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Family Support Agency

# Households and Family Structures in Ireland: A Detailed Statistical Analysis of Census 2006

Pete Lunn and Tony Fahey



THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE



# **Households and Family Structures in Ireland:** A Detailed Statistical Analysis of *Census 2006*

**A Report for the Family Support Agency**

*December 2011*

**Pete Lunn**

**Tony Fahey**

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## Table of Contents

<b>FOREWORD</b>	.....	V
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	.....	VII
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	Introduction .....	1
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	Who Partners Whom?.....	9
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	Cohabitation .....	33
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	Children’s Family Circumstances .....	51
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	Fertility .....	77
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	Conclusions.....	99
<b>APPENDIX</b>	The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) And “Tempo Effects” .....	109
<b>REFERENCES</b>	.....	115



## Foreword

As Chief Executive Officer of the Family Support Agency, I am delighted to welcome “Households and Family Structures in Ireland - A Detailed Statistical Analysis of Census 2006” which was funded by the Family Support Agency under its Call For Research Programme. This paper builds on the previous body of work “Family Figures – Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland, 1986 – 2006” and makes a very important contribution to our understanding of the changes that have occurred in Irish demography over recent decades.

Research is a key responsibility for the Family Support Agency in developing its clearly defined role in the area of family services and policy. Knowing the extent and nature of the shifts in household and family structures is vital if we are to cater for the needs of families. In the current environment of uncertainty as to the level of resources available to support parents and children, it is even more crucial that we have accurate and comprehensive information on Irish family life.

Once again, the Central Statistics Office have given the authors of the study collaborative access to full 2006 Census data which has provided exciting new insights into how household and family structures have changed and developed in Ireland in recent decades. The Family Support Agency wishes to acknowledge and thank the Central Statistics Office for extending this privilege to the authors.

Manipulation of the Census microdata has enabled the authors to specifically identify patterns that have evolved over the past quarter century with regard to the rapid growth in cohabitation; the changing family circumstances of children and patterns of fertility. In addition, for the very first time, we are presented with findings that compare the extent to which some couples cross social boundaries with those that form from similar backgrounds.

The Family Support Agency promotes the importance of families and family life for individuals, communities and society generally and we are acutely conscious of the need to facilitate family policy which is evidence led. In this regard, I am confident that the findings and the overarching themes presented by the authors in this study will undoubtedly help to inform deliberation of many aspects of future family policy, as we face in to challenging times ahead.



I would like to thank Pete Lunn and Tony Fahey for their excellent work in producing this study and I look forward to further research study proposals from the ESRI under the Family Research Programme in years to come.

***Pat Bennett***

**Chief Executive Officer, Family Support Agency**

# Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND

This is the second of two reports on the structure of families in Ireland based primarily on a detailed analysis of census data. Both reports uncover new findings on evolving family structures and aim to shed light on the various driving forces behind that evolution. The first report (Lunn, Fahey and Hannan, 2009) was mainly based on an analysis of individual records within *Census 2006*. The present report offers a more complete household-level analysis which permits issues to be examined that were previously beyond quantitative investigation.

The basis of the analysis is a transformation of the 4.4 million individual records from *Census 2006* into a set of just over one million records that contain details on family structure for each enumerated family. Access to the anonymised 2006 Census microdata was granted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) to the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) under a formal agreement, on location and under controlled conditions. Although the findings obviously relate to 2006, many of the results give insights into longer-term changes in family structures that have evolved over decades and will remain relevant for years after the survey was conducted. In this sense, they help to establish a context in which some of the findings of *Census 2011*, especially those relating to family structures and fertility, might be considered.

The report concentrates on four research topics made more accessible by this manipulation of the census microdata: (1) The extent to which partners have similar backgrounds, versus the extent to which couples cross social boundaries; (2) The rapid growth in and consequent role of cohabitation; (3) The family circumstances of children; and (4) Patterns of fertility. Unless otherwise indicated, all findings below relate to 2006.

## GENERAL FINDINGS

The methodology described allows families to be categorised not only according to their current structure but also taking account of the past marital status of the adult(s).

- Approximately one-in-three families in Ireland departs from the traditional model of a married couple both of whom are in their first marriage. One in four

children under 21 years of age lives in a family that does not conform to this model.

- Alternative family structures are dominated by never-married cohabiting couples and lone mothers (both never-married and divorced or separated). Together with first-time marriages, these four family types account for 92 per cent of families.
- Second relationships and step-families, though they exist in diverse forms, remain relatively rare in Ireland.

