

AN ANALYSIS OF PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Tony Fahey and Catherine Anne Field



FAMILIES IN IRELAND

AN ANALYSIS OF PATTERNS AND TRENDS

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and not necessarily those of University College Dublin or the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

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FOREWORD

As Minister for Social and Family Affairs it is my pleasure to publish this report on 'Families in Ireland: An Analysis of Patterns and Trends'. The report is an important resource for all those who seek to understand the changes which have taken place in families in Ireland over the past decades.



The family, in its different forms, is in a constant state of change and is an issue for a number of areas of public policy. In order to inform discussion of family issues, it is therefore useful to take stock and attempt to gain an overview of where family life now stands. The purpose of this document, which has been prepared at the request of the Family Affairs Unit in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, is to do that. It aims to bring together a range of information on central aspects of family life and highlight key features and trends.

The topics covered in the report can be classified under three broad headings: partnership, including marriage and cohabitation, parents and children and other care-giving relationships in the family.

Following a period of decline in marriage rates during the 1980s and early 1990s, the incidence of marriage has increased in the past decade, with 40 per cent more marriages in 2006 than in 1995. A decline in marriage rates among young adults has been off-set to some degree by a rise in cohabitation. In general, however, cohabitation is more often either a transient arrangement that dissolves or a stage on the road to marriage rather than a long-term alternative to marriage. At the same time the divorce rate in Ireland today is low by international standards.

A striking feature of family life over the past ten years, highlighted in the report, has been the large increase in the formation of new families, as indicated by a rise of 57 per cent in the numbers of first births between 1994 and 2006. At the same time the traditional larger family has declined. Children in Ireland are now much more likely than in previous decades to grow up in households with only one

or two children. Accompanying these changes has been the steady increase in the numbers of children living in lone parent families, and by 2006, according to census data, 17.6 per cent of children aged under 15 were in that situation.

The caring function of families remains strong, as expressed not only through the care of parents for their children but also through other caring relationships in the family.

The report successfully assembles a range of key information on families in Ireland and is a valuable resource for policy makers and those interested in how families are developing and changing in Ireland and the future supports they will need.

I would like to thank Tony Fahey and Catherine Anne Field of UCD who wrote the report and the Family Affairs Unit in my Department who supported their work and drew together the information on family services and programmes provided by other departments and agencies, which is being published alongside the report.

In ainneoin na hathruithe ar fad sa tír tá an chlann lárnach inár sochaí. Caithfimid tacaíocht a thabhairt di sa toadhcháí.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Hanafin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line under the name.

Mary Hanafin T.D.
Minister for Social & Family Affairs

November 2008

SUMMARY

This document provides a descriptive overview of a number of current aspects of family trends and patterns in Ireland, based on available data. The objective is to assemble a body of key information in accessible form between a single set of covers. The topics selected for coverage are dictated in part by the availability of data or research reports and in part by relevance for policy. They are organised under three headings: marriage and partnership, parents and children, and other caring relationships in the family.

MARRIAGE AND PARTNERSHIP

Marriage no longer possesses the cultural status or primacy as a gateway to family formation that it once had, since sex, childbearing and cohabitation outside of marriage now widely occur. However, following a period of decline in marriage rates during the depressed 1980s and early 1990s, the incidence of marriage has picked up in the past decade. There were 40 per cent more marriages in 2006 than in 1995. The increase was due in part to growth in the size of the population in the marriageable age groups, in part to the new possibility for second marriages opened up by the advent of divorce in 1997, and in part to a rise in the propensity of single people to marry. Rising marriage rates among single people were concentrated very much among those aged in their 30s and 40s and to some extent were the consequence of catch-up among those who had deferred marriage in the previous decade. Marriage rates among younger adults continued to fall. 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.

The decline in marriage rates among young adults has been off-set to some degree by a rise in cohabitation. Cohabiting couples in 2006 accounted for 11.6 per cent of all couples, and 33 per cent of these cohabiting couples had children. In general, however, cohabitation is more often either a transient arrangement that dissolves or a stage on the road to marriage rather than a long-term alternative to marriage.

Certain forms of instability in marriage have become steadily more common since the early 1980s and the incidence of divorce in particular has grown since divorce legislation came into effect in 1997. Yet the divorce rate in Ireland today is low by international standards. Even if we broaden the 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. Furthermore, having risen sharply from a very low base in the early 1990s, the marital breakdown rate has leveled off in recent years.

It is also of interest to note the wide range of forms of legal resolution of marital breakdown used by Irish couples. The majority of family cases continue to be dealt with in the District Courts, which do not have the power to grant divorce or legal separation, rather than in the Circuit Court, where those provisions are available. The adequacy of the remedies for family law cases provided by the courts and related family support services is not regularly monitored but may not be satisfactory. Two aspects of the current system are a particular concern: the large proportion of family cases processed under the summary jurisdiction of the District Court, and the prominence of domestic violence cases, which represent a particularly severe form

of family crisis, in the District Court family law caseload. An important decline in the volume of domestic violence cases in the District Court has occurred in recent years. On the face of it, this would seem to be a positive development but as it has not been examined or explained, its significance is difficult to assess.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

A striking feature of family life over the past ten years has been the large increase in the formation of new families, as indicated by a rise of 57 per cent in the numbers of first births between 1994 and 2006. There has also been a large increase (43 per cent) in the number of second births over the same period. While detailed analysis of how and why these increases have occurred has not been carried out, the coincidence between their arrival and the economic boom that started at the same time makes it likely that there is a causal connection between the two. 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. In the case of Ireland, strong jobs growth for women, along with related factors such as rising incomes, seem to have more than compensated for possible negative influences on the willingness to have children such as high house prices or expensive childcare. In any event, the vitality in family formation in Ireland since the early 1990s is an important development that lays a strong demographic and social foundation for the future.

Although Irish people have become more willing to enter parenthood over the past decade or so, they have continued the long-term move away from becoming parents many times over. It is the decline in the *large* family that has prevented the increase in the number of new families from translating into a correspondingly large increase in the birth rate.

Children in Ireland are now much more likely than in previous decades to grow up in households with only one or two children. Households with five, six or more children which were common in the past have now become rare. At the same time there has been a steady increase in the numbers of children living in lone parent families, and by 2006, according to census data, 17.6 per cent of children aged under 15 were in that situation. Lone parent families are more prone to certain kinds of risks than two-parent families. However, in assessing overall trends in the circumstances of family life, we have to keep in mind that the very large family of the past was also prone to risk and is now much less common. On balance, therefore, taking account of both the decline in large families and the rise of lone parenthood, it is not at all evident that the numbers of children living in vulnerable family types is any greater now than in the past.

When we look at the incomes and living standards of families, we find that 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.

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. While the level of reliance on family members as a source of care is a cause of concern in some respects, it nevertheless testifies to the continuing strength of the caring capacity of families.

Previous weakness in the family status of older people, caused by the high proportions who never married or had children, is abating, reflecting the rise in marriage rates which occurred among those now entering old age when they were in the family formation stages of the life cycle. For this and other reasons, the capacity of families to care for older relatives is undiminished, though it needs to be supplemented by other supports to guarantee an adequate standard of care.



INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is in a constant state of change and is a concern of a number of areas of public policy. In order to inform public discussion of family issues, it is therefore useful occasionally to take stock and attempt to gain an overview of where family life now stands. The purpose of this document, which has been prepared at the request of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, is to do that, within the limits of available information. It aims to bring within a single set of covers a range of readily available information on central aspects of family life and highlight key features and trends. The selection of topics for coverage is dictated in part by the availability of relevant data or research reports and in part by relevance for policy.

The topics considered here may be classified under three broad headings:

- 1. Partnership, which refers to marriage and marriage-like relationships (cohabitation).*
- 2. Parents and children.*
- 3. Other care-giving relationships in the family, with particular reference to dependent elderly or other relatives.*



PARTNERSHIP

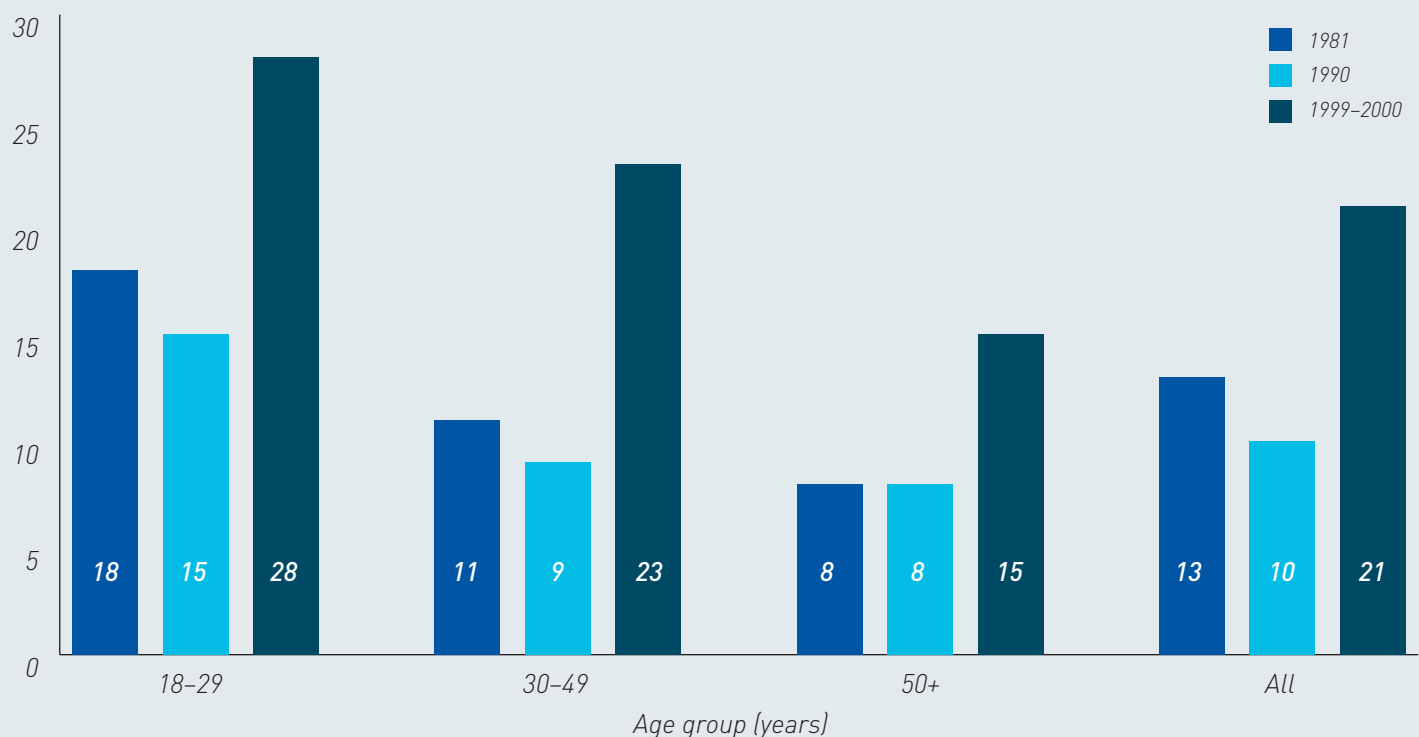
2. ***PARTNERSHIP***

People's tendency to marry or cohabit has increased in Ireland since the mid 1990s, with the upward trend in marriages being particularly notable. Given that Irish people in the past have sometimes been reluctant to form couples, the recent increase can be read as a sign of vitality in Irish family life and a counter to the notion that the institution of marriage is losing its appeal.

MARRIAGE AND PARTNERSHIP: CHANGING MEANINGS

The institution of marriage retains a central role in family life but its meaning has changed over time. In a national survey in 1973-74, 71 per cent of all respondents, and 44 per cent of respondents aged 18-30, felt that sex before marriage was 'always wrong' (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1976). When the same question was asked in a survey three decades later (in 2004-5), only six per cent of respondents felt that premarital sex was always wrong (Layte et al. 2006). In 1980, one in twenty births took place outside marriage, but today one in three do so. Changes in attitudes and behaviour such as these indicate that the former role of marriage as the sole legitimate gateway to sex and reproduction has been greatly diluted. Attitude surveys also give evidence of a declining regard for marriage. The European Values Study, carried out in Ireland in 1981, 1990 and 1999-2000, asked respondents if they thought that marriage was an outdated institution. Figure 2.1 shows that across all age-groups of Irish adults, only a minority agreed that marriage was outdated, but also that during the 1990s the size of the minority grew from around one in ten to one in five of all adults. Along with other related developments, such as the rise of cohabitation and the increase in marital breakdown, all these indications could be taken as signs of a weakening of the institution of marriage.

Figure 2.1 Percentage of Irish adults by age-group agreeing that 'marriage is an outdated institution', 1981, 1990 and 1999-2000



Source: European Values Study micro-data

Notions of weakening and decline do not however capture the complexity of what has happened to marriage. The majority of people in Ireland still marry, and while the marriage rate declined during the 1980s and early 1990s, there has been something of a recovery in marriage since 1997. People may be less reverential about the institution of marriage today but that does not necessarily mean they are less inclined to enter the married state. Equally important is the changing meaning of marriage for those who are married and the changing nature of the relationship between spouses. These are more difficult to track over time, and have not been systematically documented.¹ Yet it is clear from everyday experience that both what people aspire to as ideals in marriage and the way spouses behave have also been transformed. Some of these transformations are shown in simple things. In Hannan and Katsiaouni's study three decades ago (1977), for example, one of the markers of a modern as opposed to a traditional style of family interaction was the degree to which husbands and wives addressed each other by their first names or used terms of endearment towards each other (Hannan and Katsiaouni 1977). This reminds us how rare such intimacies of speech were in the not too distant past in most Irish families. Changes in the way that family members are expected to speak to each other reflect broader shifts in the culture of the family. Emotional closeness, mutual understanding, reciprocity and affection are now widely accepted values of family life, although we have little hard information on how universally they are held in Irish families or how widely they are put into effect. The women's movement has also given voice to women's perspective on these issues and has transformed gender relations in the family. Changes in values and practices of these kinds could be seen as an intensification and raising of expectations in marriage rather than as weakness and decline. Though they may lead to an increase in some forms of family instability (such as marital breakdown), they could also be read as reflecting profound human need and a desire to make human institutions conform to an admirable vision of human well being.

It is now common to speak of partnership rather than marriage as the generic term for long-term intimate sexual relationships. At one level, this new term reflects the growing incidence of such relationships in various forms of cohabitation outside of marriage, but it also reflects an emphasis on the ideals of partnership rather than the external formalities of marriage as the core of intimate human relationships.

¹ The study by Hannan and Katsiaouni (1977), though conducted on farm families only, remains the most extensive attempt to examine the nature and pattern of husband-wife relationships in Ireland. In the thirty years since its publication, no similar study has been carried out.

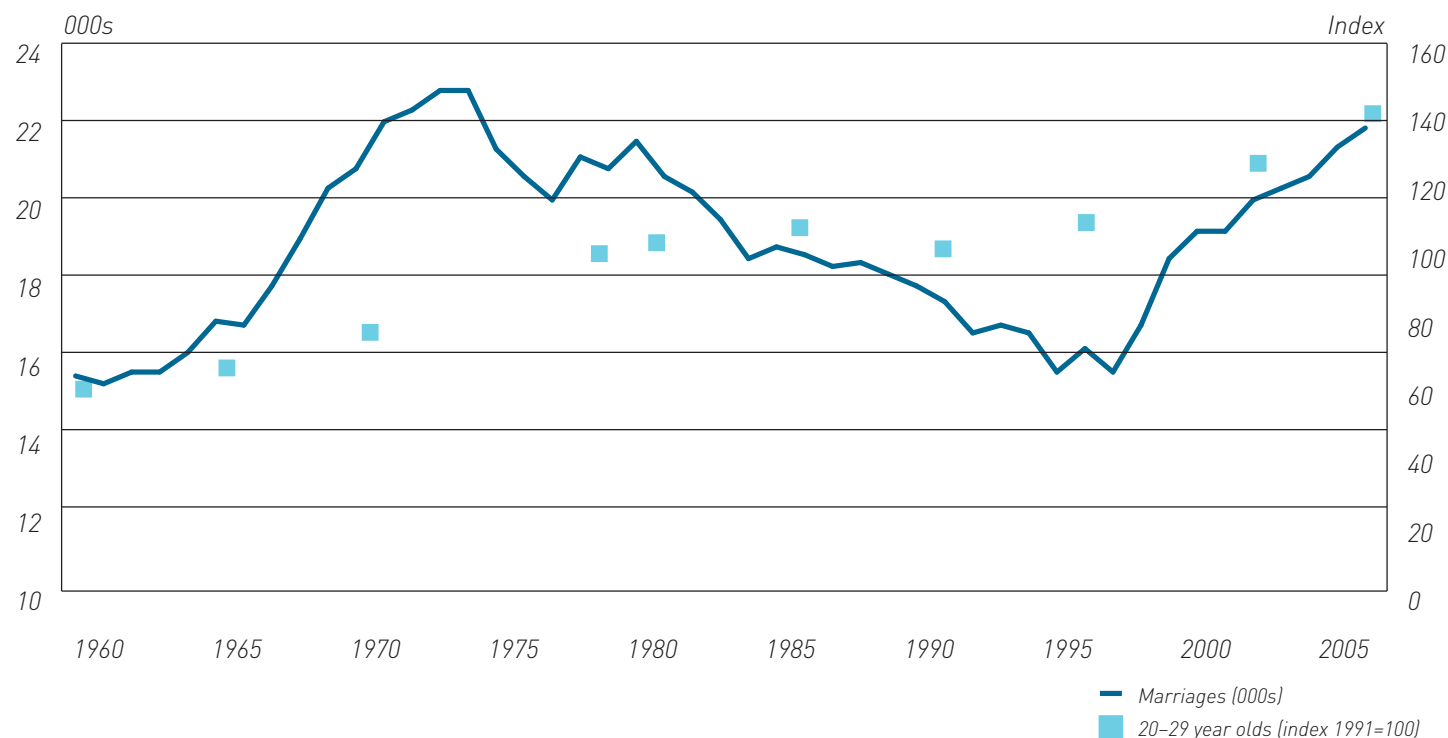
INCIDENCE AND AGE OF MARRIAGE

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Irish people showed an extraordinary reluctance to marry: they either married late or never married at all. This pattern reached an extreme in the 1930s, at which point over half of 30-34 year-olds in Ireland were single and 27 per cent of 50-54 year-olds were single. The average age of marriage around this time was 33 for men and 28 for women. No other population in human history up to that time had recorded as high an incidence of non-marriage as this (Guinnane 1997).

The popularity of marriage improved steadily for four decades after the 1930s and reached its apex in the 1970s. The highest number of marriages in Ireland in the twentieth century was recorded in 1974 (at 22,800 – see Figure 2.2). Marriages also occurred at their most youthful age at around the same time: the average age at marriage was just over 26 years for men and 24 years for women in 1974. The marriage peak of the 1970s was followed by two decades of decline in the number of marriages and a rise in the age at which people married. By the early 1990s, the annual number of marriages was hovering around 16,000, a level that was only 70 per cent of the peak of 1974, and the average age of marriage had risen by two years for both men and women. As with births, however, the 1990s

brought an end to decline and turned it into recovery: by 2006, there were 40 per cent more marriages than in 1995. Some of this increase was simply a function of the growing size of the relevant age-cohorts, but there was also some rise in the propensity of people to marry up to 2002, followed by a slight decline from 2002 to 2005 (Central Statistics Office 2007a). In the case of males, the marriage rate among those aged 16-49 rose from 17.7 per 1,000 persons in 1996 to 19.7 in 2002 and fell back marginally to 19.2 in 2005. For females, the corresponding rates were 17.8 marriages per 1,000 persons in 1996, rising to 20.2 in 2002 and falling back to 19.8 in 2005 (for further data, see Punch 2007).

Figure 2.2 Annual marriages in Ireland and size of 20-29 year-old cohort, 1960-2006



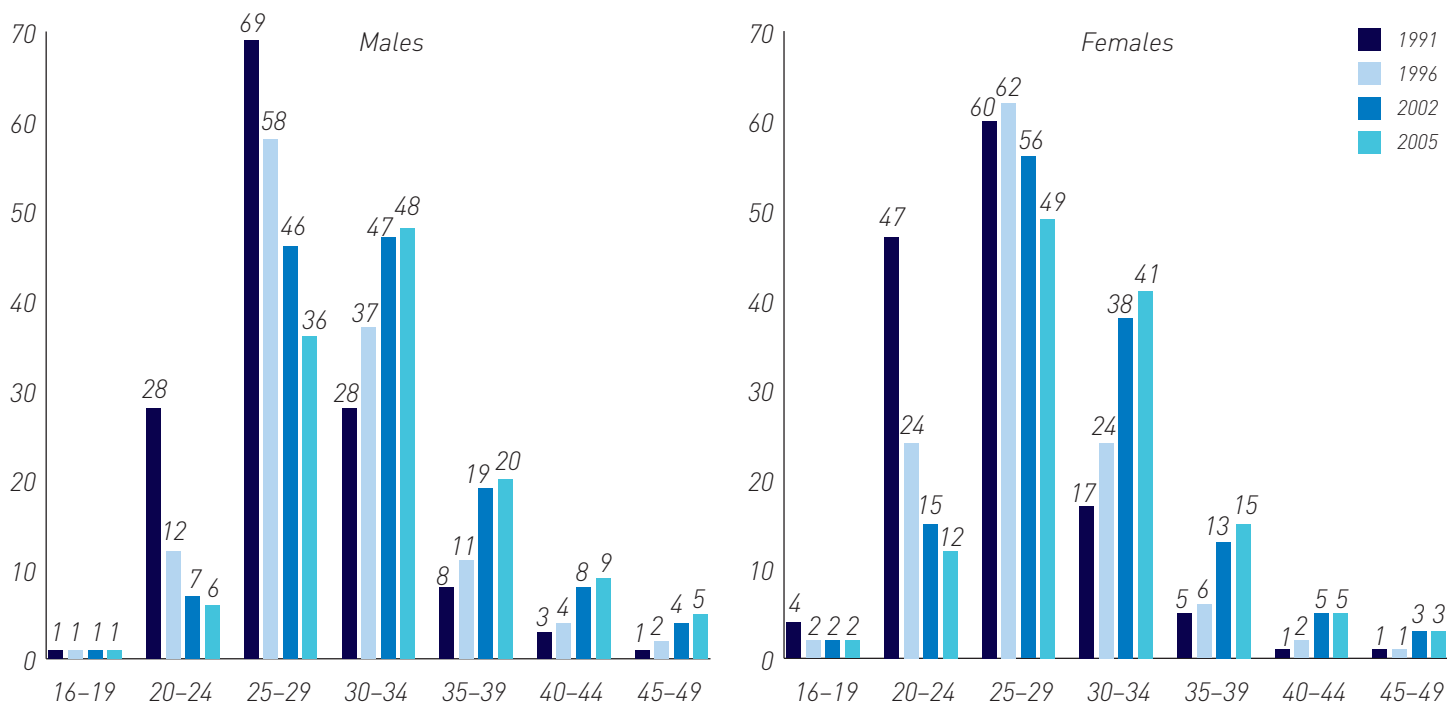
Sources: CSO Vital Statistics, Census of Population

One of the factors adding to the incidence of marriage in recent years is the introduction of divorce in 1997, which enabled people whose marriages had broken down to re-marry. In 2005, of the 21,335 marriages registered in that year just under one in ten (2,112) involved at least one partner who had previously divorced (Central Statistics Office 2007a). Since the number of marriages in 2005 was almost 6,000 greater than in 1997, the year divorce was introduced, just over a third of the increase in the annual number of marriages in that period involved at least one previously divorced partner. Thus some, but by no means all, of the increase in marriages after 1997 was the result of the legalisation of divorce and the consequent rise of second marriages.

