explanation of these differences, and they may in part reflect an inherent uncertainty in categorising certain families as lone parent or two parent (as is suggested further below). However, the discrepancies in the data do raise the possibility that there is a certain amount of over-claiming of lone parenthood for social welfare purposes. It also suggests that parents may sometimes conceal or scale back on their co-residence in order to qualify as lone parents, which points to possible disincentives to joint parenthood in present provision for lone parents. These issues deserve further investigation in the future.

The grouping together of unmarried, separated and widowed lone parents under a common “lone parent” label reflects current practice in social welfare which has unified welfare payments to lone parents into a

single One-Parent Family Payment. However, it has drawbacks from an analytical point of view. In the case of unmarried and separated lone parents (in contrast to the widowed) there is always a non-resident second parent. The conceptualisation and measurement of lone parenthood simply as the opposite of co-resident joint parenthood obscures this fact and distracts attention from the degree of jointness in parenting which persists between parents who live apart from each other. In some cases, the degree of jointness may be quite large (e.g. in cases where one parent lives part time with the principal parent and the children) so that it may be difficult to classify some families as either lone parent or two parent. In any event, the inability of current standard measures to classify and measure different degrees of jointness is a defect in the data since there now is a widespread view that public policy should promote some degree of joint parenting in most such cases, including financial support for children from the non-resident parent. Data are therefore needed to monitor how far that policy goal is being achieved – and whether and in what circumstances it is desirable.

ENTRY AND EXIT

The data are also limited in that they do not enable us to form an adequate picture of the paths of entry into or exit from lone parenthood. Sample studies of social welfare data suggest that lone parenthood arises primarily from non-marital childbearing and is a long-term state (of the order of 10 years or more) for most of those who enter it. Population data suggest somewhat different patterns, in that the number of separated lone parents seems to exceed the number of never-married lone parents at any given time. This latter pattern is somewhat puzzling, as the rate of non-marital childbearing would seem to far exceed the rate of marital breakdown (though the data on marital breakdown are too patchy to be sure on this issue). Some of this divergence may arise from problems with some of these data sources which are likely to lead to an undercounting of unmarried lone parents living with other relatives. It may also be that many mothers who are counted as unmarried at the birth of their child may in fact be in quasi-marital unions or that lone parenthood is a more transitional state for unmarried mothers than for separated mothers. Either of these possibilities (or both together) could explain why the number of children counted as living with unmarried lone parents is far fewer than the number of non-marital births would lead one to expect. Thus, for example, of the 43,200 children born outside marriage in the years 1993-96, only an estimated 17,500 – some 40 per cent – were counted as living with unmarried lone parents in 1997, that is, before the oldest of those children were five years old. To the extent that unmarried mothers make the transition into marriage after the birth of their children, it is not known how often the relationship is formed with the father of the children nor how stable such relationships are compared to those who married before their children were born.

FAMILY SIZE

At any given age, unmarried lone mothers have fewer children than married mothers, while separated mothers generally have slightly more

children than married mothers. This may suggest that unmarried motherhood has a limiting effect on fertility, in the sense that had the mothers married they would have more children than they actually did have by staying single. The significance of the somewhat larger family size of separated mothers is unclear, though it may suggest that earlier marriage and higher levels of childbearing may increase the risk of marital breakdown.

AGE

The age profile of lone parents depends very much on their marital status: most unmarried lone parents are aged under 30, while most separated lone parents are aged over 35.

EDUCATION

Unmarried lone mothers have considerably lower education levels than the average for all mothers. Interestingly, this association was also found for separated mothers. This broadens the findings of earlier research and suggests that separation is more common among those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

SOCIAL CLASS

Those from the semi-skilled and unskilled social classes are over-represented among lone parents. However, because the present analysis is restricted to cross-sectional data it is difficult to distinguish between lone parents who are drawn from these social classes and those for whom lone parenthood has led to downwards social mobility. An additional problem is that many lone parents are not in employment (and by definition do not have a partner in employment) and therefore are not categorised by social class in the data. Similar questions about causality apply to findings on housing tenure, which show that lone parents, especially unmarried lone parents, are over-represented in local authority housing.

EMPLOYMENT

Taking age, educational background and number of children into account lone mothers now have a higher level of labour market participation than other mothers. Unmarried lone mothers experience an exceptionally high *unemployment* rate, though when background factors are controlled their *employment* rate is similar to married/cohabiting mothers. The latter is due in large part to the impact of the Community Employment (CE) programme, which is financially attractive to lone parents and which in 1997 accounted for over one-third of the lone mothers at work. CE thus emerges as a significant element of overall provision for lone parents.

Household and Family Size

Along with the decline in fertility and the rise in lone parenthood, the third major issue to be examined in this report is the evolution of household and family size, with reference especially to the persistence of large family households.

Until recent decades, much of the concern about what were seen as problematic family types in Ireland focused on the large family. Concern with large families has abated over recent years reflecting the decline in family size. The average size of household declined by one person – from 4.1 to 3.1 persons – over the twenty-five years from 1971 to 1996. Much of this decline was driven by a sharp reduction in the number of very large households (7 persons or more) and a sharp increase in the number of one-person households.