## WHO PARTNERS WHOM? (CHAPTER 2)

The extent to which people tend to form partnerships with others who are similar to themselves has important potential implications for inequalities between families, maintenance of cultural identities and the crossing of social and cultural divides. We examine who partners whom according to age, educational attainment, occupation, religion, ethnicity and nationality.

- In couples the man is on average 2.3 years older than women, although the gap has narrowed consistently over the past four to five decades. Partnerships are nevertheless considerably more likely to form where the man is older, even if by only a small amount.
- Comparing older and younger couples ranging in mean age from 25 to 70 years, there has been little change in the extent to which couples tend to form among people with similar levels of education and similar occupations.
- Yet there has been a striking and ongoing shift in the gender balance. The woman has higher educational qualifications than the man in 34 per cent of couples of mean age 26-40 years, compared to just 18 per cent where the opposite holds. Even more strikingly, in 42 per cent of these younger couples the woman has the higher occupational classification, versus 28 per cent where the man has.
- Couples that combine different religious affiliations are more prevalent than couples that combine people of different nationalities or ethnicities.
- More than one quarter of young couples, those with a mean age of 30 years or less, contain at least one person of non-white ethnicity or whose nationality is non-Irish and non-UK.

## COHABITATION (CHAPTER 3)

The four-fold increase in cohabitation between 1996 and 2006 is concentrated mainly among couples in their twenties, raising the question of whether cohabitation represents an alternative to marriage or a prelude to it. In general, our

findings suggest that cohabitation is now the norm for young couples without children, but that marriage remains the strongly preferred state once a couple has children.

- For couples with a mean age of less than 45 years, more couples with no children cohabit than are married, while the vast majority who have children are married.
- In one quarter of cohabiting couples at least one partner was previously married. The mean age of such couples is over 40 years, suggesting that it is not only the recent cohort of younger adults that is taking advantage of the acceptability of cohabitation.
- The likelihood of cohabitation is linked to socio-economic status. Controlling for other background characteristics, including the presence of children, a couple in their thirties who both have third-level qualifications are less than half as likely to cohabit as a couple who both have lower second-level qualifications.
- Cohabitation is more likely among couples that combine religious affiliations and much more likely among couples who have no religion.
- The likelihood that a couple gets married increases sharply after the birth of a first child, regardless of whether the couple is fairly young, i.e. in their twenties, or older.

#### **CHILDREN'S FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES (CHAPTER 4)**

In addition to describing family structures from the perspective of couples, it is possible to analyse them from the perspective of children.

- Of the 1.15 million children, 75 per cent live with two married parents, 18 per cent with a lone parent and 6 per cent with cohabiting parents.
- The chance of living with two married parents increases steadily with the age of the child and is much higher where the parents have higher levels of educational attainment.
- We estimate that 2.5 per cent of children live in step-families (i.e. families containing at least one step-child) and 1.3 per cent are step-children. These step-families have a similar socio-economic profile to non-step-families.
- More than half of all step-families consist of a single step-child with one or more younger step-siblings, the oldest of whom is an average of eight years younger.
- International comparisons show that Ireland has a low level of second relationships and remarriage relative to other developed nations, but a relatively high rate of lone parenthood. Both may be connected to the tendency to delay family formation.

## FERTILITY (CHAPTER 5)

The new manipulation of the data allows us to take account not only of how many children each woman has given birth to in her lifetime thus far but also the timing of those births. We are also able to analyse the background characteristics of fathers in couples. The analysis offers new insights into fertility trends, including Ireland's recent baby boom, and the potential impact on the future resident population.

- The number of enumerated resident children who were born between 2003 and 2006 is lower than the number of births in Ireland during these years – a significant change from years prior to 2003, suggesting that families with very young infants switched from net immigrants to net emigrants.
- Despite the sharply growing overall number of births, births to longer-term Irish residents fell in the ten years prior to 2006. This probably reflects a further delay in childbearing among Irish people rather than a desire for fewer children.
- By the year 2000 the historical association between lower educational attainment and higher fertility had changed, such that women with high and low attainment were having fewer children than those in the middle of the educational range.
- The father's level of educational attainment influences the decision to have children almost as much as the mother's, suggesting that delayed childbearing is driven by more than concerns about women's careers.
- Couples who cohabit are less likely to decide to have a first child than couples who are married, especially if they have high educational attainment.
- We include a more technical Appendix to this report that asks whether the true fertility rate in Ireland may have been substantially underestimated over recent decades by the most commonly used official measure – the Total Fertility Rate.

## IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have a broad range of potential policy implications, not least in presenting a more complete quantification of the incidence of different family types, such that policymakers can be informed as to the numbers of families and children likely to be affected by different family policies. In addition, we highlight some implications for specific policy areas.

First, the tendency for couples to consist of partners with similar socio-economic backgrounds – in particular, similar education levels – does not seem to be increasing over time and, therefore, is unlikely to be a significant driver of increased inequality. This problem and potential remedies to it have been emphasised in a number of other countries, but the issue does not appear to be particularly relevant

in Ireland. On the other hand, the educational and occupational composition of couples has changed in some ways over recent decades and this has clearer policy implications. The growing number of younger couples in which the woman has the higher qualifications and/or occupational classification means that for many younger couples it is the woman who has higher earning power. This fundamentally changes the financial consequences of decisions to balance work and family following childbirth, relative to preceding cohorts. Where women reduce their working hours there are likely to be greater financial consequences for individual families and larger economy-wide effects in terms of under-utilised human capital. This, therefore, adds to the weight of evidence suggesting that policymakers should consider ways to increase the flexibility of working arrangements for parents, not only for mothers but also for fathers, so that impacts on careers can be less concentrated on women.

Our results also have implications for the new marriage-like rights and obligations of cohabitants that were created by the Civil Partnership Act 2010. Where a relationship between never-married cohabitants who have been together for five years (two where they have a child) breaks down, parties can apply for redress to the courts, which now have powers to make maintenance orders, pension adjustment orders, property adjustment orders and more. The extent to which the 120,000 (in 2006, probably more by the time the Act came into force) cohabiting couples are aware of their situation under this legislation is a matter that requires serious consideration, because they may enter into a contract with substantial financial consequences by default, without any active decision on their part. The greater likelihood that couples with lower educational attainment cohabit and have children within cohabiting relationships, as recorded in this report, means that there is a socio-economic dimension to who is most likely to be affected by this new legislation. If people discover, after the fact, that they have been unwittingly defaulted into a contract of such consequence they may feel a strong sense of injustice. Furthermore, our research shows that in one quarter of cohabiting couples (30,000 in 2006, now probably more) one or both partners were previously married. The implications of the new law are more complicated for these couples, raising further questions as to whether they are aware of the rights and responsibilities they may acquire by default if the relationship continues, or may have already acquired.

Lastly, our findings also have implications for future research and how it is used. Although the recent baby boom came as a surprise to many, it was arguably at least partly predictable from data contained in *Census 2006*. Hence some of the resulting pressure on hospitals, schools and other public services could perhaps have been avoided had sufficient demographic research been undertaken. Nevertheless, rather than adding clarity to the likely future direction of Irish fertility rates, our findings perhaps increase the degree of uncertainty around the issue, including with respect

to the future development of the resident population. We also raise outstanding research questions with respect to Ireland's relatively high rate of never-married lone parenthood, the management of work-life balance within couples, the impact on migration of the very deep economic recession, and a further range of issues that might be addressed once the data of *Census 2011* become available. Each of these issues has relevance for policy and, therefore, it is likely that investment in more thorough research into Ireland's demography would produce significant returns.

## LIMITATIONS

Although the census remains the most comprehensive quantitative source for studying the structure of families in Ireland, there are nevertheless limitations on what it can tell us. The present report cannot take into account family relationships that exist between different households, such as where one parent has left the home but retains a co-parenting role, or where extended family relationships, step-relationships or half-sibling relationships occur between people living in different residences. There is also the possibility that some less common family types do not get picked up by the census or that people, for whatever reason, do not record the true nature of the relationships within the household when completing the survey. Such effects are extremely difficult to quantify.

# Chapter 1

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## Introduction

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

This is the second of two studies of family patterns in Ireland based primarily on census data. The first examined the evolution of family patterns over the period 1986-2006 and provided a detailed analysis of certain issues based on census data for 2006 alone (Lunn, Fahey and Hannan, 2009). For the latter purpose, the first study made use of a data source which previously had been unavailable to academic researchers – the 2006 Census Research Microdata File (hereafter ‘2006 CRMF’) from *Census 2006*. This file contains the anonymised records on the population of Ireland collected in *Census 2006*, access to which was provided to the ESRI under a formal agreement acting through one of the authors (Lunn). The potential of this large and rich data source for the study of the family is enormous; so much so that it exceeded what could be dealt with in the first report. The present study was prompted by the potential value of exploiting this data source further. Thus, this report consists of a more detailed analysis of family-related data from the 2006 CRMF, with some additional insights provided by international comparisons.