A further feature of the recent upward trend in marriages is that it is accompanied by a sharp rise in the age of marriage, in contrast to the growing youthfulness of

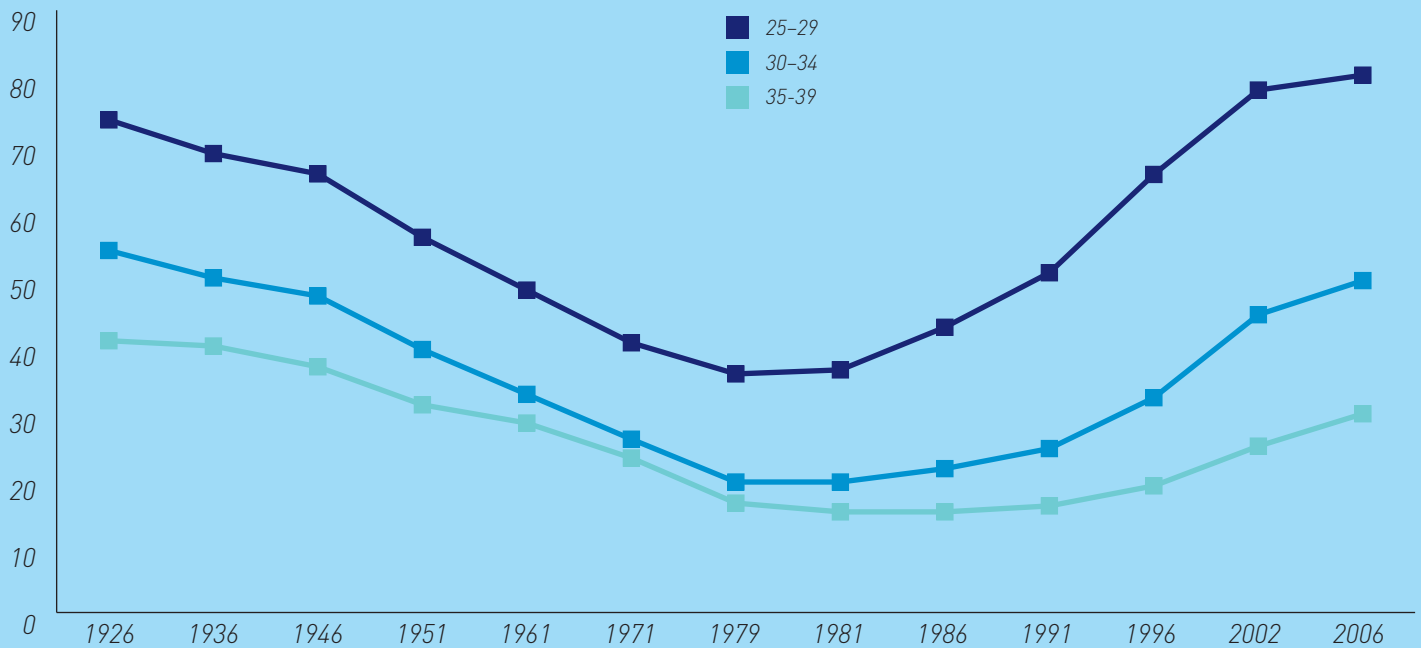
marriage that occurred in the marriage boom of 1965-74. Having risen by two years in the 1980s, average age at marriage jumped by a further four years between 1991 and 2005, rising to 33.1 years for men and 31.0 years for women – late ages of marriage not seen since the 1940s. This outcome reflected a sharp backing away from marriage among those aged under 30 years during this period but was counterbalanced by a rise in marriage among those aged over 30, particularly in the years 1996-2002. This pattern is shown in Figure 2.3, which shows marriage rates by five-year age group for 1991, 1996, 2002 and 2005. In 2005, the marriage rate among men and women aged 20-24 years was in the region of a quarter of what it was in 1991. The marriage rate among men in the age group 25-29 also declined sharply but less so for women. On the other hand, marriage rates among those aged 30-34 years more or less doubled for men and women, and rose for older age groups also.

Figure 2.3 Age-specific marriage rates for males and females, 1991-2005 (marriages per 1,000 corresponding population in each age-group)



Source: Central Statistics Office 2007a

Figure 2.4 Percentage single* in three age groups, 1926-2006



* 'Single' includes never-married cohabitants
 Sources: Censuses of Population 1926-2006

These patterns suggest that the marriage surge of recent years is probably best interpreted in part as a consequence of catch-up among those who deferred marriage during the 1980s and early 1990s and then crowded into marriage from the mid-1990s until the early years of the present decade. The surge began to ease in more recent years as the catch-up phase came to an end.

The catch-up achieved as a result is not complete, as is suggested by the data on trends in the proportion of the population remaining single in the age groups between 25 years and 39 years shown in Figure 2.4. Among those

aged in their 20s and early 30s, the proportion of single people had started to rise in the early 1980s, following a long previous decline, and continued to rise throughout the 1990s. Up to 2002, the surge in marriages after 1997 mentioned earlier had no visible impact on the upward trend in singlehood. Between 2002 and 2006 an impact begins to become evident, not to the degree that singlehood among young adults begins to decline but enough to greatly slow the rate of increase.

COHABITATION

Although marriage avoidance among young adults today is as common as it was in the 1930s, it has very different significance for family formation. Prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, marriage was the gateway to sex and reproduction: pre-marital sex and, even more, non-marital childbearing were strongly disapproved of and, as far as we can tell from the available evidence, occurred at a relatively low rate. Thus, the low level of marriage in the 1930s entailed a similarly low level of family formation. Today, marriage has lost much of the gateway function it possessed in the past: sex and childbearing before marriage are now more or less accepted as normal.

In addition, cohabitation before marriage is increasingly common and as already suggested may partly account for the delayed marriage among young adults. Cohabitation is often a transient state and is not formally registered so its incidence is difficult to track accurately. The best available source on this topic is the Census of Population which in 1996 for the first time included a count of the number of cohabiting couples and their children. The same issue has been examined in the censuses of 2002 and 2006.

As Table 2.1 shows, the 1996 census counted 31,300 cohabiting couples. They amounted to 3.9 per cent of all family units. By 2006, the incidence of cohabitation had increased fourfold in absolute numbers (to 121,800 couples) and by almost as much as a share of all family units (to 11.6 per cent). There was some shift in the family circumstances of cohabiting couples towards childless cohabitation: cohabiting couples who had children aged less than 15 rose from 12,700 in 1996 to 40,000 in 2006, but their share of all cohabiting couples declined somewhat, from 40.6 per cent in 1996 to 32.8 per cent in 2006. Yet the likelihood that young children would live with a cohabiting couple rose, at least between 2002 and 2006 (data on this item are not available for 1996). In the case of children living in family units where the youngest child is aged under 15, the share living with cohabiting couples rose from 4.8 per cent in 2002 to 6.7 per cent in 2006.

Partners of the same sex account for a small proportion of all cohabiting couples but that proportion rose fourfold between 1996 and 2002 and then showed much slower growth up to 2006. In 1996, 0.4 per cent of cohabiting couples were same-sex partnerships, but by 2002 that had risen to 1.67 per cent and by 2006 to 1.71 per cent (the absolute increase was from 150 couples in 1996 to 2,090 in 2006). The large increase between 1996 and 2002 may have reflected changing behaviour and the greater social acceptance of same-sex relationships, but it may also have been contributed to by a small change in the way cohabitation was recorded between the censuses of 1996 and 2002. In 1996, the item in the census form dealing with household members' relationship to the reference person

included 'living together as a couple' as a response option, while in 2002, that was changed to 'partner'. It is possible that the latter was more acceptable to same-sex partners as a way of recording their relationship and thereby increased the level of accurate reporting.

Halpin and O'Donoghue (2004) examined patterns of cohabitation in more detail using panel data for Ireland from the European Community Household Panel Survey. They found that for all the increase in cohabitation, it does not appear to be developing as a major alternative to marriage. Rather, in their view, it is most often a temporary arrangement found mainly among young urban adults that either dissolves after a relatively short period or leads on to marriage. They characterised cohabitation as a stage on the road to marriage and concluded that 'in the near future ... new marriages will be more likely than not to be preceded by cohabitation'.

Table 2.1 Cohabiting couples by family circumstances, 1996-2006

| | 1996 | 2002 | 2006 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Number of cohabiting couples (000s) | 31.3 | 77.6 | 121.8 |
| Number without children (000s) [% without children] | 18.6 [59.4%] | 47.9 [61.7%] | 77.8 [63.9%] |
| Number with children aged < 15 (000s) [% with children aged < 15] | 12.7 [40.6%] | 29.7 [38.3%] | 40.0 [32.8%] |
| <i>Of which:</i> | | | |
| 1 child (000s of couples) | 6.6 | 15.7 | 21.1 |
| 2 children (000s of couples) | 3.5 | 8.8 | 12.3 |
| 3 or more children (000s of couples) | 2.6 | 5.2 | 6.6 |
| Total children (000s) | 23.0 | 51.7 | 74.5 |
| Cohabiting couples as per cent of all family units | 3.9% | 8.4% | 11.6% |
| Cohabiting couples with children <15 as % of all family units with children < 15 | n.a. | 6.5% | 8.7% |
| % of children* living with cohabiting couples | n.a. | 4.8% | 6.7% |
| Number of same sex cohabiting couples | 150 | 1300 | 2090 |
| Same-sex cohabiting couples as % of all cohabiting couples | 0.4% | 1.68% | 1.71% |

* all children (of whatever age) in family units with at least one child aged < 15
Sources: Censuses of Population 1996-2006.

MARITAL BREAKDOWN

Two aspects of trends in marital breakdown over the past two decades in Ireland are of interest. One is the incidence of marital breakdown, which has increased considerably since the 1980s but is still relatively low by international standards. The other is the form of legal resolution of marital breakdown: here the issue is the degree to which couples use the various available means to deal with the legal consequences of relationship breakdown and what that reveals about the interaction between law and the family.

The introduction of divorce in 1997² might be thought to be especially relevant for both these aspects, since it has been widely viewed as a transformational event in the development of Irish family policy. It is useful, therefore, to consider whether the advent of divorce has had an impact on rates of marital breakdown and to what degree couples who are ending their relationship have taken up divorce as a means of dealing with the legal aspects of their break-up.

How much marital breakdown?

The incidence of marital breakdown is measured in most countries by reference to the divorce rate, which can be

2 The referendum to remove the prohibition of divorce from the Constitution was held and passed in November 1995. This was followed by the passage of the Family Law (Divorce) Act, 1996, which provided for no-fault divorce following four years of separation. The Act came into force in February 1997.

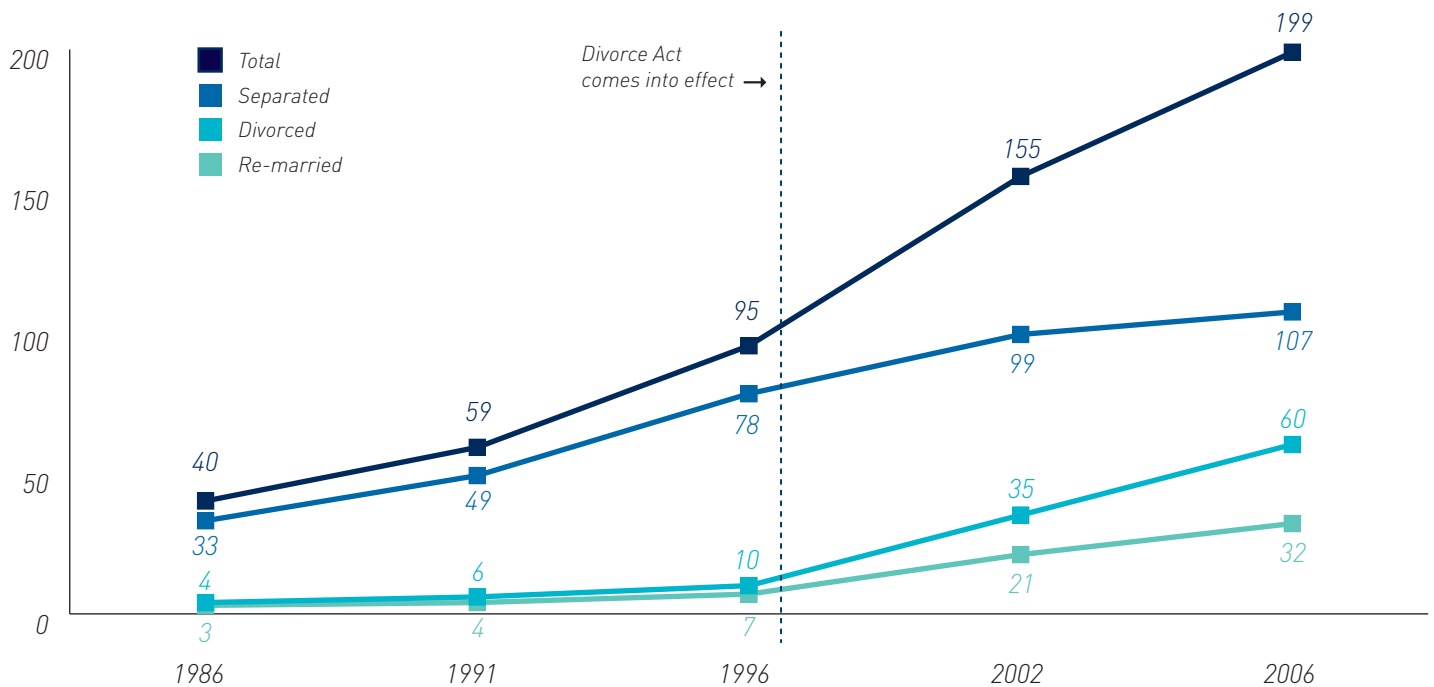
defined in a variety of ways. Table 2.2 shows comparative data for 2003 for two commonly used divorce indicators – divorces per 100 marriages occurring in the same year and divorces per 1,000 population aged 15-64. The ranking of some of the countries in this table differs between the two indicators – for example, Germany has the highest number of divorces per 100 marriages, but is fourth behind the United States, Denmark and the UK on divorces per 1,000 population aged 15-64. What is of interest to us here is that Ireland is at the bottom of the list on both indicators. This could be taken as an indication that, no matter how it is defined and measured, the divorce rate in Ireland is low, at least by the standard set by this group of countries. Countries at the top of the list on either indicator, such as Germany, the UK, Sweden and the United States, have divorce rates that are in the region of four times higher than that in Ireland.

Table 2.2 Divorce indicators for 12 countries, 2003

| | Divorces per 100 marriages | Divorces per 1,000 population aged 15-64 |
|----------------|----------------------------|--|
| Germany | 55.9 | 3.9 |
| United Kingdom | 54.5 | 4.3 |
| Sweden | 54.1 | 3.6 |
| United States | 49.2 | 5.7 |
| Canada | 48.8 | 3.2 |
| France | 45.4 | 3.2 |
| Denmark | 45.0 | 4.4 |
| Spain | 41.1 | 3.0 |
| Netherlands | 39.9 | 2.9 |
| Japan | 38.4 | 3.3 |
| Italy | 17.0 | 1.1 |
| Ireland | 14.4 | 1.0 |

Sources: Ireland – Courts Service, CSO Vital Statistics; all other countries – Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007. <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/07s1312.xls>

Figure 2.5 Numbers of persons who are divorced, separated or re-married following dissolution of marriage, 1986-2006



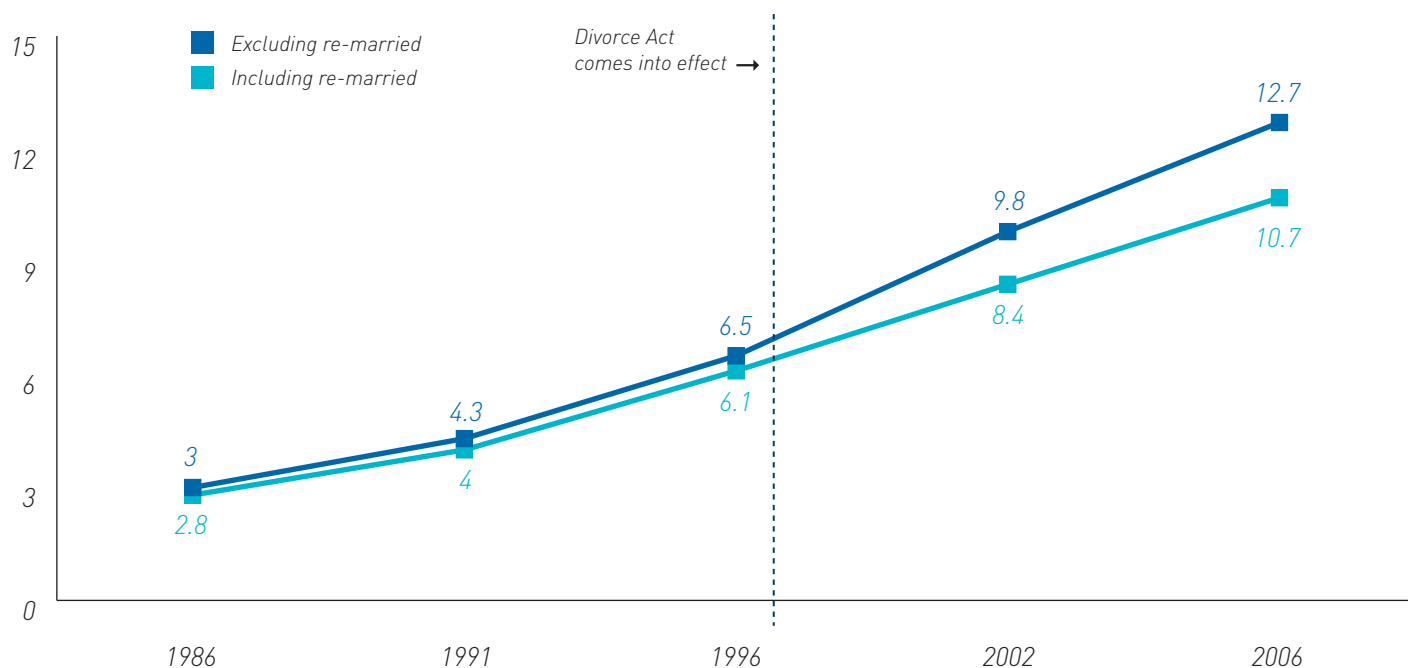
Source: Census of Population

In Ireland, however, the divorce rate is an imperfect measure of marital breakdown. This is so partly because many Irish couples whose marriages break down do not get divorced but simply remain separated, and partly because even where a divorce is obtained, the marriage breakdown it relates to will have occurred at least four years previously (the minimum period of separation required to obtain a divorce) and perhaps much longer ago. Thus divorces issued today are an indicator of marital breakdown at some time in the past rather than in the present. (The divorce rate in other countries may similarly fail to capture accurately the current rate of marital breakdown, but this is a topic on which it is difficult to find comparative data.)

A more complete measure of marital breakdown would require that account also be taken of separations (whether formal or informal) that do not lead to divorce. A crude version of such a measure can be obtained from census counts of the numbers of people who are separated, divorced or re-married following a previous dissolution of marriage. Figure 2.5 shows trends in the numbers of people in each of these categories and in the sum of the categories combined in each census year from 1986 to 2006. Figure 2.6 expresses the same numbers as percentages of the ever-married population. Some understatement of marital breakdown could occur in these data arising from emigration or death among those whose marriages

dissolved over this period and are therefore not included in census counts. Given the upsurge in immigration since the mid-1990s, a more serious distortion of the recent picture is likely to take the form of overstatement of marital breakdown arising from the inflow of divorced non-nationals, that is, those whose marriage breakdowns occurred in other countries. In 2006, non-Irish nationals (measured on a 'usual residence' basis) accounted for 10 per cent of the total population and of the married population, but they accounted for 18.7 per cent of those who had experienced a marriage breakdown, that is, were either separated, divorced or remarried following divorce (Census 2006, Vol 4, Table 40). Looking at the different types of marital breakdown separately, non-Irish nationals were under-represented among the separated (of whom they accounted for 8.7 per cent) but were heavily over-represented among the divorced and those who have remarried following divorce (27 per cent of the divorced population and 39 per cent of those who were remarried following divorce were non-Irish nationals). Non-Irish nationals were not separately identified in censuses in the 1990s and earlier so that it is not possible to estimate their impact on census measures of marital breakdown in those periods. It is likely that such an impact was present but because immigration was so much lower then its significance was less than what it has become over the past decade. Thus, in drawing on census data to assess trends

Figure 2.6 Separated/divorced as % of the ever-married population*



* excluding widowed

Source: Census of Population

in marital breakdown, it would appear that the 'import' of marital breakdown through the immigration of divorced non-Irish nationals has had an exaggerating effect on the upward movement in the numbers – but also that it is not possible to be precise about how large that effect has been.³ Consequently, in reading those data, it is best to regard them as indicating the upper bound to the trend in marital breakdown, with a likelihood that the real trend is somewhat lower than the data suggest.

Between 1986 and 2006, the total number of people in Ireland whose marriages had broken down increased five-fold, from 40,000 in 1986 to just under 200,000 in 2006 (of the latter, 36,000 were non-nationals). The upward slope of the trend became slightly steeper in the period 1996-2002, that is, after divorce was introduced, but this is partly an artefact created not only by the inflow of non-nationals but also by a wider interval between the censuses of those years.⁴ In

3 The data relate to *persons* rather than couples or marriages. As there is some misreporting in the data, the expectation that two persons (a man and a woman) would be counted for every broken marriage is not fulfilled exactly. Roughly speaking, however, the number of couples affected by marital breakdown is about half the number of persons reported in Figure 2.5.

4 The census scheduled for 2001 was postponed until 2002 on account of foot-and-mouth disease, so that the increase in separated/divorced persons recorded in that census was accumulated over six years rather than the usual five; correspondingly, the increase recorded up to 2006 was accumulated over only the four years that had elapsed since 2002.

any event, the data do not suggest that the advent of divorce was followed by a major immediate increase in marital breakdown, particularly when the effect of non-nationals is taken into account. The numbers divorced did show a sharp increase after 1996 but this was counterbalanced to a certain degree by a slower growth in the numbers who were separated. Expressed as a proportion of the ever-married population (Figure 2.6), those whose marriages had broken down increased more than four-fold between 1986 and 2006, from 3.0 per cent to 12.7 per cent (if non-nationals are excluded, the latter figure reduces to 10.8 per cent). Here again, there is no indication of a major upward shift in the trend after the introduction of divorce. This is not to say, however, that the absence of legal provision for divorce in Ireland prior to 1997 had no significance for rates of marital breakdown. It is arguable, though difficult to test one way or the other, that the absence of divorce in Ireland prior to 1997 may have contributed to a culture which discouraged marital breakdown and which even now helps keep the divorce rate to the low levels shown earlier.