However, while large families are much less prominent and numerous than before, they still contain a significant proportion of the population, especially the child population. The 1996 Census suggests that there were almost 170,000 children aged under 15 in families of four or more children of that age. This amounts to almost one in five of all children aged under 15. The 1997 LFS puts the proportion of children in these large families at 19 per cent. To put these proportions in perspective, children in lone parent families, who tend to receive more attention from a policy point of view than those in large families, now represent about 12 per cent of children under 15. This is a significantly smaller proportion, even though lone parent families constitute a higher proportion of families with children (14 per cent) than do large families (8.5 per cent). While recent studies suggest that poverty risk among large families has fallen in recent years, these families still face a significantly higher risk of poverty than the population as a whole (Callan *et al.*, 1996, p. 89). Therefore the incidence and development of this family type is still of considerable importance to policy makers.

The range of existing data on family formation means that our analysis of the social characteristics of large families is restricted to one point in time and therefore the ambiguity about the direction of causality arises again. Our analysis of the 1997 LFS micro-data suggest that larger families are more likely to experience labour market and social disadvantage than other families with children, and that these problems are most pronounced in families with five or more children. This disadvantage was manifested in a lower level of educational attainment among mothers, a higher level of non-employment or employment in the unskilled manual class among heads of household, a greater incidence of worklessness within the household, and a higher level of local authority tenancy compared to other families with children.

Data Requirements

The trends just outlined present a picture of continuing change in family formation patterns. However, inadequacies in the database mean that knowledge about the details of what is happening, much less why it is happening, is poor. While much can be gleaned from existing data, these data are inadequate as a source of guidance for social policy, and in fact in some respects have declined rather than expanded in scope and coverage over recent years. In some cases, the problem is that relevant data are not collected, while in other instances the data are collected but remain unprocessed, unpublished or inaccessible to researchers for such long periods that their value for current policy concerns is reduced.

It is puzzling that this should be so, given the importance of these areas of social life and the level of public interest they arouse. Furthermore, in

the context of the demand for strategic management and enhanced performance in all areas of public provision, it is striking that the information base needed to provide understanding and guide interventions in the family sphere has not been expanded and brought up to reasonable standards of adequacy. *Ad hoc* research projects, such as those recently initiated and funded through the Family Affairs Unit in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, can help fill the gaps. The proposed National Longitudinal Study of Children now being explored by the Health Research Board is also likely to constitute a major advance. However, some of the main shortcomings arise in connection with existing regular data collection, and these shortcomings need to be rectified to ensure that the foundations of the knowledge base in this area are secure.

KEY GAPS IN DATA

In regard to fertility, the absence of Census inquiries on fertility and of any replacement data since 1981 constitute a major gap and point to one area where data coverage has reduced rather than expanded over recent years. As a consequence of this gap, basic matters such as completed family size, levels and patterns of childlessness, and social differentials in fertility cannot adequately be tracked. It is therefore necessary that a replacement for the former Census data on fertility be put in place, expanded to cover non-marital as well as marital fertility. The Census of Population itself may not be the best vehicle for such an updated inquiry, since the scale and wide-ranging nature of the Census limits the inquiries that can be made on any subject and might also raise concerns for the Census authorities about the inclusion of items that some sections of the population might find intrusive.

The Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) might offer a better alternative. It is a large-sample survey, covering about 39,000 randomly selected households every three months and it provides for the periodic inclusion of modules focused on particular topics. *Serious attention should be given to the possibility of including a module on fertility in one of the quarters of the QNHS in 2002.* Provision should also be made to repeat such a module at regular intervals (such as once every five years, or more frequently). The CSO should also be sufficiently resourced to facilitate the timely release of the resulting information, as long time lags to release of data has hampered the use of existing data from the QNHS. Thus, for example, information on family and household structure which has been gathered by the QNHS since winter 1997 has not yet been published or made available to researchers.

Many aspects of fertility related behaviour (such as sexual activity, contraceptive use, responses to crisis pregnancy) may be too sensitive to include in general surveys such as the QNHS. However, they are of major concern from a policy point of view (particularly in fields such as women's health, child welfare and abortion) and need to be more regularly monitored than they are at present. This points to the need for a wide ranging programme of research on these areas, over and above that relating to regular data through mechanisms such as the Quarterly National Household Survey.

We have drawn on existing data sources to provide a picture of lone parenthood in Ireland, but large gaps in these sources mean that this picture remains incomplete. At a very basic level, the incidence of lone parenthood remains uncertain because of absence of information on those living in multi-family units.