The particular feature of the 2006 CRMF that this report draws on is the potential it offers for household-level rather than individual-level analysis. The 2006 CRMF as compiled by the CSO contains records on individuals and is valuable in the first instance for the detailed analysis of the family circumstances of individuals it makes possible. The first study focused on individual data relating to the non-elderly adult population (which it defined as those aged 15-59 years) and examined in particular two items recorded in the census – people’s partnership status (whether they were single, married, cohabiting, separated, etc.) and, for women only, the number of live births they had. On this basis, the first report provided a detailed account of topics such as singlehood and couple formation, marital breakdown, fertility and lone parenthood.

The 2006 CRMF data on individuals contain household identifiers that enable those who live in the same household to be linked together. Subject to the aggregation of the individual data into a household-level file, this feature makes it possible to analyse households and relationships between household members as well as individuals. For example, in analysing partnership, it is possible not just to examine



the partnership status of each adult and how that varies by factors such as age, educational level, occupation or religion but also to look at both partners in a couple together, see how they match up by age, educational level and so on, and to examine how some of features associated with them (such as the number of children in their household) are linked to their joint characteristics. It is also possible to examine children in the context of the households they live in and thus obtain a better picture of their family circumstances.

It should be said that while these features make the 2006 CRMF a rich resource for the study of the family, it nevertheless has a number of limitations. Many of these limitations are outlined in the course of this report as we deal with the specific topics most affected by them. However, one general limitation worth highlighting here is the focus of the data on households (people who live together in the same dwelling) rather than on families (people who are related to each other by blood or partnership). In many instances, core family units such as parents and their children live together, the household and the family coincide, and the 2006 CRMF provides a good picture of the structure of the family. But core family units sometimes spread across more than one household. For example, a child's father and mother may live in different households and if a non-resident parent has further children, the child may acquire half-siblings in a different household. Furthermore, as children grow up they themselves typically leave home and form households of their own, even though their primary family orientation may continue to lie with their parents and siblings. Because the census adheres strictly to the household as the basis for grouping people together, it is informative only on co-residing families and provides no information on cross-household family structures – an understandable limitation since investigation of the latter topic would require specialised data collection on kin networks. In any event, while the co-residing family is itself a worthwhile and complex subject for study, it is as well to keep in mind that there are cross-household aspects to family structure that 2006 CRMF data are silent on and are not dealt with in this report.

## 1.2 RESEARCH TOPICS

As the purpose of this study is to exploit a data source, the topics it deals with are heavily influenced by what those data can best illuminate. At the same time, the study sought to focus on topics that had considerable substantive interest for social policy and to wider society. On the basis of this mix of data suitability and substantive interest, this study picked out four topics to deal with. This section briefly presents our rationale. Note that we do not attempt a geographic analysis of variation across regions within Ireland, for insight into which readers are referred to the earlier report (Lunn et al., 2009).

## Who Partners Whom? (Chapter 2)

A substantial international literature has grown up on the general tendency in couple formation for people to partner with those who are broadly similar to themselves – what demographers call ‘homogamy’ (like partnering like) or ‘assortative mating’. This tendency can be expressed in a number of different ways, some of which can have important social consequences. For example, a particular concern has emerged in recent years with trends in educational homogamy. With the expansion of education, the growing influence of education on careers and earnings, and the entry of married women into paid employment, some researchers have argued that household-level pooling of educational resources through educational homogamy has become a substantial driver of widening inequalities in household incomes and other social resources, though it must be said that others disagree with this view. The social sciences have also long been interested in situations where homogamy gives rise to endogamy, that is, where similarity between partners is defined in religious or ethnic terms and causes partnerships to be confined largely within the boundaries of particular social groups. Endogamy can enhance social solidarity in the groups within which it occurs, but by discouraging inter-marriage across group boundaries (exogamy) in societies that are divided along cultural or ethnic lines, it can intensify social divides and weaken broader social integration.