The picture just looked at refers to the stock of persons whose marriages had broken down and not to the annual rate at which marital breakdowns occur. If we were to consider the analogy of water dripping into a bucket from a tap, Figures 2.5 and 2.6 portray the equivalent of the rising volume of water in the bucket and not of the rate of flow from the tap. In view of the incompleteness of divorce data

as a measure of marital breakdown mentioned earlier, it is of interest to attempt to derive rough estimates of a measure that includes separation as well as divorce. This can be done by calculating the average increase in the numbers of persons who are separated, divorced or remarried following divorce for each year in the intervals between the censuses of 1986, 1991, 1996, 2002 and 2006. Here we do so by focusing on the data for women, as it appears that women are more likely to provide an accurate report of their marital status than men.⁵ On that basis we can also estimate marital breakdown rates that provide a more inclusive measure of marital dissolution than the divorce rates shown in Table 2.2 above.

Table 2.3 sets out relevant numbers for each inter-census interval over the twenty years 1986-2006. The average annual increase in the numbers of women who were separated, divorced or remarried following divorce was 2,330 in the period 1986-91. It had risen to 5,531 by 2002-2006, a two-and-a-half fold increase. Measured as a rate of marital breakdown per 1,000 population aged 15-64, the increase was from 1.08 in 1986-91 to 1.99 in 2002-06. The latter is just about double the corresponding divorce rate for Ireland in 2003 presented in Table 2.2 above, which was 1.0, with the differential being due to the inclusion of various forms of separation in conjunction with the 'imported' marital breakdown represented by non-Irish nationals. However, even if we were to compare this higher estimate of marital breakdown with the divorce rate for other countries presented in Table 2.2, the Irish rate would still be quite low: it would

5 The number of women who report themselves as divorced or separated substantially exceeds the number of men in the same situation, even allowing for the higher incidence of remarriage among men. This would suggest that some men who are divorced or separated do not report themselves as such in the census forms.

rise above Italy's but remain below that of all the other countries in Table 2.2. (The divorce rate in other countries, including Italy, may understate the marital breakdown rate as it does in Ireland, and this makes it all the more likely that on a like-for-like basis, marital breakdown comprehensively measured is at a low level in Ireland by international standards.)

The *timing* of the increase in marital breakdown since 1986-91 revealed in Table 2.3 is also of interest, particularly in regard to the possible effects of the introduction of divorce in 1997. Looking at the breakdown rate per 1000 population aged 15-64, the biggest increase occurred between the periods 1986-91 and 1991-96, that is, before divorce was introduced (the increase in the rate was 60 per cent between these periods). A further increase was registered in the period 1996-2002, but it was much smaller, at 17 per cent, than in the previous period. By 2002-2006, growth had ceased and had turned into a small decline. It would thus appear that 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. It may yet emerge that the longer term effects of the availability of divorce will be of a different kind and may perhaps weaken the relative stability that still characterizes marriage in Ireland. As yet, however, no clear signs of such an effect have emerged.

Legal resolution of marital breakdown

A further perspective on family disruption can be obtained by looking at data on family law cases appearing in the court system and what that tells us about the legal means that couples use to resolve the breakdown of their relationships. This question is of interest for policy reasons

Table 2.3 Marital breakdown estimates for inter-census intervals, 1986-2006

| Inter-census interval | Average annual increase in number of women separated, divorced or remarried following divorce | Average annual marital breakdown per 1,000 population aged 15-64 | |
|-----------------------|---|--|------------------------------|
| | | Rate | Change since previous period |
| 1986-1991 | 2330 | 1.08 | - |
| 1991-1996 | 3927 | 1.73 | +60% |
| 1996-2002 | 5055 | 2.02 | +17% |
| 2002-2006 | 5531 | 1.99 | -1% |

Source: *Censuses of Population*

because the family law system is an arena where families in various states of crisis approach agencies of the state seeking remedies for their problems. There have been indications in the past that those agencies have been poorly equipped to respond to these problems. In 1996, a Law Reform Commission report on the family courts described them as a system in a chronic state of crisis. Long waiting lists, delays in the hearing of cases, brief hearings, inadequate court facilities, over-hasty settlements, inadequately trained judges, and lack of backup services were characteristic of the system (Law Reform Commission 1996). There was also a concern that large numbers of cases were being processed in summary fashion in the District Courts, without any backup services whatever. This concern was particularly acute since many of the family law cases appearing in the District Courts were domestic violence cases and so represented an extreme form of family vulnerability (Fahey and Lyons 1995).

Since then, the court system in general has been improved in various ways under the aegis of the Courts Service, an independent state agency set up in 1999 to administer the courts (Courts Service 2004). The family courts have shared in these improvements. In addition, the Family Support Agency was established in 2003⁶ in order to provide a family mediation service and support the provision of family counselling services. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, concerns persist about the adequacy of the services available to respond to family law cases, not just in the immediate context of court proceedings but also before court proceedings are initiated and after they have been completed. The types of family problems dealt with by the courts are likely to be of long duration, both in gestation and in the aftermath of court proceedings, and the need for family support could be of similar duration. There has been a lack of systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the family law system and the adequacy of the support services in dealing with these problems. All that is possible in the present context is to review the available data on the volume and composition of the family law caseload and thereby arrive at an indication of the numbers of families involved.

In the year 2006, there were 28,413 private family law applications to the courts, of which 20,900 (73.6%) were to the District Court (Table 2.4). It is not known how many families were involved in these applications. An applicant could apply for a number of different remedies (custody, child maintenance, etc.), so that the number of families would be considerably less than the number of applications. It is indicative of the inadequate state of knowledge of the working of the family law system that basic information such as the number of families who approach the system each year is not available.

⁶ Under The Family Support Agency Act, 2001

The majority of family law applications to the Circuit Court are for either divorce (54%) or judicial separation (24%) (Table 2.5). Because of the time it takes to process these applications, not all achieved an outcome in 2006, but almost none were refused and only a tiny percentage were withdrawn or struck out. The success rate for family law applications in the Circuit Court is thus very high, even though it may take some time for cases to reach an outcome.

The much larger family law caseload appearing before the District Courts was more diverse both in composition and outcome (Table 2.6). The largest block of family law applications was taken under the Domestic Violence Act 1996. These applications numbered just short of 10,000 and amounted to 47 per cent of the family law caseload in the District Court. Just over a third of the domestic violence applications were for barring orders, and just under a third were for protection orders. It is likely that there is a great deal of repeat counting of individual cases in the different types of domestic violence applications, particularly in that an application for a barring order is often accompanied by an application for a protection order (the latter is an interim order normally put in place while the hearing of a barring order application is awaited). Nevertheless, it would appear that the number of domestic violence cases appearing before the District Courts is large and that numerically this is the most important element in the family law system. It is notable, for example, that domestic violence applications alone in the District Court outnumber total family law applications in the Circuit Court.

The other family law applications coming before the District Courts are accounted for by custody and access applications, maintenance applications and supervision and care applications. The latter are applications taken by the Health Service Executive (HSE) wishing to intervene to protect vulnerable children in families.

In contrast to the pattern for Circuit Court applications noted earlier, there is a high incidence of non-successful family law applications in the District Court. However, only a small proportion – 2-4 per cent – of the non-successes arise because of refusal of applications by the court. A much larger proportion is withdrawn or struck out, the outcome that occurs when the applicant either withdraws the application or does not appear in court on the day of the hearing. This arises in over half of applications for barring orders and safety orders and in over a quarter of custody, access and maintenance applications. The significance of this high rate of withdrawal/non-appearance has not been examined. Another contrast with family law cases in the Circuit Court is that all of the family law applications lodged in the District Court in 2006 were dealt with in that year: there is no category in the data for cases that were incomplete or otherwise not dealt with by the

Table 2.4 Total private* family law applications, 2006

| | Number of applications | % |
|----------------|------------------------|------|
| District Court | 20900 | 73.6 |
| Circuit Court | 7348 | 25.9 |
| High Court | 165 | 0.6 |
| Total | 28413 | 100 |

* excluding applications for supervision and care orders by Health Service Executive

Source: Courts Service (2007)

Table 2.5 Family law proceedings in the Circuit Court, 2006

| | Applications (column %) | Outcomes (row %) | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|---------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Granted | Refused | Withdrawn/struck out | Incomplete/no outcome** |
| Judicial separation | 1789 (24%) | 1072 (60%) | 0 (0%) | 35 (2%) | 602 (38%) |
| Divorce | 3986 (54%) | 3420 (86%) | 3 (0%) | 30 (1%) | 533 (13%) |
| Nullity | 60 (1%) | 25 (42%) | 0 (0%) | 4 (7%) | 31 (52%) |
| Section 33* | 903 (12%) | 836 (93%) | 29 (3%) | 8 (1%) | 30 (3%) |
| District court appeals | 610 (8%) | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| Total | 7348 (100%) | 5353 | | | 1196 |

* Applications under Section 33 of the Family Law Act 1995 to dispense with the necessity to give three months notice of the intention to marry or to allow people aged under 18 years to marry.

** Author's estimate arrived at by subtracting cases with an outcome from total applications. This is likely to underestimate the proportion of applications lodged in 2003 that did not achieve an outcome in that year, since a proportion of the outcomes arrived at in 2003 are likely to have related to applications lodged prior to 2003.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding. n.a.: not available.

Source: Courts Service (2007)

end of the year. This reflects the much speedier processing of family law cases in the District Court compared to the Circuit Court.

Trends in domestic violence cases

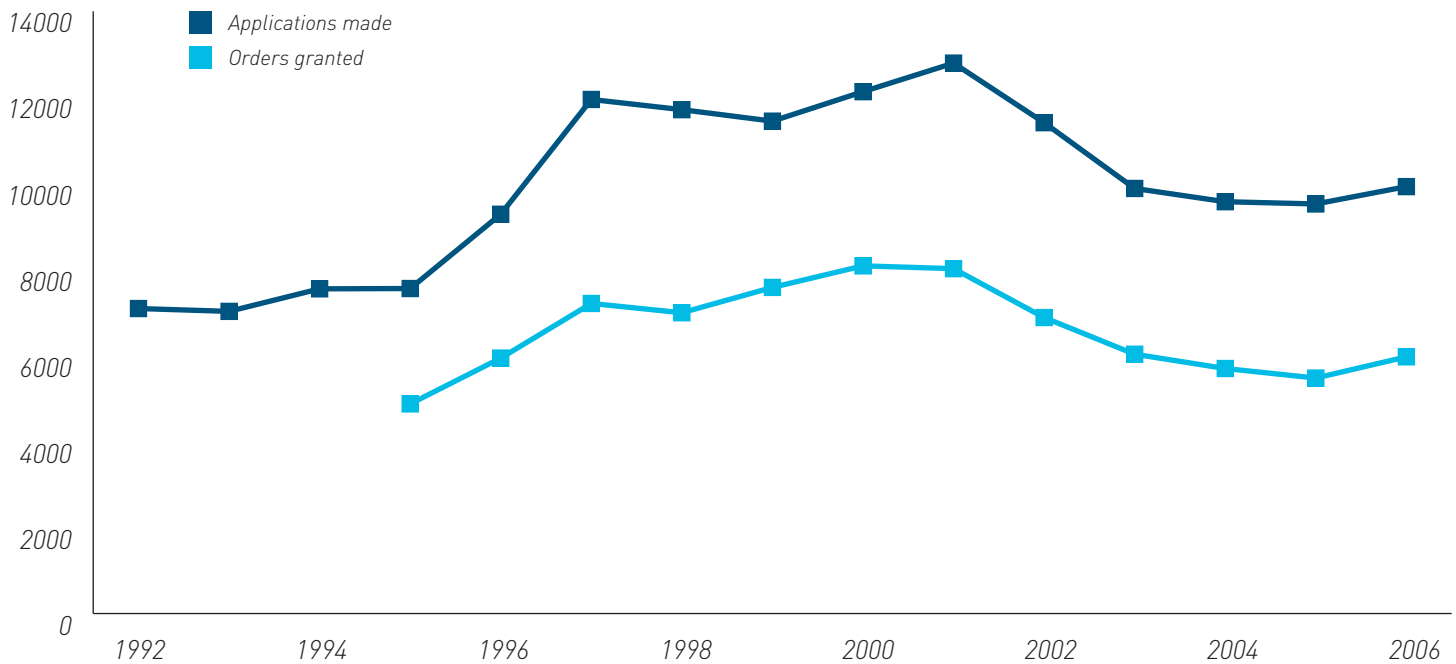
Given the large share of the family law caseload accounted for by domestic violence, it is worth noting that the volume of activity in the courts related to domestic violence has declined sharply since a peak was reached in 2003. Trend data since 1992 show that a large increase in such activity had occurred in the years 1996 and 1997 (Figure 2.7). This was the result of a major expansion of the scope of domestic violence legislation brought about by the Domestic Violence Act 1996. Previously, domestic violence legislation applied only to married couples. The 1996 Act

extended it to cover other family relationships such as cohabiting couples and parents and children, and made provision for a new type of protection – a ‘safety order’ – which enables the court to prohibit a family member from inflicting violence on other family members but without requiring him or her to leave the family home. These expansions of the legislation led to a 58 per cent increase in domestic violence applications within two years, with a somewhat smaller increase in orders granted. The numbers then levelled off from 1997 until 2001, at which point they dropped sharply again over two years. In 2003, the decline bottomed out at a level which left the volume of applications and orders about a quarter below the peak of 2001 but still above the level that had prevailed before the previous rise in 1996.

| | Applications (column %) | Outcomes (number) | | | Outcomes: per cent | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------|--------------------------|-------|
| | | Granted | Refused | Withdrawn/ struck out | Granted | Refused | Withdrawn/ struck out | Total |
| Domestic Violence | 9924 (47%) | 5967 | 321 | 3636 | 60 | 3 | 37 | 100 |
| <i>Barring Orders</i> | 3132 (15%) | 1357 | 93 | 1682 | 43 | 3 | 54 | 100 |
| <i>Safety Orders</i> | 3050 (15%) | 1221 | 103 | 1726 | 40 | 3 | 57 | 100 |
| <i>Protection Orders</i> | 3137 (15%) | 2845 | 99 | 193 | 91 | 3 | 6 | 100 |
| <i>Interim Barring Orders</i> | 605 (3%) | 544 | 26 | 35 | 90 | 4 | 6 | 100 |
| Custody and access | 5027 (24%) | 3453 | 157 | 1417 | 69 | 3 | 28 | 100 |
| Maintenance | 4207 (20%) | 2909 | 94 | 1204 | 69 | 2 | 29 | 100 |
| Guardianship | 1742 (8%) | 1268 | 42 | 432 | 73 | 2 | 25 | 100 |
| Total | 20900 (100%) | 13597 | 614 | 6689 | 65 | 3 | 32 | |

Source: Courts Service (2007:127-130)

Figure 2.7 **Numbers of domestic violence applications made and orders granted, 1992-2006**



Sources: *Statistical Abstract 1995*, p. 273; *Courts Service Annual Report 2000*, p. 62; *Courts Service Annual Report 2006*, p. 12

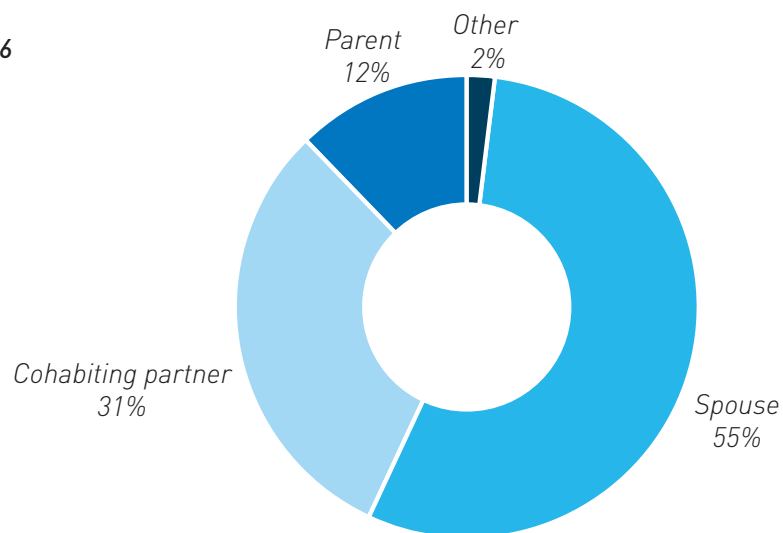
However, in assessing the level of domestic violence applications in the courts, it has to be noted that domestic violence orders applied for by married persons – the sole clientele for such orders prior to 1996 – now accounts for little over half of all domestic violence orders, with the balance accounted for mainly by cohabiting partners and parents (Figure 2.8). In 2006, for example, of the total of 5,971 domestic violence orders issued by the District Court, only 3,329 were granted to married persons. This is considerably lower than the 4,873 domestic violence orders granted in 1995, all of which were to married persons. Thus, domestic violence applications by married persons at present are not only below the peak of 2001 but also, among the married population, are lower than the level which prevailed in the early 1990s – even though the scope

of the legislation was narrower at that time. Thus the volume of domestic violence activity in the courts originating among married persons seems to be at a long-term low, and even among other persons seems to have fallen back from a previous peak. On the face of it, this would seem to be a positive development. However, there has been no investigation as to why these declines have occurred, so it is not clear whether they indicate a falling prevalence of domestic violence in the community or a shift to non-court methods of dealing with such violence.

Since domestic violence is such a serious form of family disruption, it clearly would be useful for researchers to devote some attention to what these trends and patterns indicate about the changing nature of the problem.

Figure 2.8

Domestic violence orders granted
classified by status of applicant, 2006



Source: Courts Service Annual Report 2006

CONCLUSION

People's tendency to marry or cohabit has increased in Ireland since the mid-1990s, with the upward trend in marriages being particularly notable. Given that Irish people in the past have sometimes been reluctant to form couples, the recent increase can be read as a sign of vitality in Irish family life and a counter to the notion that the institution of marriage is losing its appeal. Marriages today generally take place at a later age than they did in the late 1970s, the most youthful period for marriage in twentieth century Ireland, and have more or less returned to the pattern of late marriages last encountered in the 1940s. The result is that while the number of marriages is going up, the rise is concentrated among those aged over 30 and younger adults are more likely to remain single. However, non-marriage has a very different meaning today than it had in previous generations since sex, childbearing and cohabitation are now available outside marriage to a degree unknown in the past. The overall outcome is that marriage still occupies a dominant role in family formation and has staged a degree of revival since the late 1990s, but it occurs later in the life course and is less of a critical gateway to family formation than it was even a generation ago.

Certain forms of instability in marriage have become steadily but not dramatically more common since the early 1980s. However, Ireland still has a low rate of divorce compared to other countries, and even if one includes couples who separate rather than divorce, the marital breakdown rate is still relatively low by international standards. The advent of divorce in 1997 was not as important a turning point as might have been expected, at least in the short term. It did not give rise to a flood of divorce applications, nor was there a dramatic shift towards divorce as a way of resolving broken marriages. The majority of family cases continued as before to be dealt with in the District Courts, which do not have the power to grant divorce, rather than in the Circuit Court, where divorce and legal separation are available. 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. However, although the volume of domestic violence applications is still large, it is now smaller than it was in the period 1997-2001 and among the married population is smaller than it was in the early 1990s. The decline in domestic violence activity in the courts is an important development, but it has not been studied or explained and so its significance is difficult to assess.



PARENTS

AND

CHILDREN

3. PARENTS AND CHILDREN

A striking feature of family life over the past ten years has been the large increase in the formation of new families, as indicated by an increase of 57% in the numbers of first births between 1994 and 2006. Although Irish people have become more willing to enter parenthood over the past decade or so, they have continued the long-term move away from becoming parents many times over.

TRENDS IN FERTILITY AND FAMILY FORMATION

Context

By the early 1990s, replacement level fertility (that is, a total fertility rate⁷ – TFR – of 2.1 or more) had become the upper limit of fertility virtually throughout the developed world. No country that dropped below replacement fertility over the past four decades (the first to do so being Japan in the late 1950s) has risen above that threshold again. Replacement-level fertility is now steadily emerging in the developing world also, having already arrived in many parts of Asia (China, Thailand, North and South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong). In consequence, an upper fertility limit of 2.1 or thereabouts is on the way to becoming a norm for most of the globe in the foreseeable future (United Nations 2000b).

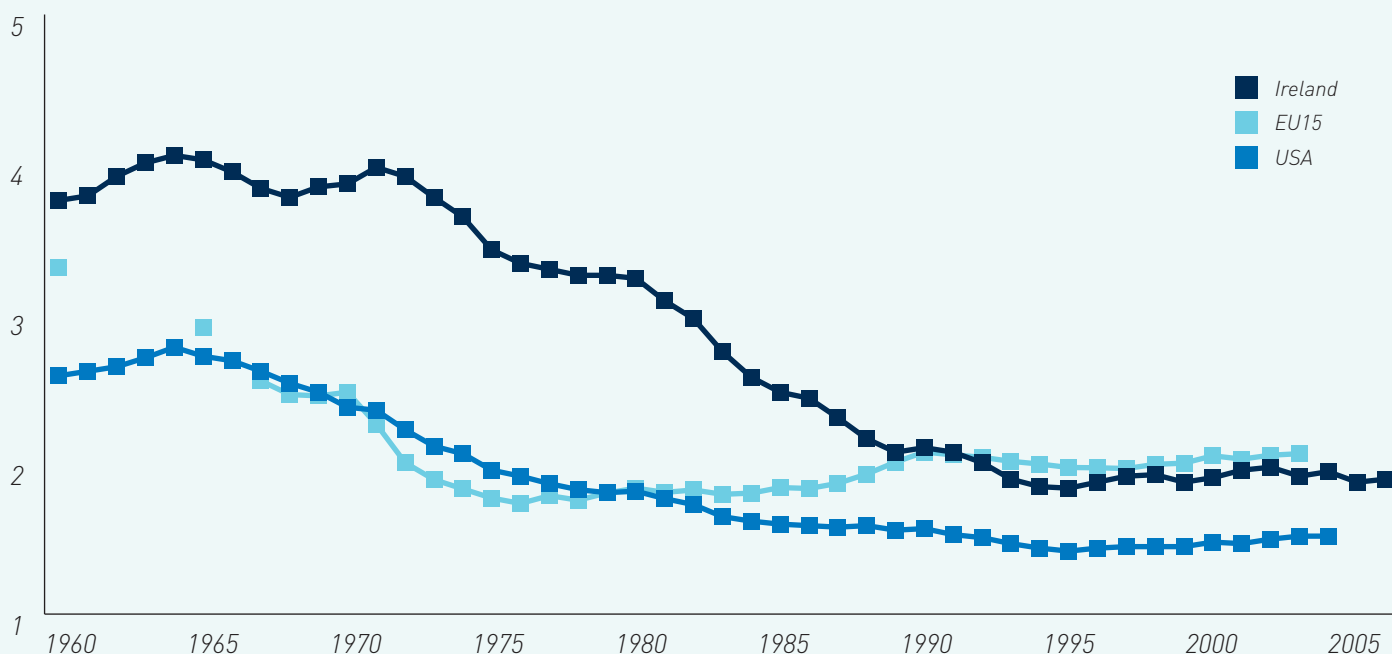
7 The total fertility rate is the average number of births a woman would have during her reproductive life if she were exposed to the fertility rates characteristic of various childbearing age groups in a particular year.

