

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Objectives

This study provides an overview of the 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 focuses on three major issues: decline in fertility, the growth and pattern of lone parenthood, and changes in household and family size, with particular reference to the persistence of large family households.

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## Fertility Decline

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, with a total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.89 in 1999, 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 the Irish TFR is high by European standards, 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.

However, 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 foreseeable future. Concerns about imminent population decline

which arise at present in many European countries thus do not apply to Ireland for the time being.

A surge in new family formation since the early 1990s is the main cause of the halt in fertility decline in Ireland in that period. First births rose by 29 per cent between 1994 and 2000, and this followed through into a more modest increase in second and third births over the same period. Fourth and higher order births continued their long-term decline. The boom in first births was such that their number in 2000 was the highest ever recorded in Ireland. This was marginally above the previous peak for first births in 1980, even though total births in 2000 numbered only 73 per cent of the total in 1980.

The rapid increase in the share of fertility occurring outside of marriage which began in the 1980s has continued unabated through the 1990s, having increased from 5 per cent in 1980 to 32 per cent in 2000. 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. It is not known what proportion of mothers who had children outside of marriage were in cohabiting unions, though indications from other countries would suggest that such unions are likely to be quite common and that solo motherhood may be a minority experience among them.

The role of marriage in family formation is less dominant and clear-cut than it once was. Marriage rates have fallen, much family formation now takes place outside of marriage (as evidenced in the high incidence of non-marital fertility) and marriage breakdown has increased. In contrast to the experience of the 1960s and 1970s, the surge in first births in the 1990s *preceded* rather than followed a surge in marriages. While first births increased from 1994 onwards, the number of marriages rose only from 1997 onwards, with a 23 per cent increase between then and 2000. 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.

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## **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. Lone parent families at present account for about 12 per cent of children aged under 15 years and

about 14 per cent of families with children of that age. Social welfare data provide higher counts of lone parent families than do Census or survey sources. This raises the possibility of over-claiming of lone parenthood for social welfare purposes, though the data are not sufficiently detailed to draw firm conclusions on this question. The possibility that parents may sometimes seek to conceal co-residence with a partner in order to claim lone parent benefits deserves further investigation. This is so not only because it may indicate some degree of social welfare fraud but also because of what it implies about the disincentives to joint parenthood which may be built into current provision for lone parents. It is also possible that some of the divergence in lone parent counts is due to differences in definitions and sampling errors.

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, since, in the case of unmarried and separated lone parents, it distracts attention from the non-resident second parent and the role he (or more rarely she) might play in his or her children's and former partner's lives. In consequence, information is lacking on the degree of jointness in parenting which persists between parents who live apart from each other. This 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.

### **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. In any event, little is known about patterns of exit from lone parenthood through the formation of new unions. Many non-marital births do not result in lone parenthood because of informal partnerships and post-birth marriages. However, it is unclear what proportion of such marriages or partnerships are with the biological father, nor how stable they 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.

### **OTHER CHARACTERISTICS**

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. Both unmarried and separated lone mothers have considerably lower education levels than the average for all mothers and are disproportionately drawn from the semi-skilled and unskilled social classes – though in some instances the lower social class position of lone mothers may represent downward social mobility caused by their family status. Similar questions about the direction of causality apply to findings on housing tenure, which show that lone parents, especially unmarried lone parents, are over-represented in local authority housing.

There has been a very rapid increase in the labour force participation of lone mothers since 1995 and they now have a higher level of labour market participation than married mothers of similar age and educational level. This is due in part to the impact of the Community Employment programme. By 1997 CE accounted for about one in three of lone mothers at work and had raised lone mothers' employment rate almost to the same level as that of married mothers. In addition, unmarried lone mothers are more likely to report themselves as unemployed, thus raising their labour force participation rate above that of married mothers.

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## **Large Families**

Until recent decades, much of the concern about what were spoken of as problematic family types in Ireland focused on the large family. Large families are much less prominent and numerous than before, but they still contain a significant proportion of 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, compared to about one in eight children who live in lone parent families. While the social circumstances of many large families are unproblematic, our analysis of the 1997 LFS micro-data suggests 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.

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## **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 of why it is happening, is poor. While a certain amount 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 knowledge base is improved.