The lack of suitable data has meant that the analysis of questions such as these has been limited in Ireland and it is here that the aggregated 2006 CRMF provides valuable new information. The data have limited capacity to illuminate the *effects* of homogamy and endogamy since they include no measures of some key outcomes of interest (e.g. household incomes or social solidarity). However, they make it possible to track the *extent* of these features of Irish partnership patterns and in addition, by examining differences between age-groups, enable us to simulate a picture of trends in homogamy over time. Chapter 2 focuses especially on homogamy by age, education and social class and endogamy within religious, ethnic and national groups.

## Cohabitation (Chapter 3)

Rapid growth in non-marital unions has been a notable development in family patterns in Ireland since the mid-1990s. However, there are many questions about the status of these relationships – whether, for example, they are a transient state that precedes marriage or a long-term alternative to marriage. The individual-level analysis in Lunn *et al.* (2009) went some way to answering these questions but was limited by its inability to look beyond cohabitants as individuals and to examine information on other individuals in the family. Thus, for example, it was not possible to establish whether both partners were single or whether one or both were separated, divorced or widowed, whether they had children together nor what ages

any children they might have were, thus making it difficult to establish their family cycle stage. Once aggregated to the household level, the 2006 CRMF data make it possible to explore these issues in considerable detail and thus to throw further light on the nature of cohabitation in Ireland.

#### **Family Circumstances of Children (Chapter 4)**

The detailed recording of family relationships in *Census 2006* provides the basis for a more precise description of children's family circumstances than has previously been possible. Previous analyses have been able to distinguish between children living in two-parent and lone-parent families, but they have had no information on important variants of the two-parent family, particularly as between original intact families and various kinds of step-families (Punch, 2007, is an exception). This is a significant gap in light of the possibility that a rise in second-family formation following the break-up of first families may now be a feature of family patterns in Ireland and may be leading to considerable diversity in what the two-parent family entails. The 2006 CRMF provides new information on this topic and enables a more refined typology of families to be created. Chapter 4, examines how children are distributed across this typology of families and also how the distribution varies according to the age and educational level of parents.

#### **Fertility (Chapter 5)**

Previous analysis of fertility based on census data has focused on a question asked of all adult women as to the number of live births they have had. While the data on this item are highly informative, they do not record the timing of births and provide no information on fathers. They, therefore, yield only a limited basis for investigating the dynamics of family building. It is in this context that a second source on fertility available from the census micro-data comes into play and adds further useful information: the data on children resident in the household who are coded as offspring of adults in the household and also, importantly, for whom age is recorded. In households with children up to the age of ten years, there is a close match between the number of births women say they have had and the number of children who live in the household (a small gap between the two reflects the effects of child mortality and the small incidence of children who move to institutions or to other private households). Where the father is co-resident in the household, these children can also be linked to him and thus yield insights on his fertility. In households with children older than ten years, the match between the number of births reported by the mother and the number of children living in the household weakens, indicating a growing proportion of children who live away from their parents' household. From that stage in the family cycle on, this item becomes less reliable as a measure of fertility.

For young families, therefore, the data on co-resident children provide a useful additional source on fertility patterns. Here we focus on two uses of these data. One concerns the migration effect on fertility and the child population as evidenced both by the contribution to overall fertility of childbearing among non-nationals and by the significance of migration *after* childbearing, which blunts the effect of changing fertility on the number of resident young children in the country. This analysis of the migration effect provides a new perspective on the demographic significance of the baby boom that has occurred in Ireland since the mid-1990s. The second topic is an analysis of the relationship between parents' characteristics and fertility. In order to analyse these issues, we construct models of fertility among couples, which take into account the characteristics of all household members, including the background characteristics of fathers and whether the couple are married.

### 1.3. AGGREGATING THE DATA

The 2006 CRMF contains over 4.4 million individual records relating to each person (present or absent) enumerated by *Census 2006*. The records are organised by county, within that by enumeration area and within that by a 4-digit person code. The coding structure allows persons to be aggregated up to form household level data in a relatively straightforward way. The more complex task is to determine the relationships within the household, which requires simultaneous consideration for each member of the household of the age, marital status and stated relationships to other members. (A flavour of this task is provided by Box 4.1 in Chapter 4, which gives more detail with respect to the identification of step-families, and explains our concern that the method may have somewhat under-recorded the true incidence of step-families.) The process throws up difficult and ambiguous cases, where key responses from some individuals are missing or where two members of the household provide contradictory information (e.g. there are more than 1,000 cases where the responses of one member of a couple state that they are married, while the other member's responses suggest otherwise). The CSO has itself developed a detailed and comprehensive methodology for determining family structures for the production of its census volumes, and for classifying ambiguous cases and incomplete census forms. We have followed this methodology relatively closely, but departed from it where necessary. In particular, where our interest is in using multivariate analysis to estimate the strength of associations between certain family structures and background characteristics, we have simply excluded ambiguous cases which might cause associations of interest to be obscured.