Analysis of the causes and consequences of lone parenthood and of the trajectories through that family status is restricted by the shortage of longitudinal information. This applies equally to lone parenthood arising from marital dissolution and non-marital childbearing. The absence of such analysis makes it difficult to explore the links between lone parenthood and social disadvantage. In some cases, social disadvantage is a cause of lone parenthood, while in others it is a consequence, and it would be useful for social policy to be better informed on those linkages. The duration of lone parenthood also has very significant implications for the resources of these families, the level of state support that they require and the broader impact of lone parenthood on both children and parents. Mention has already been made of the lack of information both on the social characteristics of non-resident parents, who in over 90 per cent of cases are the fathers, and their relationship with their children. This information is important in establishing where families fit along a continuum from solo parenting to joint parenting.

In order to provide a fuller picture of these issues, serious consideration should be given to collecting *retrospective life and work histories from a large sample of individuals*. This could provide the longitudinal information needed in a cost effective and timely way. It could pick up on those who have been in one parent families in the past but are currently in partnerships in a way that other methodologies, including prospective panels, can not.

Preparations are underway at present for a National Longitudinal Study of Children which are relevant in this regard. These preparations are being carried out by the Health Research Board under the auspices of the National Children's Strategy which was announced late in 2000. This study heralds a new era in data collection relating to certain aspects of family life in Ireland. It is greatly to be welcomed and in time will rectify many of the gaps in our present knowledge in this area. At time of writing, the scope and coverage of the survey have yet to be finalised. However, given that its focus will be on children, it would also need information on children's parents and as such it could provide the vehicle for a baseline study of paths to family formation among a large sample of parents. While the longitudinal data on children in such a study would take a long time to accumulate and bear fruit, the utilisation of the initial rounds to collect retrospective data on parents could furnish immediate results and fill important gaps in our knowledge about family formation.

Other Implications

The primary concern of the present study has been to outline and assess the present knowledge base for policy in areas connected with the family in Ireland. The main conclusion to emerge from the study is the patchy and dated character of that knowledge base. In certain areas, such as fertility, less information is available now than in earlier decades, particularly in that the Census of Population has not included an inquiry on fertility since

1981. Many more recent though increasingly prominent features of family life have scarcely ever been the subject of systematic data collection (for example, there has been no comprehensive study of marital breakdown in Ireland to date). In these circumstances, the guidance that research can offer to policy on the family is limited, and the main implication to be drawn is the need for a general expansion and upgrade of research in this area.

In addition, certain other issues emerge which are a concern from a policy point of view and these can be summarised as follows.

- ◆ The low level of fertility has become a serious concern in many European countries, as it holds out the prospect of imbalances in the age-structure of the population in the future and long-term population decline. Similar concerns are not yet justified to the same degree in Ireland, as the fertility rate has remained a good deal higher than the European average. Yet Irish fertility rates are already below replacement level and the possibility of further decline to average European levels is always present. This leads to the implication, first, that the level of fertility may soon become a concern of policy in Ireland in a way that it has not been up to now, but second, that policy measures which would have significant impact in raising or sustaining fertility are hard to identify. International experience would seem to suggest that public policy regarding families with children is secondary to broad social and economic factors in determining fertility rates, though these latter factors are themselves complex and seem to vary in their influence from one context to another. In other words, if policy in Ireland were to adopt the goal of raising or sustaining fertility, policy instruments capable of achieving that end would be difficult to identify.
- ◆ The rise in non-marital childbearing in the 1980s and 1990s seems inexorable. Low education and poor employment prospects were associated with non-marital childbearing in the 1980s but improvements in education and employment in the 1990s have not arrested the upward trend in non-marital childbearing. As in the case of fertility generally, it seems unlikely that welfare provisions for unmarried parents form a significant influence on the non-marital birth rate. However, it is possible that they have an influence on some aspects of these patterns, possibly affecting the incidence and nature of quasi-marital arrangements and the relationship between unmarried mothers and non-resident fathers (most obviously in relation to financial support). However, these influences have not been adequately explored, thus highlighting the need for much improved information on the role of non-resident parents in lone parent families generally.
- ◆ Labour force participation among lone parents, which formerly had been low, rose sharply over the mid-1990s. This occurred at least in part because persons on Lone Parents Allowance became eligible to participate on favourable terms in the Community Employment (CE) programme from 1994 onwards. Yet the proportion claiming benefits remains high, and the large numbers in CE may disguise their difficulty in entering the mainstream labour market. Thus the headline increase in lone parents' employment rates does not necessarily

indicate a corresponding success in entering paid jobs which provide sufficient income to ensure economic independence. For many lone parents, low educational and skill levels still constitute serious obstacles to finding mainstream jobs. In that context, CE schemes might be evaluated as labour market mechanisms, in which case, as far as lone parents are concerned, they would be judged according to their success in eventually funnelling lone parents into mainstream jobs. However, one could equally argue that they should be viewed as quasi-welfare schemes designed to improve the personal and family circumstances of lone parents, in which case they would be judged by their impact on the living standards and quality of life of such parents. Concerns would also arise about the distinctions they draw between lone parents and joint parents, since the latter are not as favourably treated under CE, even where their needs may be as great. The point to be highlighted here is the importance CE schemes have assumed in the lives of many lone parents and the need to keep their complex functions in this regard in mind when considering their role in the full employment economy which has recently emerged in Ireland.

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