In much of Europe, fertility had already fallen below replacement by the mid-1970s but it has shifted further downwards until the mid-1990s, at which point it bottomed out at a low level (Figure 3.1). Since then, the TFR in the EU15 has hovered around 1.5 and in the ten member states that joined the EU in 2004 it is around 1.4. The lowest fertility levels on record have occurred in southern and eastern Europe since the early 1990s. Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Ukraine and Latvia all dipped below 1.2 between 1995 and 1999 (Council of Europe, 2000: 74). The prospect of population decrease is now a real one for the European Union, though inward migration from outside the

Union is likely to defer its arrival for some time (Council of Europe, 2005). However, natural increase in the population – the excess of births over deaths – is weak and has turned into natural decrease in Germany and Italy and in the combined 10 new member states (Council of Europe, 2005).

Some other regions of the developed world, of which the United States is the most important, have had a stronger fertility record. The TFR in the US dropped from close to 4 in the late 1950s to 1.79 in 1978, but then shifted slightly but steadily upwards (Figure 3.1). By 1989 it had risen above 2.0 and since then has hovered around the same level.

Figure 3.1 Total fertility rates in Ireland, the EU15 and the USA, 1960-2006



Source: CSO, Eurostat.

This fertility rate, coupled with modest inward migration, is sufficient to ensure that total US population will continue to grow for the foreseeable future, in contrast to incipient population decline in Europe (United Nations 2000b). US fertility has been sustained in part by ethnic minorities – the TFR among US Hispanics in 1998 was 2.95 and among Black African-Americans was 2.24.⁸ But even among non-Hispanic white women in the US, the TFR was 1.85 in 1998 (National Center for Health Statistics 2000: 35-36). This is higher than the national TFRs of nearly all of Europe (among the present EU25, only Cyprus and Ireland had TFRs above 1.85 in 1998).

Fertility in Ireland

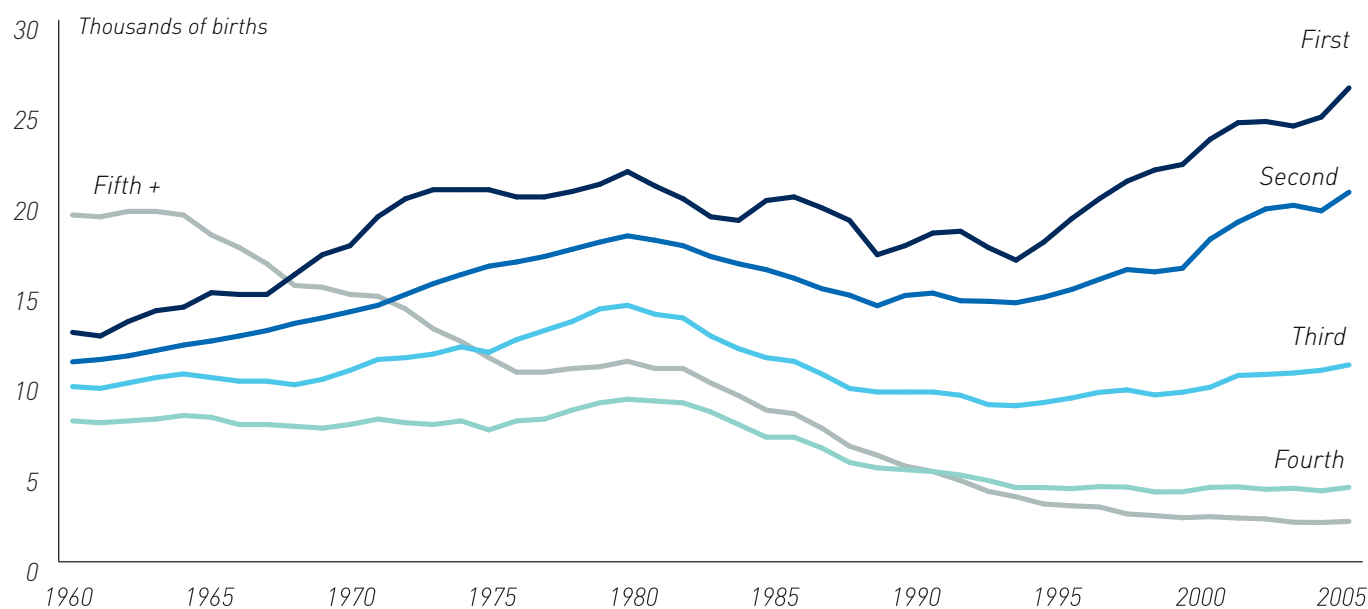
The level of fertility in Ireland is now closer to that of the US than of the rest of Europe, and this was true in the 1950s and early 1960s also. Fertility in Ireland remained at a high level until 1970, at which point it commenced a rapid decline that persisted for two decades (for data on completed fertility from Census 2006, see Punch 2007). The decline bottomed out in the 1990s and then recovered slightly. In 2006, it was somewhat higher (at 1.90) than it had been in 1995 (when it was 1.84). The bottoming out and slight recovery in Irish fertility rates over the past decade and a half is in some ways surprising. Many

⁸ Hispanic fertility in the US is itself a puzzle since it is now higher than in the major home countries from which Hispanic migrants to the US originate. In 1995-2000, for example, the TFRs in Puerto Rico and Mexico were 1.99 and 2.75 respectively (United Nations 2003).

factors would seem to make Ireland less fertility-friendly than some other European countries and some of these factors intensified in the 1990s. The level of public support for families with children remained low in relative terms throughout the period, despite absolute increases in recent years, the childcare system is poorly developed and under-funded, demand for female paid labour has risen rapidly over the past decade, and house prices have soared since the early 1990s. Yet Ireland remains at the top of the European fertility table and does not seem to have suffered the negative effects on the fertility rate one would have expected from such factors. Possible explanations for this are considered later in this chapter.

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. The most recent CSO population projections foresee a 25 per cent increase in Ireland's population over the next fifteen years (according to their medium scenario – Central Statistics Office 2004a). According to UN projections, Ireland is the only European country likely to have a substantially larger population in 2050 than it has today (though the UK and France may also register smaller increases – United Nations 2005). Concerns about imminent population decline that arise at present in many European countries thus do not apply to Ireland for the time being.

Figure 3.2 Number of births by birth order in Ireland, 1960-2006



Source: CSO Vital Statistics

Family formation

A surge in new family formation since the early 1990s is the main cause of the halt in fertility decline in the Ireland in that period. Adults in Ireland who hitherto were childless developed a sudden new willingness to become parents, as evidenced by a rapid increase in the numbers of women having their first child. First births rose by 57 per cent between 1994 and 2006 (Figure 3.2). If we take the birth of a first child as a marker of new family formation, we can thus say that since the mid-1990s, Ireland has experienced a level of creation of new families that is the highest on record. The sharp rise in the number of marriages since 1997 noted in the previous section is thus part of a large overall increase in family formation that has occurred over the past decade.

The large increase in first births between 1994 and 2006 carried forward into a slightly lesser increase in second births, which rose by 43 per cent over the same period. The number of second births in each year since 2002 have also been the highest on record. Third births showed a much smaller increase, but in the context of the trend towards very small families found elsewhere in Europe it is significant that there was any increase at all. At the

other extreme of family size, fifth and higher order births continued their long-term decline. In the 1960s, higher order births were exceptionally common in Ireland. In 1960, for example, for every 100 firstborn children, over 150 children were fifth-born or higher. By 2006, for every 100 firstborn children, only 11 children were fifth-born or higher. Thus, the very large family, which little more than a generation ago was very common, has now become rare.

Number of children in household

Although there are now more families than ever before, the families in question are smaller and this is reflected in a steady reduction in the numbers of children in family households. As Table 3.1 shows, the number of children aged under 15 living in small households (those with one or two children) rose sharply between 1981 and 2006, while the numbers living in larger households (those with four, five or six or more children) fell equally sharply. For example, in the case of children living in one-child households, the increase was from 118,041 in 1981 to 209,402 in 2006 (a rise of 77 per cent), while in the case of children living in four-child households, the decrease over the same period was from 196,304 to 81,384 (a fall of 59 per cent). In 2006, 62 per cent of children were living

Table 3.1 *Distribution of children aged under 15 years across family households by number of children in household*

| No. of children in household | 1981 | 1996 | 2002 | 2006 | % change 1981-2006 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------------------|
| | No. of children | | | | |
| 1 | 118041 | 163946 | 188239 | 209402 | +77.4 |
| 2 | 248580 | 292008 | 300684 | 325830 | +31.1 |
| 3 | 267225 | 223005 | 207636 | 213915 | -19.9 |
| 4 | 196304 | 107376 | 85068 | 81384 | -58.5 |
| 5 | 105280 | 38025 | 25100 | 22055 | -79.1 |
| 6 or more | 95621 | 22774 | 13405 | 9786 | -89.8 |

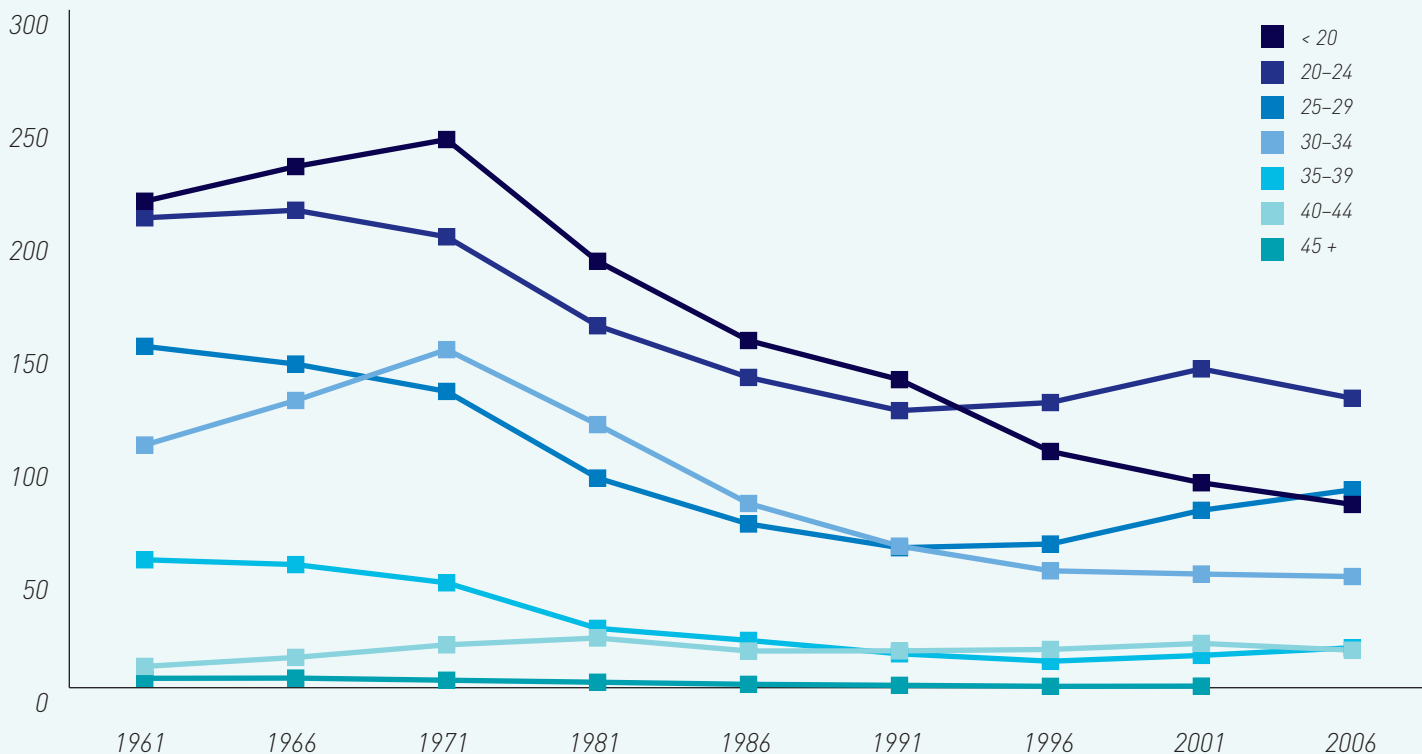
Source: Census of Population

in households with one or two children, compared to 35 per cent in 1981, while 13 per cent of children were living in households with four, five or six or more children, compared to 38 per cent in 1981.

There has been little investigation of the implications of the decline in the size of households for the well being of children and families. In Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, much of the concern about what were seen as problematic family types focused on the large family. Walsh (1968), for example, pointed to the large proportion of Irish children living in families with seven or more children, especially among the urban and rural poor who could least afford to support them. Kent and Sexton (1973) showed that large family size had a negative effect on the physical development of a sample of Dublin children. Today, the family with seven or more children has become rare and concern about problematic family types has moved on. The lone parent family, for example, now occupies a slot in policy concern formerly occupied by the very large two-parent family.

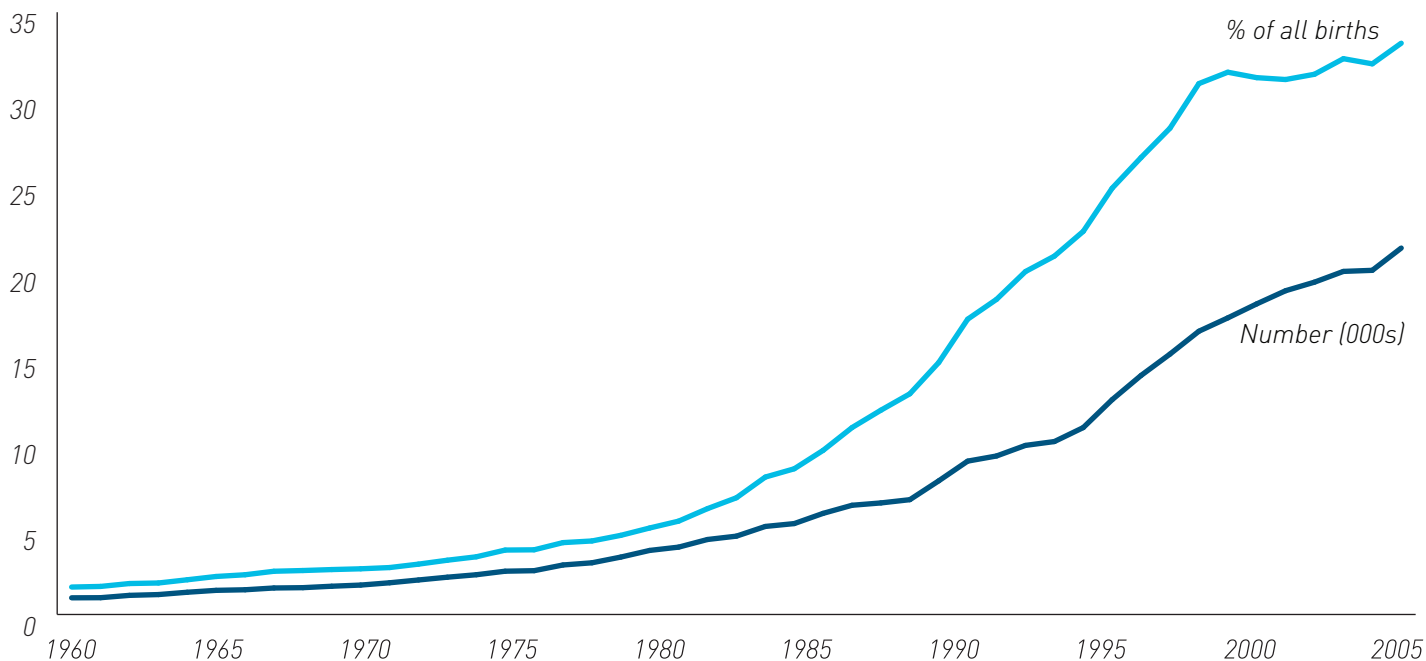
In view of concerns often expressed about the rise in lone parent families and the possible negative consequences for children, it is worth noting that the numbers of children found in what might be called high-risk family types (which would include the very large family) have not greatly increased over time. In Census 2006, for example, the number of children aged under 15 recorded as living with lone parents plus those recorded as living in two-parent households with six or more children aged under 15 was 145,399. This was less than the corresponding total in 1981, when the number of children in these two family types combined was 160,000. It is difficult to compare the level of risk associated with different family types at different points in time, and of course we are talking here of risk rather than inevitable outcome – many children in very large families in the past suffered no ill effects just as many children in lone parent families do likewise today. Yet it is useful to keep in mind that as new forms of vulnerable family emerge, old forms decline or disappear, and both sides of this development need to be taken into account in assessing overall trends.

Figure 3.3 Age-specific fertility rates, 1961-2006



Source: CSO Vital Statistics

Figure 3.4 Births outside of marriage, 1960-2006



Source: CSO Vital Statistics

Age at childbearing

Women in Ireland have traditionally had a late age at childbearing, and this tradition persists. In 1960, the average age of women giving birth was 31.6 years. Over the following two decades, that age shifted slightly downwards and was 28.8 years in 1980. Thereafter it edged slowly upwards again, and by 2004 had reached 30.8 years. These rather small movements in the average age of childbearing have been accompanied by larger movements in the age-spread of childbearing around the mean, especially since the 1970s: childbearing has declined among women aged in their 20s and 40s and has become increasingly concentrated among women aged in their 30s (Figure 3.3). In 1971, the age group 25-29 had the highest number of births but over the past ten years, the age group 30-34 has taken over as the dominant age for childbearing among women. Teenage birth rates are low, account for less than 6 per cent of births, and have fallen slightly since the early 1980s. At the other end of the maternal age range, the birth rate among women aged 40-44 is now less than a third of what it was in the early 1970s, while births among those aged 45 or over, while always unusual, have also declined since the 1970s. The latter trends are significant since they indicate that while the average age of child-bearing among women has risen in recent years, this has not meant that births to mothers in the oldest ages have increased.

Births outside marriage

The rapid increase in the share of fertility occurring outside of marriage that began in the 1980s continued unabated through the 1990s, having increased from 5 per cent in 1980 to 32 per cent in 2000 (Figure 3.4). Since then, however, the proportion has all but levelled off, having reached 33.2 per cent in 2006. Whether the recent plateau signals the end of the rise in non-marital childbearing is difficult to say. 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 (Hannan and Ó Riain 1993). The rise in educational participation and fall in unemployment since the early 1990s did not immediately cause a corresponding slowdown in the growth of non-marital childbearing but that effect may be now becoming evident. On the other hand, 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.

Figure 3.5 compares the changes in non-marital childbearing across countries between 1980 and 2005. This comparison shows that levels of non-marital childbearing varies widely across countries so that it is not possible to speak of a single international norm in this area. Some countries have long had low levels of non-marital births and despite recent upward movements continue to do so by international standards (see especially Greece in Figure 3.5). Others have soared from relatively low to high percentages. Norway, for example, showed a large absolute increase between 1980 and 1996 (from 14 to 48 per cent of births, an increase of 34 percentage points). Ireland showed a five-fold *relative* increase (from 5 to 25 per cent of births) over the same period. Some countries already had high proportions of births taking place outside marriage in 1980 (especially Denmark and Sweden), but even these have showed increases since then. The US had a relatively high proportion in 1980 (third to Sweden and Denmark in Figure 3.5) but its increase since then has been comparatively modest, so that it is now only a short way above the mid-point for the EU. (Within the US, racial differences on this indicator are significant: among white Americans, 22 per cent of births occurred outside marriage in 1999, compared to 69 per cent among Black African-Americans and 42 per cent among Hispanics – National Center for Health Statistics 2000: 47).

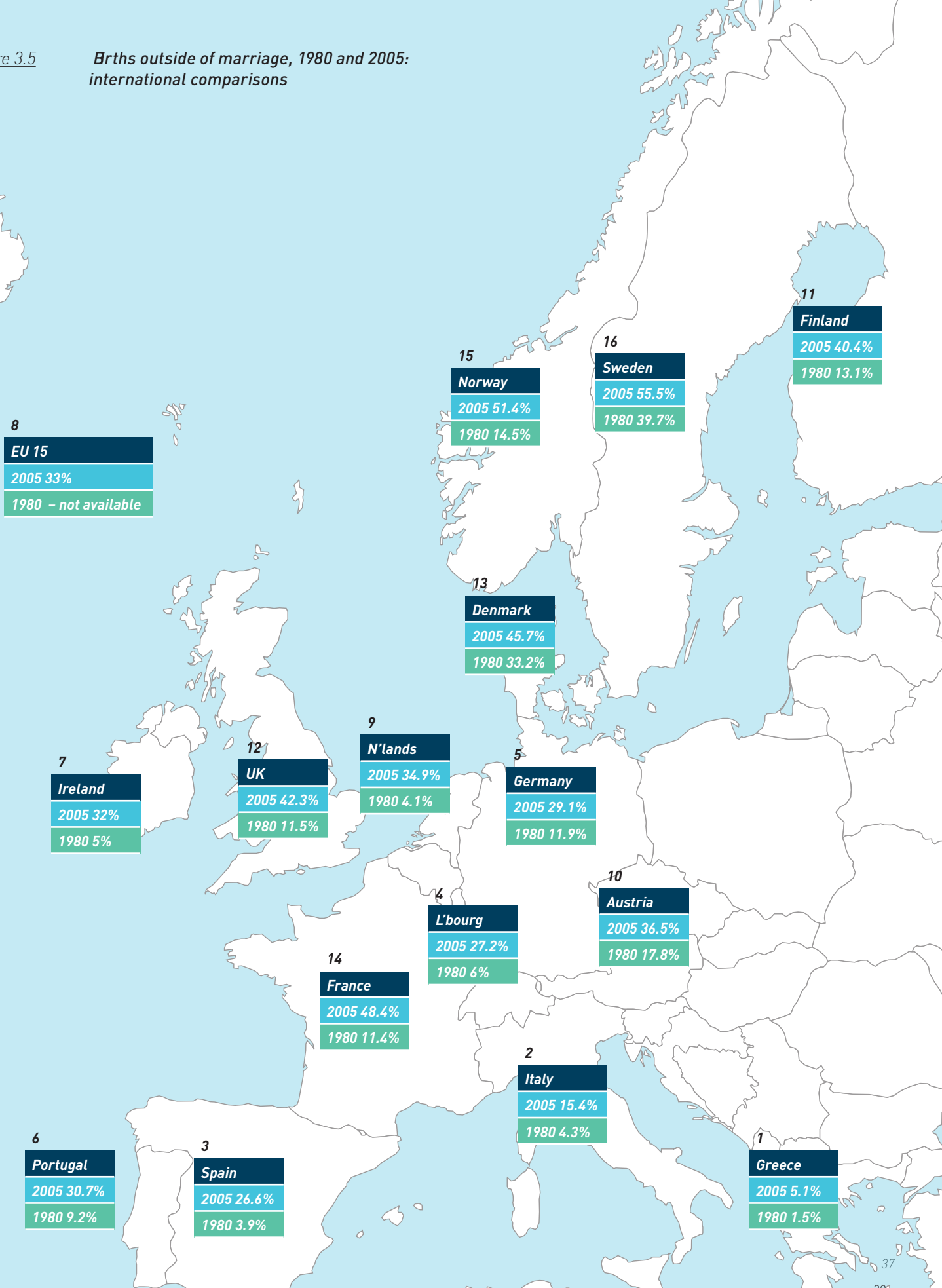
The social significance of high proportions of births occurring outside marriage is difficult to interpret and is likely to vary from country to country. Non-marital births often occur to cohabiting couples rather than to solo mothers. In Sweden, for example, where the incidence of non-marital births is extremely high (at 55 per cent of all births), the incidence of solo births (that is, to women not involved in a stable relationship) is much lower. In the early 1990s, only 6% of Swedish mothers in the age-range 25-29 had a child before entering their first long-term union (Kiernan 2004: 45). Across nine European countries, births to solo mothers generally accounted for between 5 and 12 per cent of all births (*ibid.*). Thus, the level of solo births is lower and less variable across countries than the level of non-marital births.