Once the data have been aggregated to the household level, they consist of records for each of 1,469,521 private households that include Irish residents, i.e. discounting visitors and not including people living in institutions. The resulting numbers match

the figures produced in Table 12 of the Principal Demographic Results of *Census 2006*.

#### 1.4. THE STUDY POPULATION

The definition of the family used in this study is adapted from that used by the CSO in the census. The CSO codes families according to the UN definition whereby a family consists of either (a) a married or cohabiting couple, (b) a married or cohabiting couple together with one or more never-married children of any age who live with them, and (c) a lone parent living with one or more never-married children of any age. Not all households contain families (single person households, house-sharing households, households such as sibling households that contain relatives other than parents and children or spouses. Some households contain more than one family (in three-generation households with parents, an adult daughter and her child, for example, two families are identified). For the purposes of this report, we narrowed the UN definition in certain ways. Most importantly, when talking of families with children, primarily in Chapter 4, our focus is on families with dependent children, which we have defined to mean those who are aged under 21 and who live with one or both parents.<sup>1</sup> Note also that although same-sex couples fall within the definition of the family just outlined, they are not part of the present analysis. Lunn et al. (2009) contains a section of analysis on the 2,090 same-sex couples enumerated in *Census 2006*, but the expansion of that analysis to the household level is not of great value, owing to the small population and the very small number of same-sex couples with children within this enumerated group.

Once households that do not match the definition of the family (single-person households, house-shares and households containing more distant relatives) are removed from the household-level data, the primary study population consists of 1,032,501 households containing 1,053,180 families, of which 863,940 centre on an opposite-sex couple, either married or cohabiting. Table 1.1 presents an initial breakdown of these families into a thirteen-way typology intended to act as a useful reference point for much of the rest of this report. The typology is constructed using a combination of current family structure, as deduced from the census form in the manner described above, and the answers to the marital status question provided by the adult(s) in the family. Separate figures are given for families with children.

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<sup>1</sup> The exclusion of children over age 20 from the definition and the fact that children who have grown up and left home are not accounted for, mean that in some cases the oldest child in the household may not be the oldest child of the couple. This could potentially make some of our findings prey to biases, for example when we consider family type by the age of the oldest child, or age gaps between children by birth order, etc. However, a comparison of the number of children within the home with the response to the question asking women how many children they have given birth to (alive) suggests that any such bias is negligible for households where the oldest child is aged below 10 years and remains small up to age 16 years. We have limited our analysis accordingly.

Table 1.1: A Typology of Family Structures Enumerated in *Census 2006*

	All families		Families with children	
	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Married, both in 1<sup>st</sup> marriage</b>	711,844	67.6	498,828	66.5
<b>Married, husband previously married</b>	13,472	1.3	8,219	1.1
<b>Married, wife previously married</b>	9,379	0.9	6,011	0.8
<b>Married, both previously married</b>	6,378	0.6	2,680	0.4
<b>Cohabit, both never married</b>	93,510	8.9	29,919	4.0
<b>Cohabit, male previously married</b>	11,024	1.0	5,063	0.7
<b>Cohabit, female previously married</b>	7,021	0.7	3,940	0.5
<b>Cohabit, both previously married</b>	10,208	1.0	5,060	0.7
<b>Lone mother, never married</b>	70,690	6.7	70,690	9.4
<b>Lone mother, previously married</b>	91,861	8.7	91,861	12.3
<b>Lone father, never married</b>	6,112	0.6	6,112	0.8
<b>Lone father, previously married</b>	20,577	2.0	20,577	2.7
<b>Unclear couple</b>	1,104	0.1	666	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,053,180</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>749,626</b>	<b>100</b>

Notes: “previously married” covers divorced, separated and widowed. Unclear couples relate to those where the responses on the census form were in some way contradictory or internally inconsistent.

