



## **Hanafin launches report on the ever-changing formation of Families in Ireland**

**“Families in Ireland are in a constant state of change and meeting the variety of needs and planning for the future supports required is the challenge for policy makers now and into the future”** said Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Hanafin T.D. today (28<sup>th</sup> November 2008). The Minister was speaking at the launch of a new research report - ***Families in Ireland: An Analysis of Patterns and Trends*** in Dublin.

The research report was written by Professor Tony Fahey and Catherine Anne Field of UCD and funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Minister Hanafin said the report **“brings together a range of information on central aspects of family life and highlights key features and trends. It will be a valuable resource for policy makers and those interested in how families are developing and changing in Ireland.”**

Along with the report, the Minister launched a new information booklet detailing family supports and services across a range of Government Departments and agencies.

Speaking at the launch Minister Hanafin said **“overall, the report provides a rich description of families in Irish society and helps us to better understand the positive and negatives trends in family life. Looking at the findings, there is a clear trend, contrary to common opinion, that family life in Ireland is clearly**



**alive and well. This is supported by the findings that there are more marriages taking place and we have lower divorce levels compared with other countries.**

**A striking feature of family life over the past ten years, highlighted in this report, has been the large increase in the formation of new families, while at the same time the traditional larger family has significantly declined. Children in Ireland are now much more likely to grow up in households of just one or two children, than in previous decades.**

**Overall income and living standards have increased in the last decade, however the report, yet again highlights the higher risk of poverty found among lone parent families and those two parent families with more than four children.**

**Supporting families at all stages of their lives and through possible difficult stages, which can affect them from time to time, is at the core of the work of the Family Support Agency and is something that the Government continues to develop. In the coming year there will be funding provided to the FSA to developing a programme to support positive parenting skills, as well as the ongoing support for counselling services.”**

The analysis in the report comes under three broad headings – partnership, including marriage and cohabitation, parents and children and other care-giving relationships in the family.



### **Marriage and Partnership**

- Following a decline in marriage rates during the 1980s and early 1990s, the popularity of marriage has picked up in the past decade, with **40% more marriages in 2006 than in 1995**.
- By 2005, the **average age of marriage stood at 33.1 years for men and 31.0 years for women**, high ages of marriage not seen since the 1940s
- **Ireland's divorce rate is low by international standards** – even taking a broader measure of marital breakdown to include both divorces and separations that do not lead to divorce, that broader measure still indicates a low rate of marital breakdown compared to other developed countries.
- Despite the increase in **cohabitation before marriage, it does not appear to be developing as a major alternative to marriage**. In general cohabitation is more often either a transient arrangement that dissolves or a stage on the road to marriage.
- Rather than causing an upward shift in the marital breakdown rate, the **introduction of divorce was accompanied by a slowing down and eventual levelling off in the rate of growth of marital breakdown**, at least over the ten years since divorce legislation has been in place.
- A feature of the family law system is the heavy use made of **applications under domestic violence legislation, which considerably outnumber applications for separation or divorce combined**.

### **Parents and Children**

- There has been a large increase in the formation of new families, as indicated by **a rise of 57% in the numbers of first births**



**between 1994 and 2006.**

- Patterns in developed countries generally would suggest that over the past two decades **buoyancy in job opportunities for women has had a strong positive effect on birth rates.** By contrast, family-friendly public policies appear at best to have a weak effect on birth rates.
- Because of the decline in the number of large families, **children in Ireland are now much more likely than in previous decades to grow up in households with only one or two children.** For example, in 1981, 38% of children were living in households with four, five or six or more children but by 2006, this had fallen to 13% of children.
- There has been **a steady increase in the number of children living in lone parent families,** and by 2006, 17.6% of children aged under 15 were in that situation.
- Looking at the incomes and living standards of families, **overall living standards have increased** and the proportion who experience very low levels of consumption has fallen. The most serious concern is the **higher than average risk of poverty found among lone parent families and two parent families with four or more children.**
- Though **fertility rates in Ireland** are now below replacement level, when taken in combination with present levels of inward migration they are sufficient to sustain population growth for the future.
- **Women in Ireland have traditionally had a late age for child-bearing,** and this tradition persists. In 1960, the average age of women giving birth was 31.6 years and in 2004, it was 30.8 years.
- **Teenage birth rates are low,** account for less than 6% of births and have fallen slightly since the early 1980s.



- **Childbearing outside of marriage** has become more general in the population and is now less concentrated among young adults. The average age of birth to mothers outside of marriage was 27.1 years in 2006, compared to 22.2 years in 1980.

### **Other Caring Relationships**

- The **caring functions of families remain strong**, as expressed not only through the care of parents for their children but also through other caring relationships in the family.
- **Relatives are the main source of childcare for the children of working mothers** and family members provide large volumes of unpaid care to those with disabilities.
- **The number of people aged over 65 is projected to increase** from less than 430,000 today to 1.1 million by 2036, while the number of people aged over 80 is projected to increase from just over 100,000 today to 318,000 in 2036.
- **People at younger ages have much lower rates of disability** than those at older ages but because there are many more younger than older people, the absolute numbers of younger people with disabilities is quite high.

### **Copies of the report are available from:**

**Government Publications Sales Office,  
Molesworth Street,  
Dublin 2.**

**Ph. 01-647 6834/37 or 1890 213 434  
or**

**Family Affairs Unit of the Department  
Ph. 01-704 3593**

**or**

**on the website [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).**