In Ireland, studies of women who were pregnant outside marriage have shown that such women live in a wide range of partnership circumstances. In one large-scale study (Mahon et al. 1998), which gathered information on over 2,000 women who were pregnant in 1996, 35 per cent of the sample were unmarried but only 11 per cent described themselves as 'single' (that is, as uninvolved in any ongoing relationship). Over 25 per cent (that is, over two-thirds of those who were unmarried and pregnant) reported that they were in a stable relationship of some kind (7.5 per cent cohabiting, 9 per cent 'going steady' and 9 per cent 'engaged'). Furthermore, whatever the relationship status of the mothers at time of giving birth outside marriage, there are indications that large proportions enter into marriage within a few years of the birth of the child, though

it is not possible to say how often the man that they eventually marry is the father of the child (Fahey and Russell, 2001). This is an issue we will return to further on in connection with patterns of lone parenthood.

Figure 3.5

Births outside of marriage, 1980 and 2005:
international comparisons



ABORTION

The 2006 Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships found that, of women who had been pregnant, 21 per cent had experienced a crisis pregnancy. The latter represented 13 per cent of women aged 18-65 (Layte et al 2006). The study also found that 15 per cent of these crisis pregnancies resulted in an abortion.

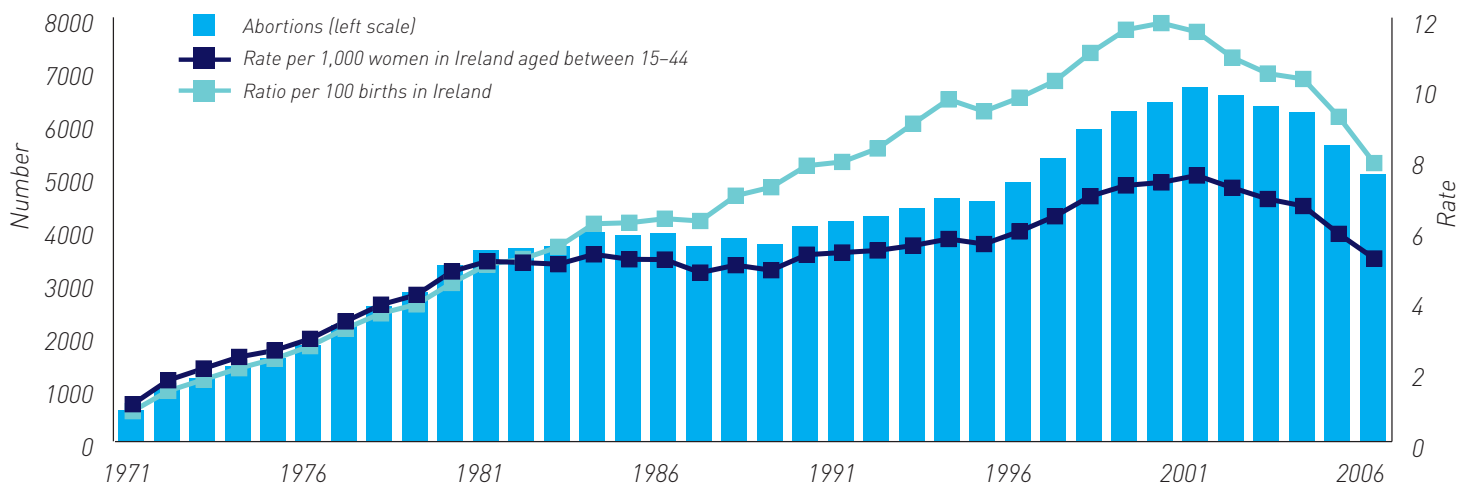
Abortion has been legal under certain circumstances in Ireland since the Supreme Court judgement on the X case in 1992, but because of restrictive medical ethics and an absence of regulatory legislation, no abortions are carried out in this country. Britain traditionally has provided the main outlet for Irish women seeking abortions. The annual numbers of women giving Irish addresses who had abortions in England and Wales had risen sharply since the 1970s and peaked at 6,673 in the year 2001 (Figure 3.6). The numbers have declined since then and had fallen to 5,042 in 2006. The significance of this recent decline is not clear. It may in part be the consequence of more effective contraceptive practice, in particular greater use of the 'morning after' pill.⁹ It may also reflect a move to other countries for abortion, such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain.

It is not possible to tell from the available data which of these possibilities is the more important.

Whatever the cause of the downward movement in the numbers of Irish women obtaining abortions in England and Wales, it is clear that it has occurred primarily among younger women, particularly those in the age-band 20-24 years (Figure 3.7). In 2001, 2,404 Irish women in that age-group had an abortion in England or Wales. By 2006, that figure had fallen to 1,505. Here again, it is unclear whether this decline reflects a real fall in the incidence of abortion among Irish women or a shift to countries other than Britain in order to obtain abortions. It is only among women aged over 30 years that that no recent decline in abortion rates has occurred, while among women aged 45 and over there has been an increase in the incidence of abortion.

⁹ A study of contraceptive practice and crisis pregnancy in 2004 found that among 18-25 year olds (males and females), five per cent reported that either they or their partner had used emergency contraceptives (morning after pill) in the past year. (Rundle et al, 2004: 88)

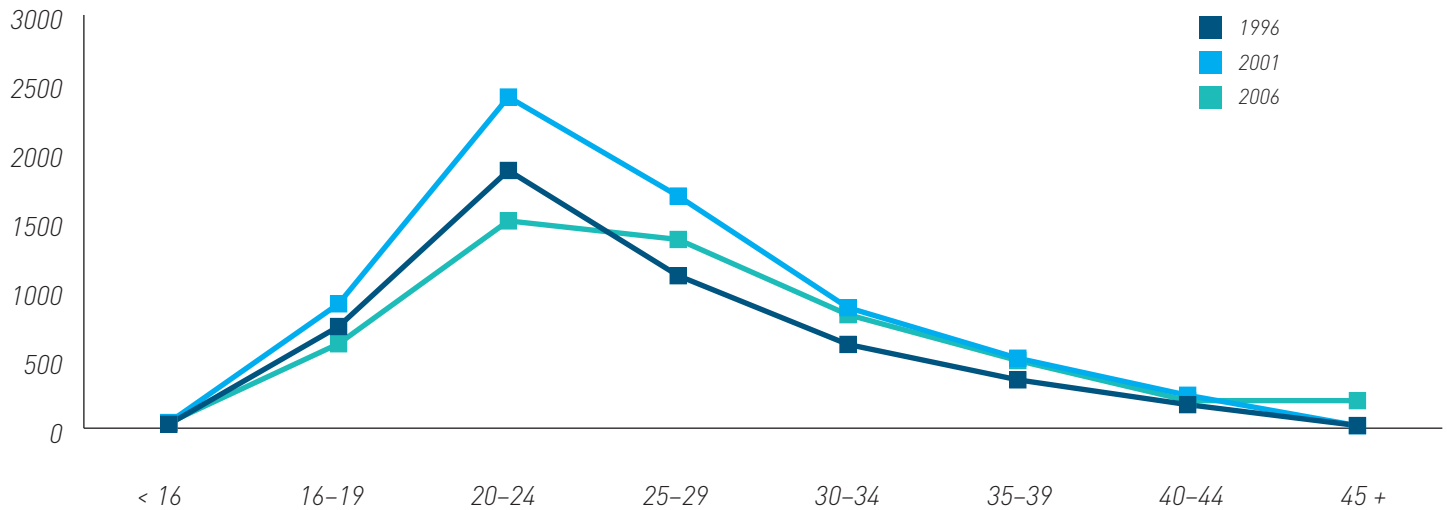
Figure 3.6. Annual number, rate and ratio of abortions in England and Wales among women who give Irish addresses, 1971-2006



Sources: Department of Health, England & Wales, *Abortion Statistics, England & Wales, 2006. Bulletin 2007/01*; National Statistics, *Series AB (various years), Abortion Statistics: Legal abortions carried out under the 1967 Abortion Act in England and Wales*. Central Statistics Office: *Vital Statistics, Population Estimates*.

Figure 3.7

Changing age profile of abortions in England and Wales among women who give Irish addresses, 1996, 2001 & 2006



Sources: As Figure 3.6.

While data on abortions obtained by Irish women in England and Wales may understate the true incidence of abortion among Irish women to some degree, it is nevertheless likely that the abortion rate in Ireland is relatively low by international standards. Measured solely on the basis of abortions obtained in England and Wales, the abortion rate among Irish women is well below that of many other developed countries – only Northern Ireland has a lower rate according to the comparative data in Table 3.2. The Irish abortion rate as measured in Table 3.2 would need to be considerably understated in order for the true Irish rate to approximate to that of countries such as New Zealand, the United States, Sweden, Australia and England and Wales.

Table 3.2

Measures of legal abortion by country, 2003

| | Rate per 1,000 women aged 15-44 | Ratio per 100 births |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| New Zealand | 21 | 33 |
| United States ¹ | 21 | 31 |
| Sweden | 20 | 34 |
| Australia | 20 | 34 |
| England & Wales ² | 17 | 29 |
| Canada ³ | 15 | 31 |
| France | 15 | 26 |
| Norway | 15 | 25 |
| Denmark | 15 | 24 |
| Scotland ⁴ | 12 | 23 |
| Finland | 11 | 19 |
| Netherlands ² | 9 | 14 |
| Germany ⁵ | 8 | 18 |
| Belgium ⁵ | 8 | 14 |
| Switzerland | 7 | 15 |
| Ireland ⁶ | 7 | 10 |
| Northern Ireland ⁶ | 4 | 6 |

1 Provisional estimates. 2 Residents only. 3 Includes abortions residents obtained in selected US states.

4 Includes abortions residents obtained in England and Wales.

5 Includes abortions residents obtained in the Netherlands.

6 Abortions in England and Wales obtained by women who gave an Irish address.

Source: Sedgh et al. 2007.

EXPLAINING FERTILITY TRENDS

Demographers have not been very successful either in predicting or explaining fertility trends. The mid-twentieth century baby boom in the developed world came as a surprise, while the degree of collapse in fertility that occurred in the final decades of the century in regions such as Europe and Japan was equally unexpected.

Sub-replacement fertility (that is, average number of children per woman below 2.1) has arrived in so many parts of the world in recent decades that it can now be regarded as a basic feature of modern civilization rather than a peculiarity of particular societies: 45 per cent of the world's population live in countries with below-replacement fertility and over half of these countries are in what the United Nations classifies as the developing world (United Nations 2005: xvii).

However, even if low fertility is on the way to becoming universal, there are still important differences between countries in exactly how low it has fallen. As already mentioned, the United States has fared relatively well in this regard, since its fertility rate stabilized at a level just below replacement since the late 1980s. When combined with inward migration, the US fertility rate is sufficient to keep its population growing steadily for the foreseeable future. The EU, like Japan, is in a weaker position, as its fertility rate has been at less than three-quarters the level needed to replace the population over the same period. Natural population increase, the balance between births and deaths, is now virtually at a standstill in the EU as a whole, and while inward migration is enough to keep the population growing for the time being, the prospect of population decline is on the horizon and has already arrived in some European countries (Council of Europe, 2005). Referring to this situation, the European Commission, in its recent Green Paper *Confronting Demographic Change* (2005), expressed the worry that Europe 'had lost its demographic motor' and badly needed to revitalize its demographic performance if its social and economic goals were to be met.

Why, then, does Europe have such low fertility and what can be done to raise it? Research conducted over the past number of years has thrown up some clues as to how these questions might be answered. The central finding is that jobs, especially jobs for women, are good for fertility rates, implying that a major cause of Europe's low fertility is its poor jobs performance. The impact of jobs on fertility today is the reverse of the pre-1980s pattern where jobs for women caused fertility rates to fall. Castles (2003) refers to this reversal of the historical employment-fertility relationship among women as 'the world turned upside down' (see also Brewster and Rindfuss, 2000; Ahn and Mira,

2002; Sleebos, 2003: 20; Billari 2005). Family-friendly public policies, by contrast, appear at best to have a weak effect on birth rates (Sleebos, 2003). The greater importance of jobs and labour demand (especially as they affect *women's* employment) compared to family policy measures as positive influences on birth rates has been demonstrated in a recent panel data analysis of OECD countries covering the period 1980-1999 (D'Addio and Mira d'Ercole 2005). Table 3.3 highlights some of the relationships that can be extrapolated from the results.

This table first confirms that demand for women's labour has larger effects on fertility than changes in family policy – the effects on fertility in the upper panel of Table 3.3 are considerably larger than those in the lower panel. Of the labour demand effects, a higher female employment rate and a lower rate of female unemployment are both strongly positive. Other aspects of female employment patterns have more varied effects. The ready availability of part-time jobs for women is good for fertility, but surprisingly, greater gender equality in hourly earnings is not. The interpretation of the latter finding offered by the authors is that wage inequality is a proxy for job segregation, suggesting that women are more likely to have children if the jobs available to them are in sectors where there is less direct competition with men and women workers are therefore under less pressure to conform to male work practices. The general lesson seems to be that where demand for women's labour is strong, women with families are more likely to be able to pick and choose the jobs that suit themselves, thus enhancing the flexibility needed to further work-life balance and encourage fertility. This is not to say that having jobs encourages women to have large numbers of children but at least that it encourages them to have *some* children. Poor job prospects, on the other hand, had the effect in the past of leaving women with little else to do but become mothers, whereas today the effect is either to put them off motherhood altogether or to discourage them from having more than one child.

The weak effects for family policy measures in Table 3.3 are consistent with what is known about broad country differences in fertility. Those countries with the highest fertility rates (such as the United States, New Zealand and Ireland) tend to have *lower* state support for families with

children: state provision of pre-school childcare typically is slight, maternity leave is short, and tax-benefit supports for either two parent or lone parent families are ungenerous (D'Addio and Mira d'Ercole, 2005). Countries with strong state supports for families with children (France, the Nordic countries) perform moderately well as far as fertility is concerned but do not come up to the level of the top performing developed countries. Southern European countries have both family-unfriendly social policy regimes and low fertility, so their fertility behaviour is more in line with what one would expect in the light of their weak state supports for families with children. The specific provisions referred to in Table 3.3 show that the level of wage replacement during maternity leave and of net transfers to families with children have small positive effects on fertility, but that extended parental leave has a small *negative* effect (the interpretation here is that extended maternity leave weakens labour market skills and makes it difficult for mothers to return to work).

The Irish experience is broadly consistent with these patterns, though there has been no detailed analysis of the causes of Irish fertility trends over recent decades. There is a coincidence between the timing of the surge in new family

formation since 1995, the boom in the economy that got underway at that time, and the rapid growth of employment, especially of married women's employment. In the high-job scenario that emerged in Ireland, disincentives to childbearing that are concentrated in early childhood (such as high direct costs of childcare, or high cost of housing in the early stages of house purchase) or weak state supports for families with children may have some deterrent effect but it seems to be counter-balanced by women's confidence in their longer-term employment prospects.¹⁰ In effect, the Celtic Tiger enabled Ireland to make the transition from being a low opportunity economy to a reasonably high opportunity economy for women just as low economic opportunity ceased to be a positive influence on fertility rates and high economic opportunity took over that role.

¹⁰ There is a paradox here because at the individual level, women with higher education and with stronger attachment to the labour market continue to have smaller families than do less educated or stay-at-home mothers. In other words, when we look at the situation *within* countries, we find that women with weaker labour market and educational profiles have somewhat larger families, but when we compare developed countries with each other we find that those with stronger educational profiles and labour market attachment among women have higher birth rates (Castles, 2003, Billari 2005).

Table 3.3

Effects of changes in labour demand (esp. for women) and in family policies on total fertility rates: extrapolations from OECD panel data analysis 1980-1999

| | <i>Effect on total fertility rates</i> |
|--|--|
| <i>Labour demand changes</i> | |
| 5% increase in female employment rate | 15% increase |
| 5% decrease in female unemployment rate | 15% increase |
| 5% increase in share of women in part-time work | 6% increase |
| 5% increase gender earnings equality (ratio of female to male hourly earnings) | 17% decrease |
| <i>Changes in family friendly policy</i> | |
| 5% increase in length of parental leave | 1.2% decrease |
| 5% increase in percentage of wage replaced during maternity leave | 1.3% increase |
| 5% increase in net transfers to families with children | 0.56% increase |

Source: Derived from d'Addio and Mira d'Ercole 2005, Table 6 and fn 48, p. 64

LONE PARENTHOOD

The incidence of lone parenthood has been rising steadily since the 1980s. In 1981, according to census data, lone parent families with at least one child aged under 15 years accounted for 7.2 per cent of all families with children of that age and by 2002, that proportion had risen to 16.7 per cent (Table 3.4). A further very large increase was recorded in the census between 2002 and 2006, with a rise in the number of lone parent families during those four years of almost 30,000, compared to a rise of only 12,000 in the six years from 1996 to 2002.

Table 3.4 Census Data on Lone Parent Families, 1981-2006

| | Families with children <15 | Lone parent families with children <15 | LP as % of families with children <15 |
|------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1981 | 413067 | 29658 | 7.2 |
| 1986 | 423316 | 36353 | 8.6 |
| 1991 | 411884 | 44071 | 10.7 |
| 1996 | 405699 | 56112 | 13.8 |
| 2002 | 411080 | 68625 | 16.7 |
| 2006 | 461411 | 98333 | 21.3 |

Source: Census of Population.

The higher rate of increase after 2002 may have reflected real changes in family behaviour, but also in part reflected a more complete count of lone parent families in 2006.¹¹ Certain other methodological changes between censuses make it difficult to track the precise timing of the increase in lone parent families over recent decades, yet it is clear that today over one in five of families with children aged under 15 years are headed by a lone parent.

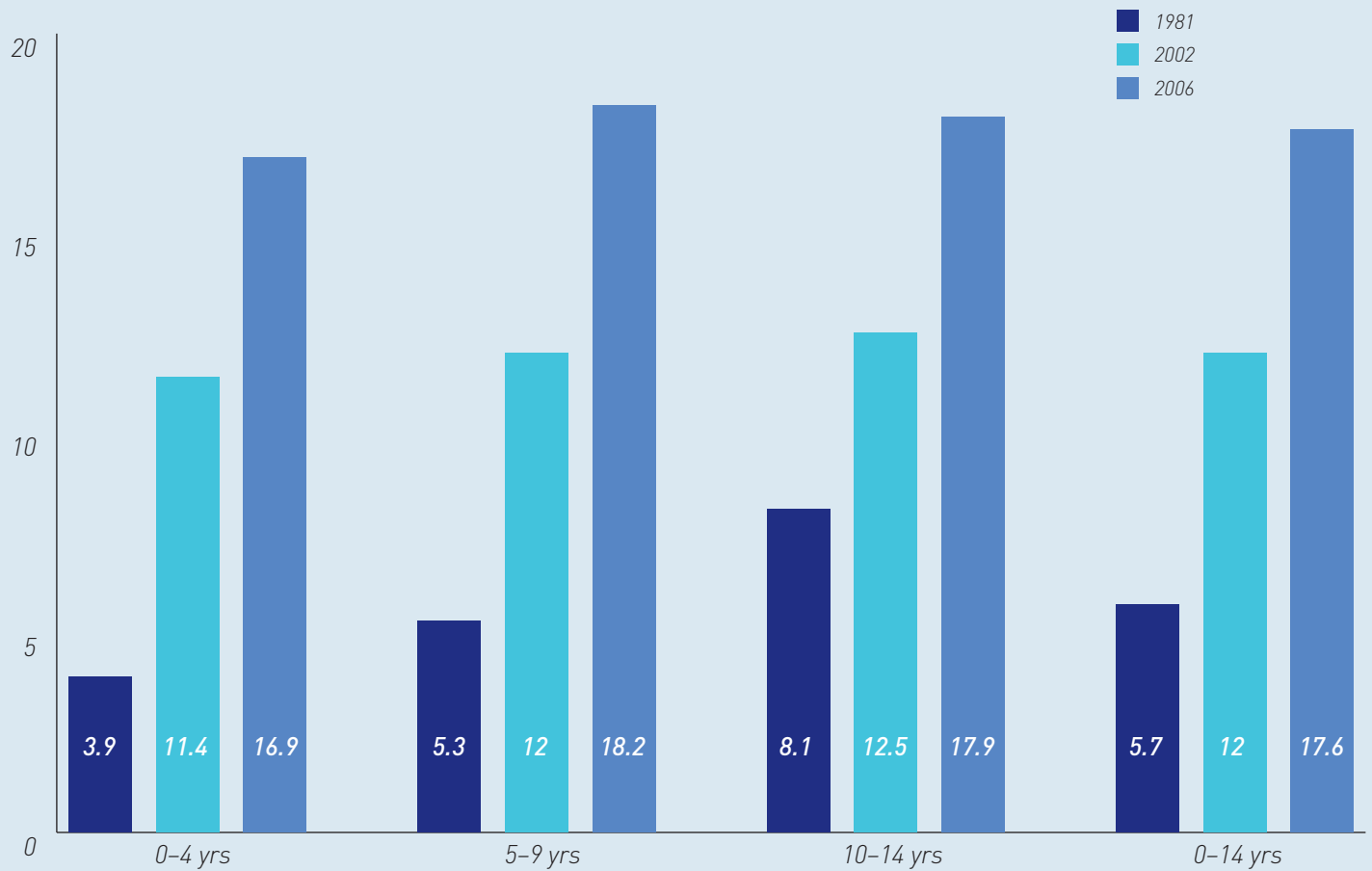
Lone parent families on average have fewer children than two-parent families and so account for a somewhat smaller proportion of the number of children than they do of the number of families. In 2006, when the census recorded

21.3 per cent of families with children aged under 15 years as lone parent families, 17.6 per cent of children aged under 15 years lived in those families (Figure 3.8). Here again, a striking feature is the very large increase in the proportion of children living with lone parents that was recorded in the census between 2002 and 2006. It is also notable in Figure 3.8 that in 2006 16.9 per cent of children aged 0-4 years were living with lone parents. It can be deduced from data on births outside of marriage looked at earlier that in the region of 31-32 per cent of children in that age group were born outside of marriage. Thus, the proportion of those children living with lone parents is the equivalent of about half of those born outside of marriage. When we take into account that children in lone parent families includes many whose parents are separated or divorced, we have a further indication that many unmarried mothers are not lone parents but are either cohabiting when the child is born or enter marriage or cohabitation soon afterwards.