### **KEY GAPS IN DATA**

In regard to fertility, the absence of Census inquiries on fertility since 1981 constitutes a major gap and points 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 can no longer be adequately tracked. It is, therefore, necessary that a replacement for the former Census data on fertility be put in place, and expanded to cover non-marital as well as marital fertility. The Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) which was initiated in 1997 might offer a suitable vehicle. *Serious attention should be given to the possibility of including a module on fertility in one of the quarters of the QNHS as soon as possible.* Provision should also be made to repeat such a module at regular intervals (such as once every five years, or more frequently).

It is also important that the CSO (and other agencies where relevant) be sufficiently resourced to facilitate the timely release of this and other statistical information. Although the introduction of the QNHS late in 1997 (to replace the former Labour Force Surveys) greatly expanded data collection in a number of areas, not least on family and household structure, the processing and publication of the data have fallen behind. This problem is reflected in the present report, in that on a number of topics it has had to rely on Labour Force Survey data dating back to early 1997 even though more comprehensive and more up-to-date data lie unused in inaccessible

QNHS data files. Another important data source, the Annual Vital Statistics Report, also suffers from some time-lags to publication. At the time of writing, the most recently available issue of this source related to 1997, and this issue was also notable in that for the first time since the present-day system of marriage registration was introduced in 1952, it omitted data on marriages on account of delays in processing the necessary returns in the General Register Office. *In general, it is important that where good quality data are collected, as is the case with the QNHS and vital statistics, resources should be provided to ensure such data are processed and published in a timely fashion.*

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 collection through mechanisms such as the QNHS.

Differing estimates of the incidence of lone parenthood are provided by administrative and survey data. The differences may be due to over-reporting of lone parenthood in administrative data (perhaps arising from an excessive level of claims for One-Parent Family Allowance). It is also possible that the available survey data (such as that from the 1997 Labour Force Survey used in the present report) may under-count lone parents to some degree, particularly in the case of lone parents who live with larger family units. This is another issue on which data from the QNHS could throw some light, but until those data become available, an element of uncertainty remains about the true incidence of lone parenthood.

Analysis of the causes, consequences and trajectories through lone parenthood is restricted by the lack of longitudinal information. 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 parents*. This could provide the longitudinal information needed in a cost effective and timely way. The National Longitudinal Study of Children now being planned by the Health Research Board could provide the platform for such a study, since the information it would gather would be directly relevant to the circumstances of children.

There is also a major gap in information on the non-resident parent in lone parent families – both on the profile of those parents and on the nature of their relationship with the children and resident parents. Such information could not easily be gathered in routine data collection exercises. But it relates to an important aspect of present-day family life and therefore justifies some investment of effort and resources to document properly.

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## Other Implications

In addition to the need for a general expansion and upgrade of research and data collection on various aspects of family formation, certain broad policy issues also emerge from the present study. These can be summarised as follows.

- Concern about the very low levels of fertility arising in many European countries do not yet apply to Ireland and may not in the foreseeable future. If present fertility rates in Ireland are maintained and inward migration continues at present levels, total population in Ireland will continue on a modestly upward growth path, in contrast to the incipient decline emerging in many European countries. However, even if low fertility were to emerge as a policy concern in Ireland, experience elsewhere suggests that policy measures which would have significant impact in raising or sustaining fertility are hard to identify. International patterns 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.
- The rise in non-marital childbearing in the 1980s and 1990s seems inexorable but its significance is unclear in the absence of information on the degree to which such childbearing takes place within quasi-marital relationships. 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, though they may have some influence on 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.
- The Community Employment (CE) programme emerged in the 1990s as an important area of provision for lone parents and largely accounted for the rise in labour force participation among lone parents since 1994. CE is normally evaluated in labour market terms, that is, by reference to its effectiveness in funnelling participants into mainstream employment. By that standard its success among lone parents appears to have been limited. However, CE also has important welfare effects for lone parents. Those effects are positive in one sense, in that CE boosts incomes and possibly improves quality of life for lone parents. However, it also gives an advantage to lone parents compared to married parents that may not be justified by reference to welfare needs and that may act as a disincentive to joint parenthood. Thus, while a case may be made for the retention of CE on welfare grounds, it also requires scrutiny and may need some reform on the same grounds.