¹¹ Census 2006 introduced a 'grid' method of recording household structure such that the relationship of each person in the household to every other member was identified, in place of the old method which recorded relationship only to one 'reference person'. The new method was more effective in identifying lone parent families living within larger households and so increased the total count of such families.

Figure 3.8

Percentage of children by age-group living with lone parents, 1981, 2002 and 2006



Source: Census of Population

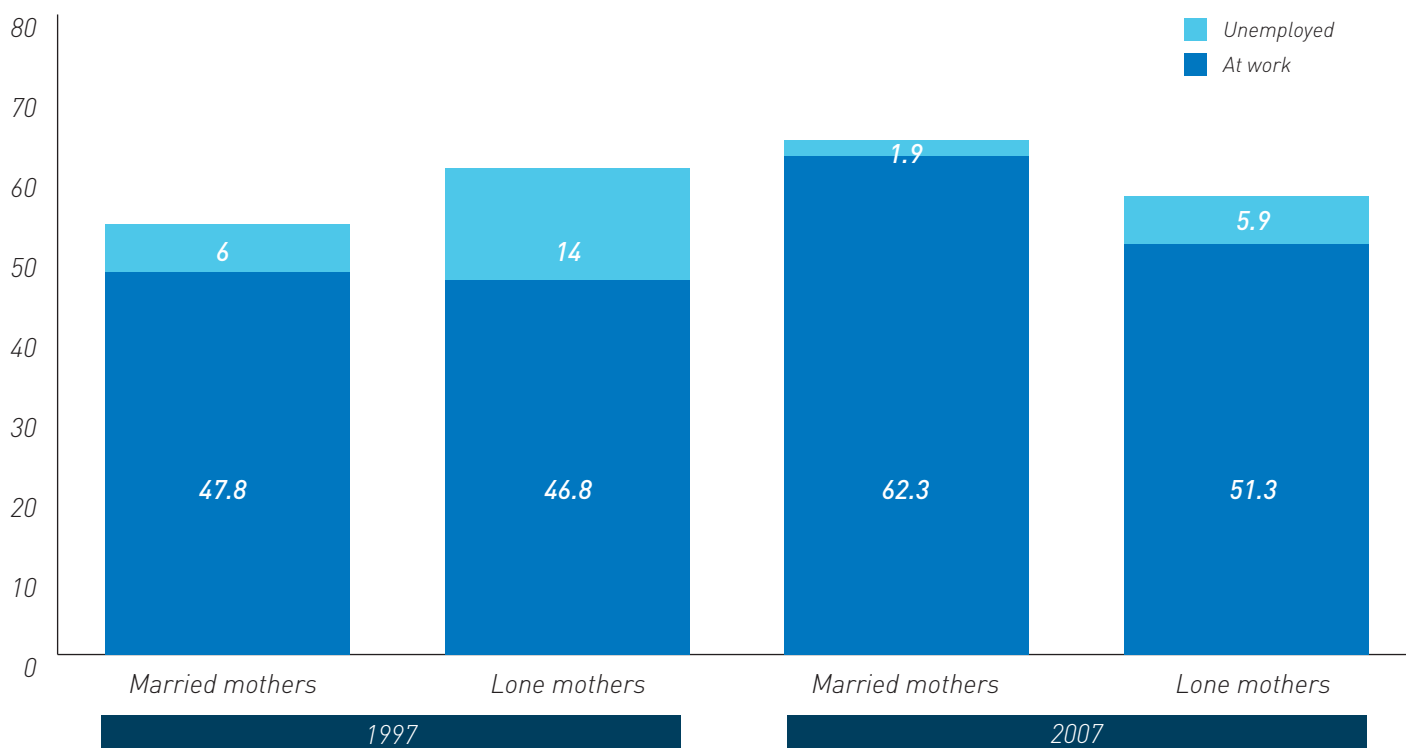
Lone parenthood in the past was most commonly due to widowhood but in recent decades non-marital childbearing and marital breakdown have become the dominant routes of entry into lone parenthood. According to micro-data from the Quarterly National Household Survey 2003 (Quarter 2), 59 per cent of lone parents with at least one child aged under 15 were unmarried, 35 per cent were separated, divorced or otherwise living apart from their spouses, and 6 per cent were widowed.

Both non-married and separated lone mothers have significantly lower levels of education than married mothers, and are disproportionately located in the lower social classes and in local authority housing (Fahey and Russell, 2001). Among lone parents aged under 35, data from the 2002 census suggest that almost half (47 per cent) were educated only to minimum school leaving age (16) (Department of Social and Family Affairs 2006a: 19). In 1997, despite their disadvantages lone mothers had a similar rate

of employment as married mothers, largely because the Community Employment (CE) scheme operated particularly to the advantage of lone mothers (Figure 3.9). A further large proportion (14 per cent) were unemployed and this gives a sense of the disadvantage experienced by this group in the labour market (Fahey and Russell, 2001). By 2007, the employment rate among married mothers had forged ahead, jumping by over 14 percentage points since 1997, but for lone mothers the increase was a more modest 4.5 percentage points. Almost six per cent of lone mothers were unemployed, compared to 1.9 per cent of married mothers.

Figure 3.9

Percentages of mothers with children aged under 15 who are at work and unemployed by married/lone-parent status in 1997 and 2007



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey, 1997 Q4, 2007 Q2

THE INCENTIVE EFFECTS OF STATE SUPPORTS FOR LONE PARENTS

Because lone parent families have long been identified as a family type at high risk of poverty (see next section), they have been targeted for special social welfare payments (mainly the One-Parent Family Payment), along with additional benefits such as access to local authority housing and extensive support under the scheme of Supplementary Welfare Allowances (for a detailed account of the emergence and current provision of social security for lone parents, see McCashin 2004: 172-192; see also Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006a and 2006b).

The combined benefits received by the majority of lone parent families is considerably greater than that received by couple families with children, particularly when the smaller household size of lone parent families is taken into account. A recurrent concern about those benefits is that the possible incentives they create may trap lone parents into situations that are contrary to their own or their children's long-term interests. One broad area where these incentives may operate is in regard to employment, where the concern is that lone parents may be discouraged from taking up work or may be confined to part-time or low skill employment. Such employment-related incentives

for lone parents have long been recognised and attempts made to address them (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000; Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006a). Here our concern is with a second broad area where negative incentives for lone parents are often said to operate, namely, in regard to family formation. These have only recently come to be a focus of policy reform (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006b) and have also occasionally gained some attention in public debate. State supports for lone parents could in theory impinge on the family formation at four main decision-points.

These are:

1. the decision to become pregnant in the first place;
2. the decision whether or not to have an abortion;
3. the decision whether or not to live with the other parent of the child, with some implications for the decision to have joint custody;
4. in cases where lone parenthood is the result of the breakdown of an existing relationship, the decision whether to split up or not.¹²

In the case of the decision to become pregnant, the available evidence suggests that pregnancy outside of marriage is often unplanned and unexpected and arises from the non-use or ineffective use of contraception during sexual intercourse or takes place in the context of a on-going relationship (for a review of the evidence on this issue, see Rundle et al. 2004; see also McCashin 1996). The proportion of women who deliberately set out to become pregnant with the intention of becoming lone parents is likely to be limited, and even among such women the availability of lone parent payments might not be a decisive factor. Thus, the incentive effect of lone parent payments on the decision to become pregnant is unlikely to be large. The same is true in regard to the decision of married or cohabiting partners to split up. In those cases, conflict or dissatisfaction in the relationship is likely to be the main initiating cause of breakup, and in many cases income and living standards for the parent who has custody of the children will fall when the couple separates. The availability of lone parent payments may soften the financial consequences of break-up, but it is unlikely to be an important initiating cause.

It is in regard to 2 and 3 above – the decision to abort or not abort and the decision to co-reside or not with the other parent – that the incentive effects of lone parent supports may be most significant, though even here it is uncertain how decisive they are. Given the pro-life character of Irish policy on abortion, any incentive not to have an abortion that might arise from lone parent supports would have to be considered positive, even if it entailed an increase in the incidence of lone parenthood. The desire to attract women with crisis pregnancies away from the abortion option appears to have been a significant part of the rationale for introducing welfare payments for unmarried mothers in the first instance (McCashin 2004), and would be likely to be supported by many Irish people today for the same reason. It is not clear what effect welfare benefits for lone parents have in this regard, but in so far as any such

effect is present, it would be an argument in favour of the current system.

The only remaining incentive is that which affects the decision to co-reside with the other parent. It is here that negative effects are most likely to emerge, as it is a condition of qualification for the One-Parent Family Payment that the recipient not be cohabiting with a spouse or partner (see Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006b, pp. 80-83). Since the vast majority – over 85 per cent – of parents of young children co-reside, it is evident that most families are not influenced by this provision. Even among women who give birth outside of marriage, the majority (possibly as many as two out of three) are either in an on-going couple relationship when the child is born or enter one shortly thereafter. Nevertheless, this still leaves a small but significant minority for whom the incentive to live as a solo parent arising from lone parent supports could be important.

An indication of what is involved can be obtained by comparing payments to lone parents under the One-Parent Family Payment scheme with the universal payments to all families provided in the form of Child Benefit (see Table 3.5). In 2006, the average annual payment under the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) scheme was €6,132 per child in lone parent families. Child Benefit payments in the same year amounted to an average per child of €1,897. Since the majority of lone parents receive both Child Benefit and the One-Parent Family Payment (the latter being subject to certain qualifying criteria), the total average sum per child received by lone parents (€8,029) was more than four times greater than that received by the majority of two-parent families. Where one or more partners in a couple family is unemployed or otherwise dependent on social welfare, this differential would be narrowed, since the unemployed partner in a couple family would receive additional payments, such as Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance. Even in that instance, however, the partners would receive more if living apart than if living together. For example, in the case of a lone mother (with one child) in receipt of OFP and a partner who is on Jobseeker's Allowance, their joint weekly income if living apart would be €419.60 but if living together it would be €353.10, a reduction of €66.50 per week. Furthermore, as a lone parent a mother would receive welfare benefits in her own name whereas as the partner of an unemployed man, she would receive many of the benefits through her partner and so would depend on his willingness to share.

The possible incentive towards lone parenthood thus arises in the first instance from the higher levels of welfare support available to lone parents compared to couple parents and in the second instance from the freedom from dependence on a partner's income that welfare benefits for lone parents entail.

¹² Other decisions could also be considered, particularly those that were important in the past such as the decision to put a baby up for adoption or to emigrate to Britain to conceal a birth outside of marriage. However, these have become less relevant in recent years and for space reasons are not considered here.

Recognising the problems caused by this situation, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has proposed a reform of supports for lone parents (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006b). The key elements of the proposal are (1) to abolish benefits targeted on lone parents and introduce instead a new allowance targeted on all low income families with children, (2) to 'individualise' the payment so that entitlement on the part of the recipient is independent of whether he or she is living with a spouse/partner or not; (3) to restrict entitlement to the allowance

after the child reaches age 5 and eliminate it altogether after age 8, with a view to encouraging the parent either to enter employment or to transfer to Jobseekers Allowance, or another appropriate payment as a means of support. The proposed reforms thereby hope to reduce disincentives to both employment and joint parenthood and in fact seem well calculated to overcome the worst features of the present system on both counts. Whether or in what form the reforms will be introduced and what effect they will have remains to be seen.

Table 3.5 Comparison of benefits payable under One-Parent Family Payment and Child Benefit Schemes

| | <i>One-Parent Family Payment</i> | <i>Child Benefit</i> |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Total amount of benefit in 2006 | €834 million | €2,056 million |
| No of families in receipt | 83,000 | 563,000 |
| No of children in receipt | 136,000 | 1,084,000 |
| Amount per child | 16,132 | 11,897 |

Source: Statistical Information on Social Welfare Services 2006

EXCLUDING FATHERS?

The Commission on the Family (1998) recommended that, in cases of family break-up, 'joint parenting should be encouraged with a view to ensuring that, as far as possible, children have the opportunity of developing close relationships with both parents' and suggested that 'in cases where joint parenting is in the child's best interest public policy has a key role in promoting that interest' (Commission on the Family, 1998: 180). This recommendation was made against a background of growing concern that, over and above the incentives to lone parenthood just looked at, public policy was more likely to inhibit than encourage an active parenting role by fathers who found themselves on the margins of their families.

Arguing along these lines, a review of the status of fathers produced for the Commission on the Family asserted that in modern societies fatherhood is viewed in a more ambiguous way than is motherhood: it is associated with a mix of positive and negative imagery where motherhood is viewed in a more consistently positive way (McKeown et al. 1998: 404). The pervasiveness of the negative aspects of this imagery, according to these authors, permeates both fathers' views of their own role and the wider cultural response to fatherhood, including the response built into public policy. They contend that although a greater involvement in the care and upbringing of their children is increasingly presented as the ideal towards which the modern father should aspire, that ideal 'is either opposed or not supported by many of the structures, policies and practices which directly impact on fathers' (McKeown et al. 1998: 406). They cite a range of examples of the bias against fatherhood, such as in family law (where the rights of fathers, and of unmarried fathers in particular, are weak), in state services and supports for families (where they suggest that the main focus is on the mother and 'fathers tend to be largely ignored and avoided' – *ibid.*: 438), and in the training of family professionals, among whom they say there is a great deal of uncertainty about how to approach men and work with them.

Ferguson and Hogan (2004) have explored these themes further by means of a qualitative study of 'vulnerable' fathers in Ireland and how they related to family support services. A vulnerable father was defined as 'a man who is struggling to be a good enough parent due to having involvement with social services and family support agencies' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004: 4). They found that inclusive practice towards such fathers was rare: they were generally excluded from the bulk of child care and family support work, often on the basis simply of 'a general view of men as dangerous, non-nurturing beings'. They contended that 'the overall orientation of welfare systems to exclude men is so powerful that even in cases of inclusive practice, clear evidence emerged of men's exclusion' (Ferguson and Rooney, 2004: 4). According to their analysis, exclusionary practice was particularly strong among statutory social

workers: voluntary agencies such as family centres seemed to be more willing and able to engage with fathers and more successful in bringing them towards a constructive role in their families. The recommendations arising from their study suggested that family services need to undertake fundamental re-appraisal of their views of men and masculinity, to recognize the potential for caring and nurturing that the majority of vulnerable fathers possess, and to adopt a pro-active, supportive role in realizing that potential, for the benefit both of the fathers and their families.

Research in these areas is as yet in an early stage of development, and policy initiatives are still few in number. Yet this is an emerging area for family policy and warrants being highlighted as an issue for further exploration and development.

FAMILY AND CHILD POVERTY

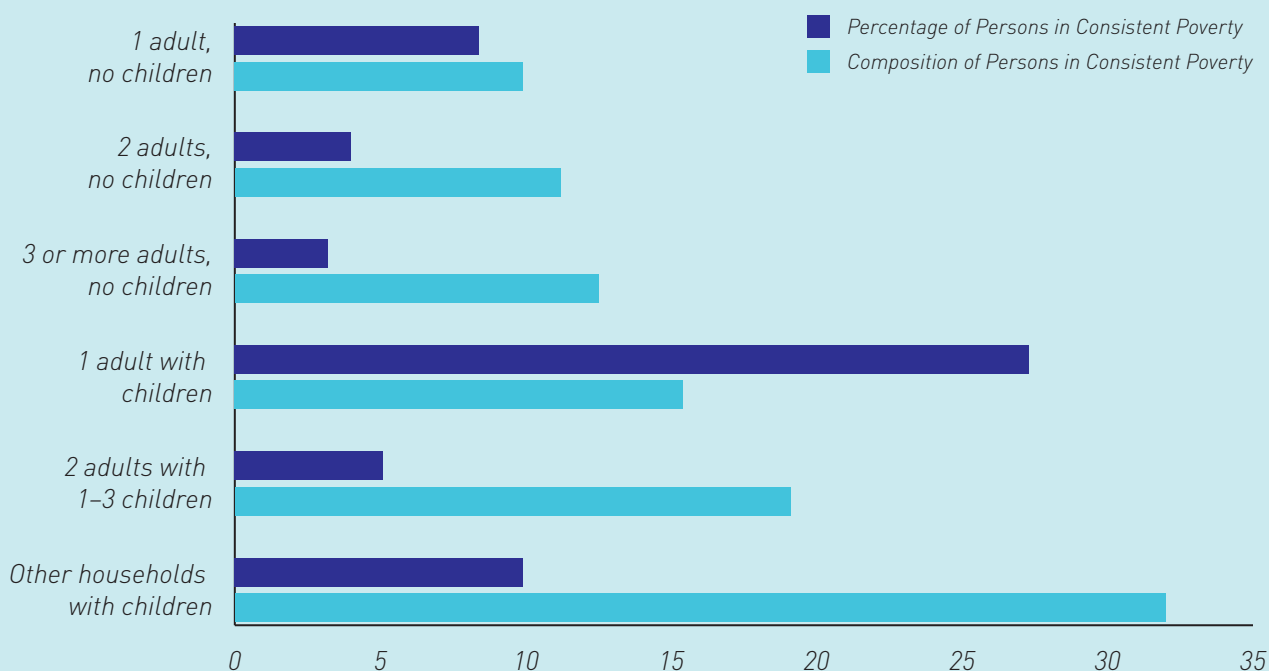
In 2005, 19.7 per cent of Irish households were classified as being 'at risk of poverty' in that they had incomes below 60 per cent of median household income. This compares with an EU-25 average of 16 per cent at risk of poverty (Central Statistics Office 2006b). Anti-poverty policy in Ireland focuses on a measure of poverty called 'consistent poverty'. People are classified as poor according to this concept if they have a combination of low household income (defined as less than 60 per cent of the national median household income, adjusted for household size) and experience any two of a list of eleven basic deprivation items, such as not being able to afford a full meal on at least one day over the previous two weeks, being unable to afford heating at any time over the past year, not having a warm waterproof coat. (Note that this is a revised definition of consistent poverty, as adopted for the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 – see Government of Ireland 2007. The previous definition listed eight items from which the lack of any one, combined with low income, constituted consistent poverty.)

Lone parent households stand out as having higher than average risks of poverty in Ireland, while households with more than three children are also a major part of the population in consistent poverty. In 2006, more than one in four lone parent households (27.3 per cent) were consistently poor in the sense defined above (Figure 3.10). This is an improvement in the poverty rate among lone parent households since 2003, when it stood at 33.7 per cent (Central Statistics Office 2006b), and is consistent with a longer term lessening of the poverty risk among lone parent households (Whelan et al. 2003).

Nevertheless, it is clear that lone parent households still face a distinctively high level of economic vulnerability in Ireland.

The consistent poverty rate among other households with children was considerably lower, at just under 10 per cent, but those households nevertheless accounted for almost one in three (32 per cent) of all households in consistent poverty. Lone adult households, many of which are comprised of elderly people, were the only other household type to have high rates of consistent poverty.

Figure 3.10 Percentage and composition of persons in consistent poverty classified by type of household, 2006



Source: EU-SILC 2006 (Central Statistics Office 2007e, Tables A5 & A6)

CHILDCARE

One of the largest changes affecting family life in Ireland in recent years has been the rapid rise in female labour force participation, much of which is accounted for by an increase in the employment rate of mothers with young children. In 1986, 32 per cent of all women were in employment, and around 20 per cent or less of women with children of school or pre-school age were in employment (Table 3.6). By 2002, the female employment rate had risen to over 50 per cent among women, whether or not they had children, and the gap between the employment rate of all women and mothers with school or pre-school children had all but closed.

However, much of the rise in female employment was part-time, so that by 2002 full-time employment rates were considerably lower than overall employment rates among all women and more especially among women with children. Among all women, 37.7 per cent were in full-time employment, compared to 55.2 per cent employed overall, while among women with children aged under 3, 25.6 per cent were employed full-time, half the overall employment rate for women in that category. It is worth noting that the lowest rate of full-time employment occurred among women with children aged 6-16 (22 per cent on 2002) rather than among those with younger children.

A notable feature of the recent rise in the labour force participation of women with children is that it has occurred despite low levels of provision of formal childcare. By OECD standards, Ireland has exceptionally low levels of public spending on childcare and childcare costs absorb especially large proportions of second earner incomes in two earner families (Cournède 2006: 8). In 2005, 40.3 per cent of families with pre-school children made use of childcare but almost half of that was accounted for by childcare

provided by relatives, the majority of whom were unpaid (Table 3.7). Among families with primary school-going children, only 21.5 per cent used childcare, and relatives accounted for over half of this, again with the majority being unpaid. Formal, properly regulated childcare is a minority experience for children of mothers with paid work in Ireland, and that is largely financed by families themselves. Use of childcare increased slightly between 2002 and 2005, but so too did reliance on unpaid family carers. State funding for childcare in the usual sense is targeted mainly at families in disadvantaged areas, and while important as an anti-poverty measure, does not benefit the majority of families. For children aged from 4 years upwards, the provision of infant classes in primary schools amounts to a form of childcare provision and, as a recent OECD review of childcare in Ireland put it, is 'the only form of reasonably funded state provision for young children to be found all over Ireland' (OECD 2004: 34). About half of all 4 year olds and nearly all 5 year olds are provided for this way. However, opening hours are limited and vacation periods when the schools are not in session are long. Thus, the value of this kind of provision from the parents' point of view is limited.

Table 3.6 *Maternal and female employment rates, 1986-2002*

| | <i>Mothers with youngest child aged:</i> | | | | | | <i>Women</i> | |
|------|--|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|
| | <i>Under 3 years old</i> | | <i>3 to not yet 6 years old</i> | | <i>6-16 years old</i> | | <i>All</i> | <i>Full-time</i> |
| | <i>All</i> | <i>Full-time</i> | <i>All</i> | <i>Full-time</i> | <i>All</i> | <i>Full-time</i> | | |
| 1986 | 20.7 | | 15.6 | | 17.7 | | 32.0 | |
| 1991 | 33.5 | | 27.3 | | 25.9 | | 36.4 | |
| 1996 | 43.8 | 26.2 | 39.2 | 22.8 | 36.8 | 19.2 | 41.1 | 29.9 |
| 2000 | 52.5 | 28.9 | 51.8 | 30.5 | 41.8 | 17.8 | 53.3 | 36.5 |
| 2002 | 51.1 | 25.6 | 52.3 | 30.9 | 51.1 | 22.0 | 55.2 | 37.7 |

Source: OECD 2003, Table 2.4.

Table 3.7

Types of childcare among families with pre-school and primary school children, September-November 2002 and December-February 2005

| | Pre-school | | Primary | |
|---|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2002 % | 2005 % | 2002 % | 2005 % |
| % of families with children in childcare | 37.9 | 40.3 | 22.0 | 21.5 |
| <i>Of which, care provided by:</i> | | | | |
| Unpaid relative | 27.6 | 28.6 | 41.7 | 45.3 |
| Paid relative | 12.1 | 11.1 | 14.3 | 12.1 |
| Paid carer | 31.6 | 29.9 | 34.0 | 30.4 |
| Crèche/Montessori | 24.5 | 24.9 | 6.2 | 6.3 |
| Other | 4.2 | 5.4 | 3.7 | 5.8 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Central Statistics Office 2006 (figures for 2002 contain revised data)

There have been repeated calls for the development of both childcare and early education services in Ireland. In response, The National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1999 and was implemented initially through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 – 2006. This Programme entailed expenditure of more than €500m and, by the end of 2007, had delivered almost 40,000 new childcare places. The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006 – 2010 is a successor Programme to the EOCP. The total allocation to the NCIP is €575m over five years. The NCIP is expected to deliver an additional 50,000 new childcare places, including 10,000 for the 3-4 years age-group and 5,000 for after-school care.

However, provision in Ireland is still low by European standards, and is far short of the targets set by the Barcelona European Council 2002 (OECD 2004: 47). Even where provision is reasonably extensive, as among 4 and 5 year olds attending infant classes in primary schools, there is a concern that the approach is overly focused on instruction and cognitive development and insufficiently attuned to the specific requirements of early childhood education.

IDEAL AND ACTUAL NUMBERS OF CHILDREN

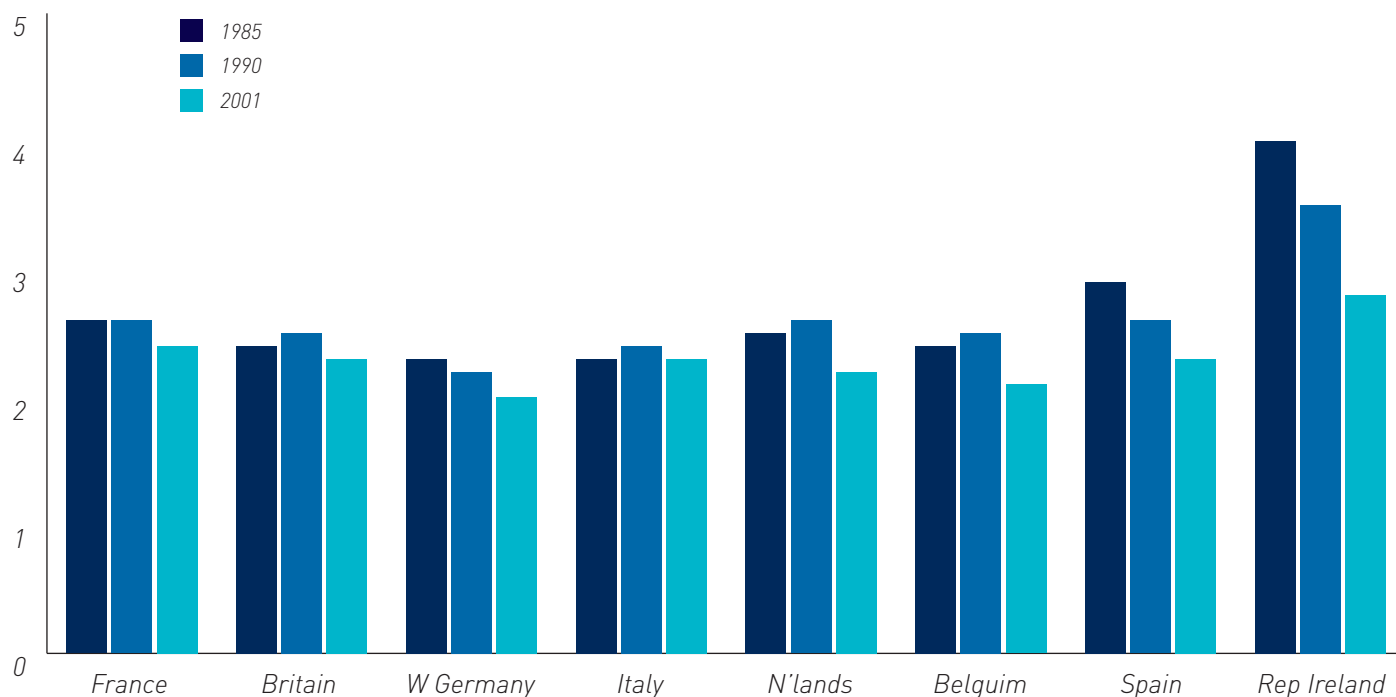
In the context of the very low fertility rates outlined earlier, there has been particular interest in the policy significance of a well recognised feature of fertility patterns in low fertility countries: the number of children people have is on average less than the number they prefer (Goldstein et al. 2003; Bongaarts 2002: 426-427; van Peer 2000; van de Kaa 1998). Chesnais (1998), for example, points out that while women in Europe say they want an average family size of 2.2, the actual total fertility rate is only 1.45.

This pattern, which emerged historically in the course of the transition to low fertility, is the reverse of that found in high fertility countries, where actual fertility typically exceeds preferred fertility (Bongaarts 1998: 8-11). The shortfall between actual and preferred fertility in low fertility countries has been read by some as having considerable policy significance since it may indicate the presence of a receptive environment for pronatalist policy (a policy that promotes child-bearing). For Chesnais (1998), for example, it reflects a 'latent demand for family support', while for Sleebos (2003: 30) it 'provides a window of opportunity for policies aimed to increase fertility and to bring it into line with individual preferences'.

Data on actual and ideal family size that enable us to assess such latent demand are available for a number of countries. Ideal family size is measured in these sources in one or both of two ways: by asking respondents (a) what they think is the ideal number of children for a family in general (which we label here the *general* ideal family size) and (b) what they think is the ideal number of children for themselves personally (*personal* ideal family size). (For a fuller analysis of the data which follows, see Fahey 2008).

Figure 3.11 shows data on general ideal family size of eight European countries in 1981, 1990 and 2001. This shows that Irish adults had exceptionally large ideal family size

Figure 3.11 Mean general ideal family size, all adults



Sources: European Values Study 1981, 1990; Eurobarometer 56.1 (2001)

(four children on average) in 1981 but that by 2001 that ideal had fallen closer to, but not quite as low as, the typical ideal in other European countries. The other countries in Figure 3.11 also showed a small decline in ideal family size between 1981 and 2001.

The important question that now arises is the degree to which people attain their family size ideals. This question can meaningfully be answered only in connection with those who have completed their fertility, since those in their childbearing years could still be in the process of family building. For this reason we focus here on women aged 45-64. Because of small sample sizes for this age-group in the surveys at our disposal, it is not possible to examine individual countries separately and so we look here at the pooled survey data for the eight countries just referred to. The survey for 2001 contains a measure of both general and personal ideal family size and both these measures are reported here. An important means of examining social differentials in patterns of fertility ideal attainment is to classify the results by the educational level of respondents. This is done in Table 3.7.

The key points to emerge from this table are as follows:

1. The ideal-actual gap did not widen over the period 1981 to 2001. If anything, it narrowed: among women at all educational levels the average actual number of children was 0.3 below the ideal in 1981 compared to 0.1 below in 2001.
2. Actual family size was somewhat lower in 2001 than in 1981, but this was accompanied by a fall in ideal family size rather than to a widening of the ideal-actual gap.
3. Educational differentials did not lead to consistently significant differences in family size ideals in 1981, 1990 or 2001. In 2001, for example, women who had completed their education at the age of 15 years or younger had the same general family size ideal (2.4) as women who had completed their education at age 20 years or higher.
4. However, educational differentials did affect *attainment* of fertility ideals: the less educated showed no real gap *on average* between ideal and actual fertility in 1981, 1990 or 2001. That gap was quite substantial for better educated women (a shortfall of about 0.5 children in 1981, 0.7 in 1990 and 0.6 in 2001).

Table 3.7 Actual and ideal family size by age completed education among women aged 45-64, pooled data for 8 European societies

| <i>age completed education</i> | <i>actual no of children</i> | <i>ideal family size (general*)</i> | <i>ideal family size (personal*)</i> | <i>Actual-ideal (general*)</i> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1981 | | | | |
| 15 yrs or earlier | 2.6 | 2.8 | | -0.2 |
| 16-19 | 2.2 | 2.7 | | -0.5 |
| 20+ | 2.1 | 2.6 | | -0.5 |
| Total | 2.4 | 2.7 | | -0.3 |
| 1990 | | | | |
| 15 yrs or earlier | 2.7 | 2.7 | | 0.0 |
| 16-19 | 2.4 | 2.8 | | -0.4 |
| 20+ | 2.1 | 2.7 | | -0.7 |
| Total | 2.5 | 2.7 | | -0.2 |
| 2001 | | | | |
| 15 yrs or earlier | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 0.1 |
| 16-19 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 2.3 | -0.1 |
| 20+ | 1.8 | 2.4 | 2.5 | -0.6 |
| Total | 2.2 | 2.3 | 2.4 | -0.1 |

* *General: ideal number of children for family in general; Personal: ideal number of children size for respondent personally.*
Sources: European Values Study 1981, 1990; Eurobarometer 56.1 (2001)

We need to look at the final point more closely and consider what the lack of a gap *on average* between ideal and actual fertility among less educated women signifies, as that average is a composite of under-attainment of family size ideals ('too few'), over-attainment ('too many') and 'just right' outcomes. Table 3.8 shows the incidence of under-attainment, over-attainment and 'just right' outcomes by educational level for 1981, 1990 and 2001 (for 2001, these outcomes are presented for both general and personal ideals since the data for that year contain both measures). In 2001, among less educated women, although actual family size matched the general ideal family size on average, 22 per cent of those women had fewer than their

personal ideal family size but this was almost counter-balanced by the 17 per cent who said they had too many. Thus, there was a significant level of both under-attainment and over-attainment among less educated women but these cancelled each other out and caused the outcome to come very close to the ideal on average. The pattern was quite different among better-educated women. Here, over-attainment is rare and under-attainment common. In 2001, for example, 46 per cent of better educated women had 'too few' children relative to their personal ideal family size but only 7 per cent had 'too many' children. This indicates that over-attainment was six-and-a-half times more common than under-attainment in this group.

Table 3.8 Fulfilment of fertility ideals among women with completed fertility (ages 45-64), pooled data for 8 European societies, 1981, 1990, 2001

| | <i>Age completed education</i> | | | <i>All</i> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| | <i>15 yrs or earlier</i> | <i>16-19</i> | <i>20+</i> | |
| 1981 | | | | |
| Too few | 37 | 41 | 44 | 39 |
| Just right | 39 | 39 | 46 | 39 |
| Too many | 24 | 20 | 10 | 21 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| 1990 | | | | |
| Too few | 33 | 40 | 46 | 36 |
| Just right | 42 | 41 | 40 | 41 |
| Too many | 25 | 19 | 14 | 22 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| 2001: general ideal | | | | |
| Too few | 25 | 33 | 43 | 32 |
| Just right | 52 | 44 | 47 | 47 |
| Too many | 24 | 23 | 10 | 20 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| 2001: personal ideal | | | | |
| Too few | 22 | 28 | 46 | 30 |
| Just right | 61 | 57 | 47 | 56 |
| Too many | 17 | 15 | 7 | 14 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Sources: European Values Study 1981, 1990; Eurobarometer 56.1 (2001)

Two significant points for policy emerge from this analysis. The first is that if women were enabled to achieve a closer match between their fertility ideals and their outcomes, the impact on fertility would not all be upwards. A small but still significant minority of women have more children than their ideal and in their case a better match between ideal and outcome would tend to reduce the fertility rate. The second is that if policies to address the under-attainment of fertility ideals are to be considered, the positive association between high education and under-attainment found in our analysis should be taken into

account. It suggests that those policies would be most effective if weighted towards women with high human capital for whom the opportunity costs of child-bearing (in terms of income, career or lifestyle) are greatest. This in turn would imply that child-support measures which had a pro-natalist intent might differ from those with an anti-poverty intent, since the former would emphasise horizontal distribution from those without children to those with children, where the latter would emphasise vertical distribution from the better-off to the less well-off.

CONCLUSION

A striking feature of family life in Ireland over the past ten years has been the large increase in the formation of new families, as indicated by an increase of 57 per cent in the numbers of first births between 1994 and 2006. There has also been a large increase of 43 per cent in the number of second births over the same period. Since 1999, the annual numbers of first and second births have been the highest ever recorded in Ireland, even though total births were well below the peak numbers reached in the early 1980s. While detailed analysis of how and why these increases have occurred has not been carried out, the coincidence between their arrival and the economic boom that started at the same time makes it likely that there is a causal connection between the two. It is particularly notable that in developed countries generally, good job opportunities for women seem to have a positive effect on their willingness to have at least one or two children. It is plausible to consider in the Irish case that the buoyant labour market for women has more than compensated for possible negative influences on the willingness to have children such as high house prices or expensive childcare. In any event, the vitality in family formation in Ireland since the early 1990s is an important development that lays a strong demographic and social foundation for the future.

Although Irish people have become more willing to enter parenthood over the past decade or so, they have continued the long-term move away from becoming parents many times over. It is the decline in the large family that has prevented the increase in the number of new families from translating into a correspondingly large increase in the birth rate. One consequence is that children in Ireland are now much more likely to grow up in small families, with particularly large increases in the one and two child families and particularly large decreases in the numbers of children living in families with five, six or more children. There has at the same time been a steady increase in the numbers of children living in lone parent families, and by 2006, according to census data, 17.6 per cent of children aged under 15 were in that situation. Lone parent families are more prone to certain kinds of risks than two-parent families, not least the risk of poverty, and the rise in lone parenthood thus adds to the vulnerability of families. However, in assessing overall trends in the circumstances of family life, we have to keep in mind that the very large family of the past was also prone to risk, including again the risk of poverty. The decline in the very large family can thus be considered as a reduction in vulnerability that has to be kept in mind in assessing overall trends in the circumstances of family life.

When we look at the incomes and living standards of families, we find that 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.



OTHER

CARING

RELATIONSHIPS

4. OTHER CARING RELATIONSHIPS

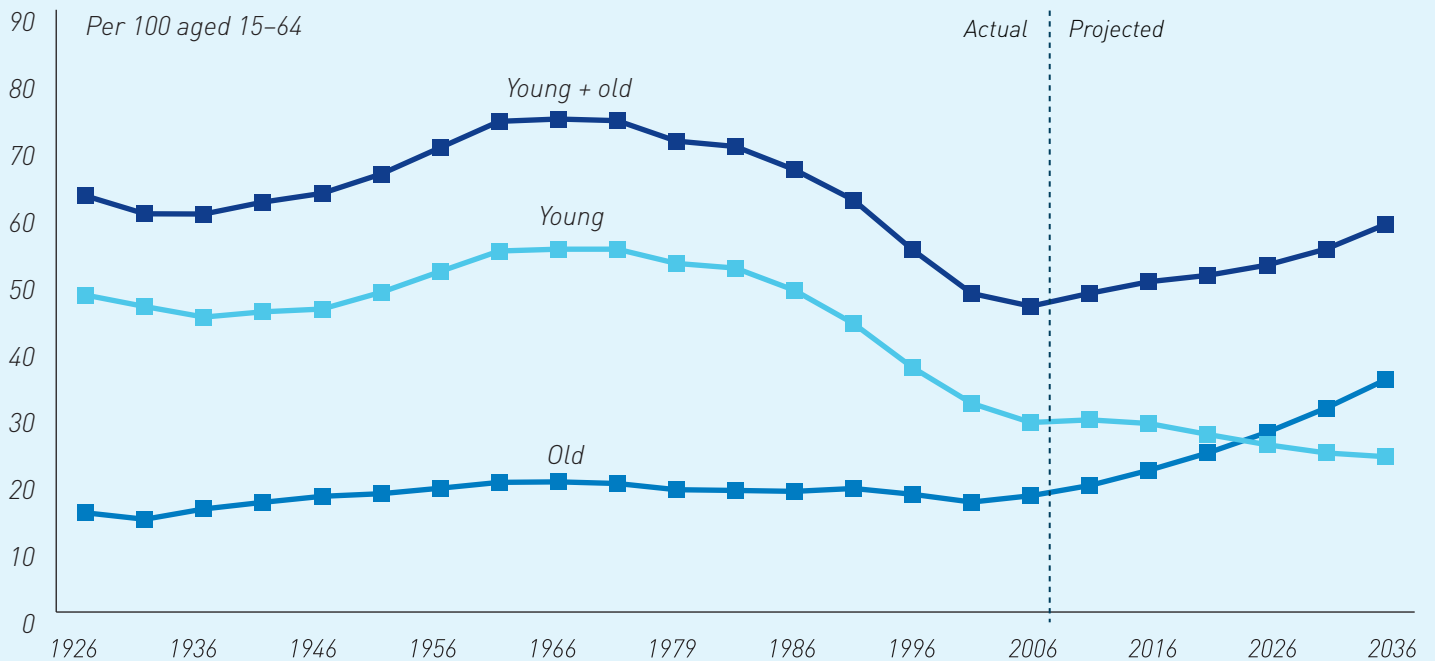
Concern has been expressed about the prospect of a growing burden of care on families on account of population ageing and about the capacity or willingness of families to provide that care.

Interest in caring relationships in the family in dependency situations other than those related to children has been dominated in recent years by concerns about population ageing and the capacity of families to cope with the care needs of the growing numbers of elderly. In addition, there are concerns about the care needs of other dependent relatives, such as those who have physical or learning disabilities, whether in childhood or adulthood. This section reviews some general data on these issues in Ireland and draws general conclusions about their implications for family life.

OLDER PEOPLE

High age dependency ratios, combining young and old dependency, are nothing new in Ireland. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Ireland had the largest share of population aged 65 or over of any country in the world, and it also had large proportions of children. This arose as a consequence of uniquely high rates of emigration coupled with reasonably high rates of fertility. Together these meant that Irish population was both top heavy with older people and bottom heavy with children – what was lacking was the adult age-ranges in between. This pattern became particularly acute from the 1950s to the 1970s. The huge emigrant outflow of the 1950s removed a large segment of the young adult population, while rising numbers of births in the 1960s and 1970s produced a sharp increase in the numbers of children. The result was that Ireland experienced a uniquely high age dependency among developed countries at that time (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Age dependency ratios in Ireland, 1926-2036



Source: CSO (2006), M2F2 assumptions

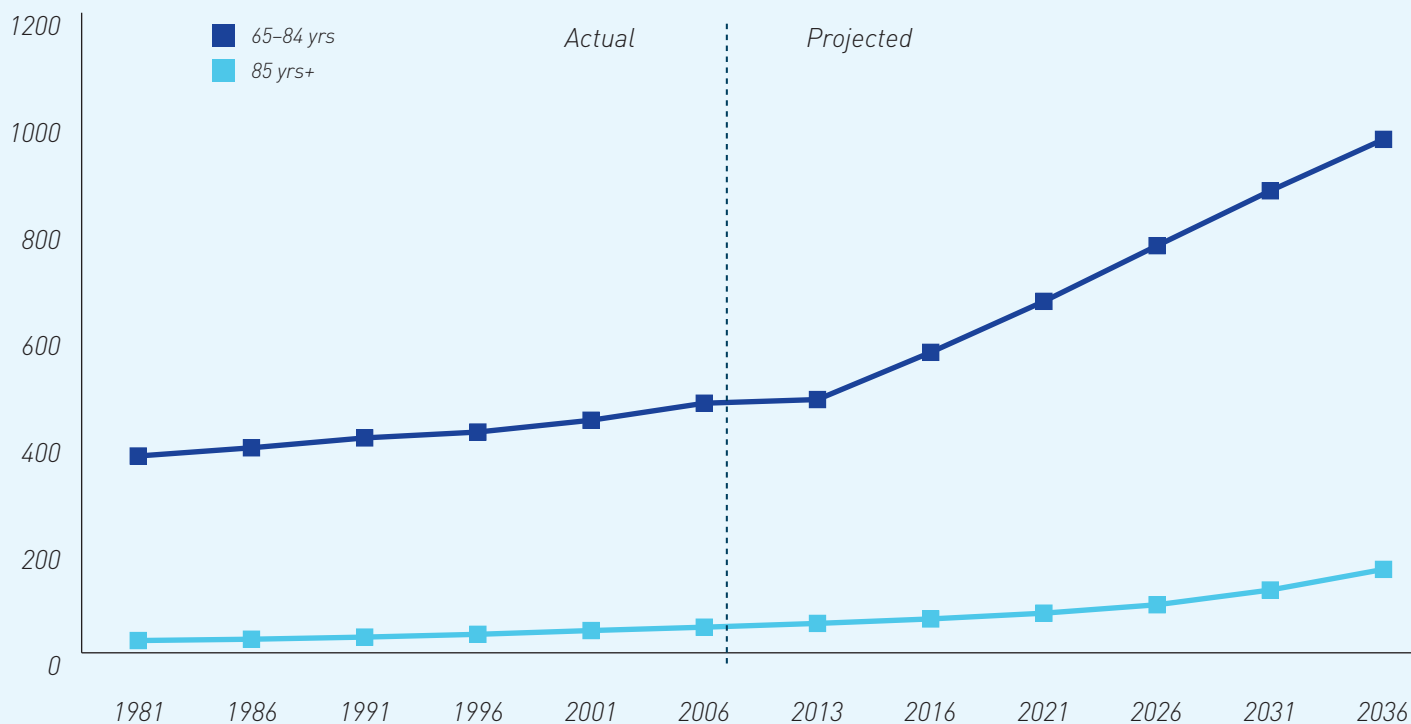
Since the peak of the early 1970s, overall dependency ratios in Ireland have been on a downward path. Much of the overall decline was due to falling youth dependency, which in turn was the consequence of a combination of falling fertility and an expanding adult population. However, old dependency also declined slightly. Having had the highest old age dependency among developed countries in 1960, Ireland now has the lowest, and is the only country in the world in which old age dependency is lower today than it was in the 1960s. The downward trend in old age dependency is only now bottoming out. It is soon likely to rise, driven by upward movement in old age dependency. Nevertheless, even by 2036, the old age dependency ratio in Ireland will be no greater than that found in a number of other developed countries today.

Although growth in the old age dependency ratio in Ireland has been slow to arrive and will take place at a relatively restrained rate compared to other countries, growth in the absolute numbers of older people will be rapid (Figure 4.2). The numbers aged over 65 are projected to increase from less than 430,000 today to 1.1 million by 2036, while the numbers of the 'oldest-old' – those aged over 80 – are projected to increase from just over 100,000 today to 318,000 in 2036.

The implications of this growth for family caring responsibilities are mitigated by two factors. One is that part of the growth in the numbers of elderly is due to rising life expectancy and that in turn entails an increase in disability-free life expectancy. The CSO projections presented in Figure 4.2 are based on the assumption that life expectancy among men will increase by 7.4 years between now and 2036, while the corresponding assumption for female life expectancy is an increase of 6.5 years. Experience in other countries has shown that disability-free life expectancy generally increases in tandem with, or slightly faster than, overall life expectancy (Jacobzone *et al.* 2000, OECD 2006). While no disability-free life expectancy projections are available for Ireland, this experience would lead one to expect that the increase in the numbers of *dependent* elderly in Ireland over the next three decades is likely to be smaller than the increase in overall numbers of older people. Thus, the increase in the burden of care arising from population ageing may not be as great as the rising numbers of old people on their own would suggest.

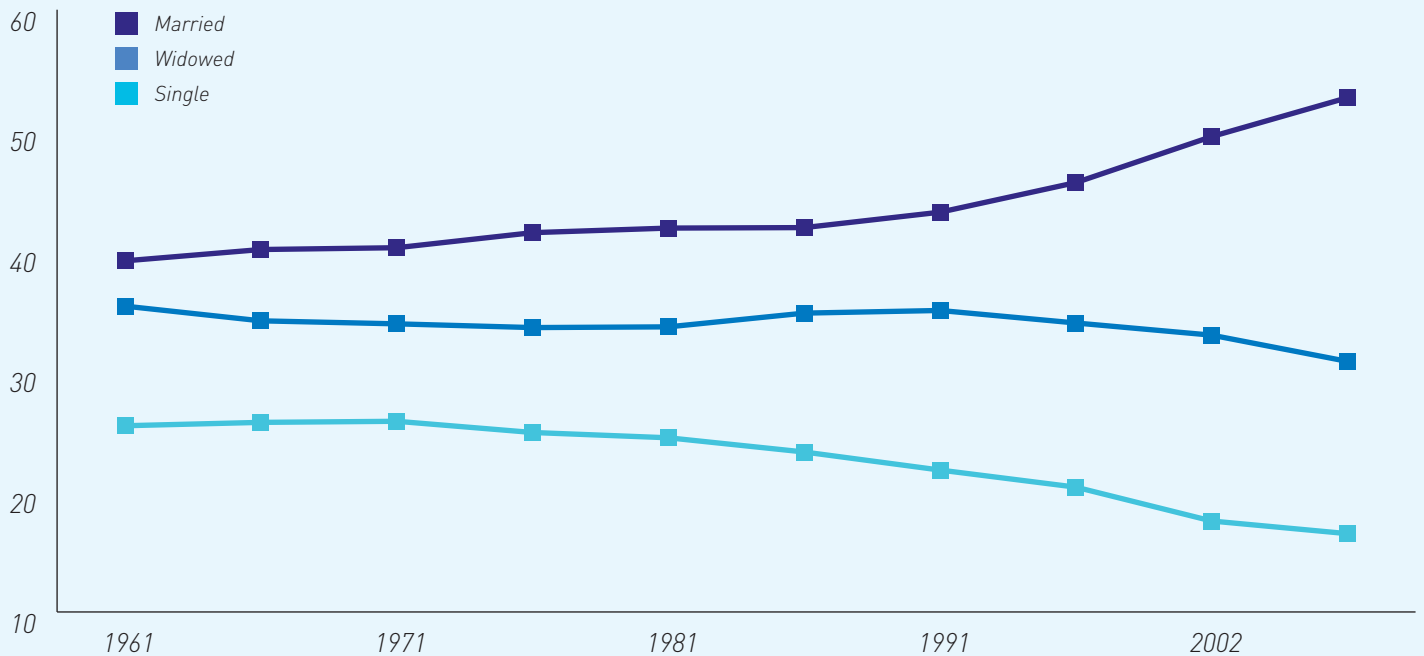
The second mitigating factor is peculiar to Ireland and has to do with the changing family status of the elderly

Figure 4.2 The numbers of older people in Ireland, 1981-2036



Source: CSO (2004), M2F2 assumptions

Figure 4.3 The elderly population (aged 65 and over) by marital status, 1961-2002



Source: Census of Population

population. Low marriage rates in Ireland in the past meant that uniquely large proportions of the population reached old age without ever having married or had children. In the 1960s, for example, over 25 per cent of 65-69 year olds in Ireland were single and thus lacked the key family members – spouses and children – who most often provide support to people in old age (Figure 4.3). The rise in marriage rates from the 1930s to the 1970s eventually fed through into a rise in the proportion of the older people who were married or widowed and had adult children. By 2002, the proportion of those aged 65 and over who were single had fallen to 17.5 per cent and continuing feed-through effects mean that that proportion is likely to fall further over the coming years. Connell and Pringle (2004: 63) project that among 65-74 year olds, over the period 2002-2021, the proportion single among men will decline from 19.4 per cent to 12.6 per cent and among women will decline from 13.3 per cent to 9.7 per cent (similar declines are projected to occur among those aged 75 and over). Improved longevity also means that co-survival of spouses is increasing and the incidence of widowhood among those aged over 65 is declining, though only by a small amount (except among women aged 65-74, where the decline in widowhood is quite substantial – Connell and Pringle, 2004: 63).

The decrease in marriage rates since the 1970s noted earlier may eventually lead to a return to higher rates of singlehood among older people, though because of rising

cohabitation and an increasing incidence of childbearing outside of marriage, it is unclear whether this will entail a growth in the proportion of older people who have no adult children. In any event, for the immediate future the proportion of older people who have spouses and/or adult children will be greater than in the past and this strengthens the capacity of the family to act as a source of care for the dependent elderly.

Other factors are sometimes pointed to as constraints on the caring capacity of families that may grow in the future and limit the caring commitment of families towards frail elderly people. These include the decline in family size, which means that elderly parents have fewer adult children to call upon for care, and the rise in married women's labour force participation, which is sometimes said to reduce the availability of adult daughters and daughters-in-law to older people. While empirical data or trends in family care-giving are rare, such evidences as exist gives no clear indication of a long-term decline in the provision of care by families towards older people (see, e.g., Pickard 2008: 6, who identifies a flat trend in family care-giving in England over the period 1985-2000; for more general discussion, see Finch 1998 and O'Shea and Hughes 1994). Adult children have smaller families of their own, have finished childbearing at an earlier stage in life, and can adjust their work commitments to fit in with care provision, all of which tends to facilitate their caring role and to ensure that it will remain effective for the future.

DISABILITY

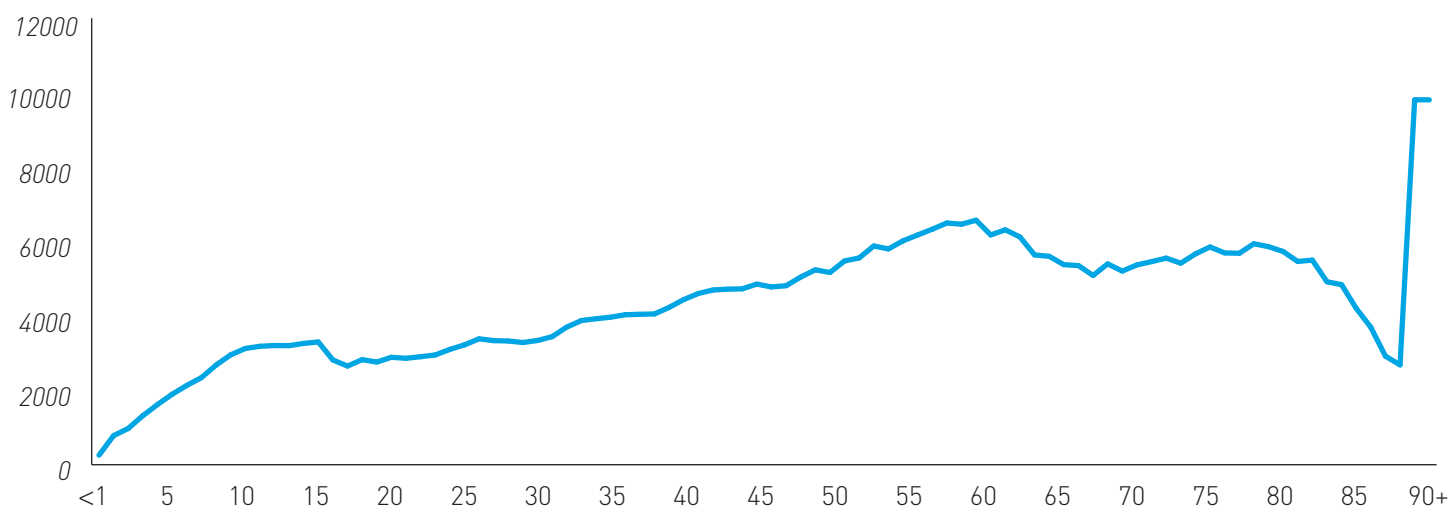
Caring for dependent relatives in the family is not confined to the elderly, nor are all elderly in need of care. Disability can occur in all age groups including children and young adults. The varying needs are often severe enough to require personal care. As in the case of the dependent elderly, that personal care is frequently provided by family members.

The Census of Population carried out in 2002 for the first time attempted to quantify the level of disability in the population and the amount of unpaid care provided by the adult population to those with disabilities. The measures applied in the 2002 census were limited in various ways. They focused only on physical disabilities and did not distinguish levels of disability or identify those who required personal care. The 2006 Census expanded the range of disabilities covered to include learning and intellectual disability, psychological and emotional conditions and chronic illnesses but again did not examine levels of disability or need for personal care. The expanded coverage of disability in Census 2006 means that the data it produced are not comparable with those of Census 2002, and for that reason we will focus here only on the data for 2006.

The count of persons with a disability in Census 2006 amounted to 393,707, or 9.3 per cent of the population.

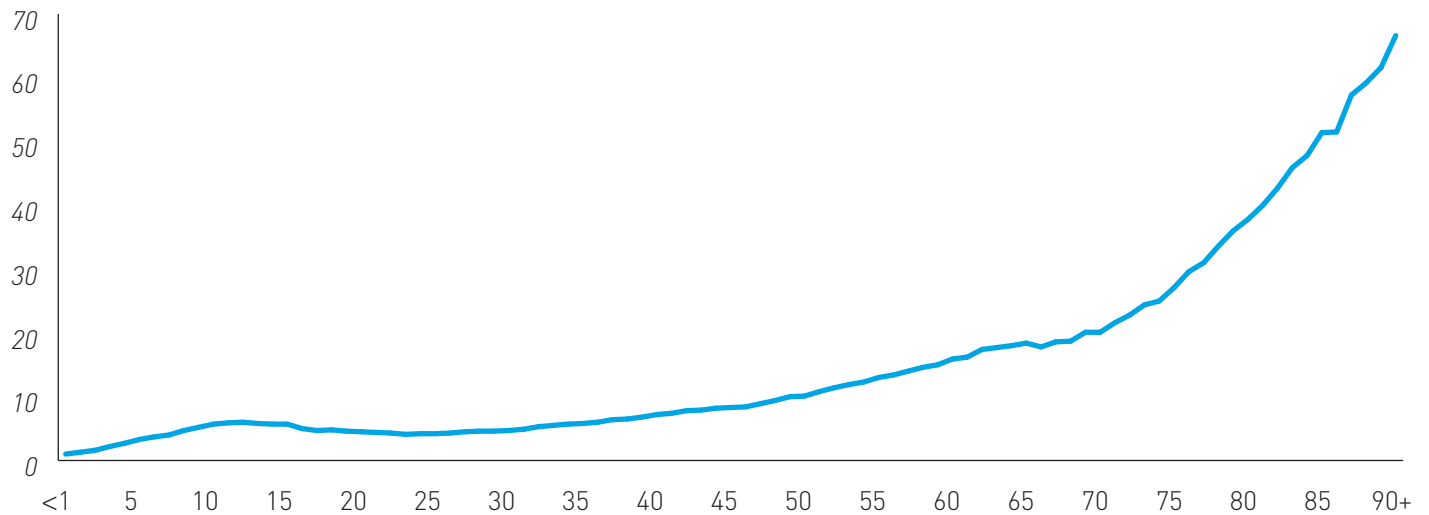
Of these, 191,017 were males (9 per cent of all males) and 202,768 were females (9.6 per cent of all females). Figure 4.4 sets out the numbers of persons with disabilities by single year of age, and Figure 4.5 presents the same numbers as percentages of the population in each year of age. Taken together, these two graphs reveal a striking pattern: people at younger ages have much lower *rates* of disability than those at older ages (Figure 4.5) but because there are many more younger than older people, the absolute *numbers* of younger people with disabilities is quite high (Figure 4.4). For example, the number of people aged 45-64 who have a disability, at 114,899, is only slightly less than the number for those aged 65 years and over, which is 138,257. However, the latter represent 29.5 per cent of their age group whereas the former represent only 12.3 per cent of theirs.

Figure 4.4 **Number of persons with disability by single year of age, 2006**



Source: *Census of Population 2006*

Figure 4.5 Per cent of population with disability by single year of age, 2006

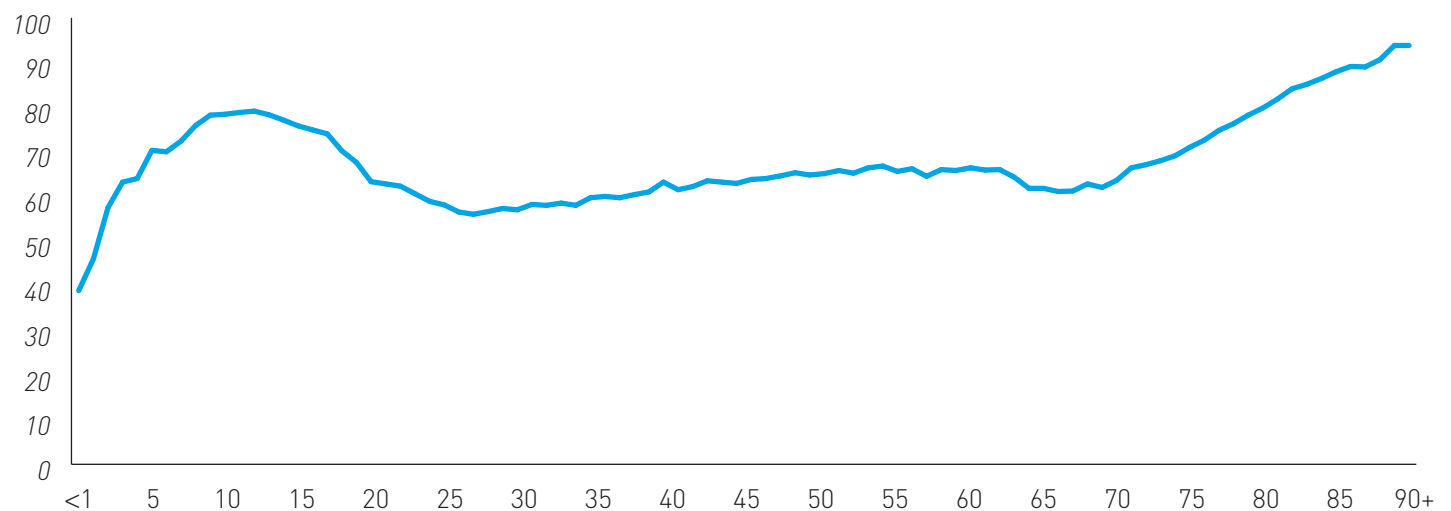


Source: Census of Population 2006

It is not possible from the census data to measure variations in the level of disability by age or to assess whether need for care arising from disability is higher for older people. However, the *number* of disabilities that people suffer is available in the data and provides an indirect indicator of severity and need for care. A version of this indicator is presented in Figure 4.6, which shows the percentage of the disabled in each year of age who suffer from more than one disability. According to this indicator, the severity of disability rises to quite high levels as childhood advances, with a peak reached in the mid-teenage years. It then falls

until the early 20s and fluctuates within a narrow band up to around the mid-70s, at which point it rises quite steadily up to quite high levels among those aged in their late 80s and 90s. It has to be acknowledged that the precise significance of this indicator is somewhat uncertain, since two or more mild disabilities may be no more restrictive in people's lives than a single severe disability. For what it is worth, however, taking multiple disability as a proxy for severity of disability, the data suggest that among those with disabilities, the teenage years and the years after age 75 or so are the ages of greatest disability risk.

Figure 4.6 Per cent of disabled with more than one disability by single year of age, 2006



Source: Census of Population 2006

CARERS

Among the population aged 15 years and over, Census 2006 recorded 160,917 persons who provide unpaid care to those with disabilities – 60,703 male carers and 100,214 female carers. These carers amounted to 4.6 per cent of the population, 2.9 per cent and 4.8 per cent of the corresponding male and female populations. Setting the number of unpaid carers alongside the numbers of persons with a disability would suggest that there is something more than two persons with a disability for every one unpaid carer. One cannot deduce from this with any exactitude that something less than half people with disabilities are receiving unpaid care, since some people with disabilities may be receiving care from more than one person and some carers may be looking after more than one person with disabilities. Nevertheless, it may not be too far from the truth to conclude from the figures that the proportion of people with disabilities receiving unpaid care is somewhere under a half.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of carers by age group and gender. The dominant age-groups for provision of care are 45-54 and 55-64, though for women the age group 35-44 is also important. While more women than men provide care, the number of hours of care provided per week is roughly similar for each, though with a slightly higher level among women (Figure 4.7). Over half of male and female carers provide less than 14 hours of care per week (60 per cent for males, 56.4 per cent for females). Less than a quarter of

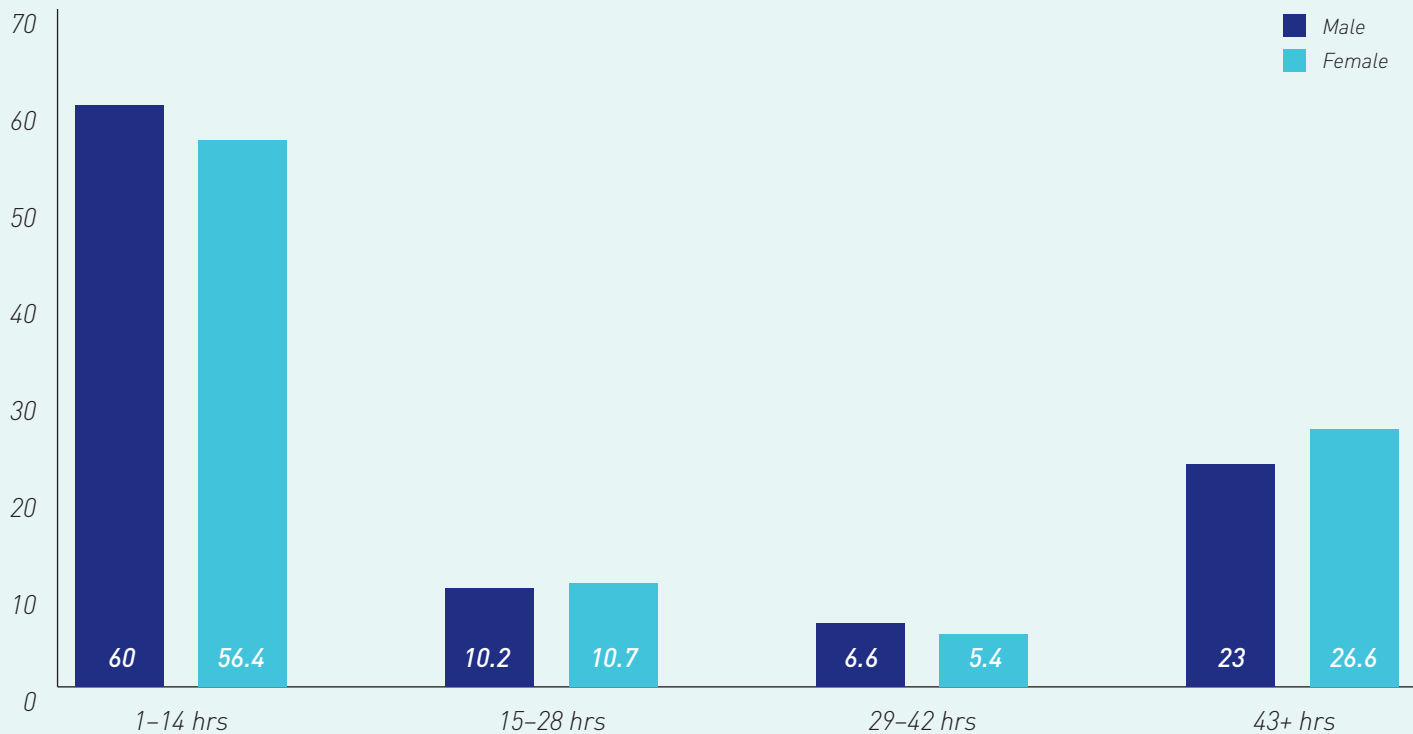
male carers (23 per cent) provide more than 43 hours per week, while 26.6 per cent of female carers do so. Labour force data on carers identified in Census 2006 shows that 60.5 per cent are in the labour force. Hours of unpaid care provided varies to some degree by labour force status: among those who provide 1-14 hours of care per week, 69.2 per cent are in the labour force, compared to a labour force participation rate of 38.7 per cent among those who provide more than 43 hours of care per week.

Table 4.1 Carers by gender and age group, 2006

| | Male | | Female | |
|-------|--------|----------------|--------|----------------|
| | Number | % of age group | Number | % of age group |
| 15-24 | 5621 | 1.6 | 6665 | 2.0 |
| 25-34 | 7644 | 2 | 11719 | 3.2 |
| 35-44 | 14017 | 4.4 | 24219 | 7.8 |
| 45-54 | 16423 | 6.1 | 29374 | 11.3 |
| 55-64 | 9855 | 4.7 | 17228 | 8.5 |
| 65+ | 7143 | 3.4 | 11009 | 4.2 |
| All | 60703 | 2.8 | 100214 | 4.7 |

Source: Census 2006

Figure 4.7 Carers by gender and number of hours of unpaid help provided per week



Source: Census 2006

CONCLUSION

Much concern has been expressed about the prospect of a growing burden of care on families on account of population ageing and about the capacity or willingness of families to provide that care. However, the effects of population ageing on need for care are mitigated by possible improvements in elderly health that accompany ageing and that defer the onset of the kinds of disability that make older people dependent on the care of others. In addition, in Ireland, the number of older people who have remained single and childless has been falling in recent years, thus increasing the proportion who, as they enter old age, have available to them the core family resources represented by spouses and children. Thus, there are important senses in which the family resources of older people are strengthening rather than weakening at present in Ireland.

It is also evident that a focus on population ageing as the main driver of changing patterns of need for care risks overlooking the extent of disability that exists in the non-elderly population. While the proportions of those in younger age groups who suffer from disabilities are much smaller than in the elderly population, the absolute numbers involved are large. It is not possible from the data on this subject looked at here to determine what levels of dependency arise from disability across the age range, but it is quite likely that a substantial proportion of the total requirement for family care arises in connection with non-elderly. This too should remind us that the situation of older people is not the only influence on the amount of unpaid caring that families are called upon to provide.

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