A number of points are immediately apparent from this breakdown. First, approximately one-in-three families does not conform to the traditional model of a married couple both of whom are in their first marriage. The proportion is similar if the analysis is limited to families with children. In fact, the figures in Table 1.1 probably underestimate the extent of departure from the traditional model, because among the top category of married couples in their first marriage are more than 5,500 families containing step-children, an unknown number of couples who cohabited prior to marriage, and a not insignificant number of cases where individuals who had been previously married did not record this fact on the census form. This latter effect is known to be significant because of the implausible disparity between the number of women who stated that they had previously been married and the number of men who did so – some men are apparently averse to describing themselves on the census form as remarried, as distinct to simply married (see Lunn *et al.*, 2009, p. 48).

Two essential qualifications are necessary to the one-in-three figure just derived, however. First, because Table 1.1 includes children regardless of age and also

because families with greater numbers of children are more inclined to conform to the traditional model, only one-in-four children under 21 years of age lives in a family arrangement other than with two parents in their first marriage (see Chapter 4). Second, while the thirteen-way typology above (which can be further split into families with and without step-children) is indicative of the diversity of family types that occur in Ireland, it is noticeable that many of the less common structures are really not very common at all. Indeed, 92 per cent of all families (both with and without children) fall into one of the four dominant categories: first-time marriages, never married cohabiting couples, never-married lone mothers and previously married lone mothers. Thus, while there is diversity in family structures, there remain a small number of dominant forms that account for the large majority of families in Ireland.

# Chapter 2

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## Who Partners Whom?

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Patterns of who partners whom are important aspects of family life: they have effects on the stability of couple relationships, the extent of social inequalities between families, the making of social bonds within and between groups, the preservation of cultural identities, and the passing of genetic features across generations. ‘Thirty acres doesn’t marry fifteen’ is an old saying from rural Ireland which reflects the tradition of marriage matching among farm families, as classically recounted by Arensberg and Kimball in the 1930s (Arensberg and Kimball, 2001). Today, the ‘match’ is no longer hammered out as a bargain between families as it was in the past. Yet what social scientists call ‘assortative mating’ still occurs in a patterned way, with respect to cohabitation as well as marriage. ‘Like’ still partners with ‘like’ – not always but often enough for it to be recognised as a continuing fundamental principle of family behaviour (for reviews, see Blossfeld, 2009; Kalmijn, 1998).

However, what is counted as ‘like’ in this context varies across time and place, and this variation is a worthwhile topic of investigation. In the past in Ireland, land mattered more for marriage matching than it does today and age mattered less – as we shall see below, wide age-gaps between spouses were fairly common, in that somewhat older men often married younger women. Today, most, though not all, partner selection takes place within quite narrow age bands. This is usually taken to reflect the modern emphasis on mutual attraction and companionship as bases for partnership, though why males are still on average slightly older than their female partners is a little commented on but intriguing aspect of gender relations (for a perspective on this, see Hakim, 2010).

Education – ‘human capital’ – has taken over from land and other forms of material capital as a shaper of life-chances. It is hardly surprising, then, that it also plays a larger role in matching of partners. Some international researchers think that a growing tendency for the well-educated and the poorly educated to select partners of a similar education level to themselves – an increase in ‘educational homogamy’ – is leading to wider gaps in human capital between families and thereby is a cause of widening social inequalities more generally, especially in regard to differences in



household incomes and success in the job market (Esping-Andersen, 2009, pp.59-61; McCall and Percheski, 2010, pp.336-7). There are several elements to this argument, each of which can be evaluated separately. One is that, over time, women's educational levels have caught up with men's, so that now there is a more even numerical balance between the sexes at each educational level. That in turn is said to facilitate new levels of educational matching in partnership. The pooling of income-earning potential that such matching entails can then plausibly be seen as a contributor to widening income inequalities. The logic here is that the gap between the combined incomes of two highly educated spouses versus two poorly educated spouses is likely to be greater than that between the incomes of the male partners on their own. It must be said that, while this logic has a ring of plausibility, detailed empirical tests have not consistently supported it. Firstly, while there is general agreement that educational homogamy has increased in many developed societies in recent decades (Schwartz and Mare, 2005), it is less clear that this trend can be generalised to countries with later developing education systems (Blossfeld, 2009, p.516; Smits, 2003; Smits and Park, 2009). Secondly, where educational homogamy has increased, its effect on income inequality is disputed: some studies find that its impact is significant (Karoly and Burtless, 1995; Schwartz, 2010; Reed and Cancian, 2009), while others find that this impact is absent or at most small (Breen and Salazar, 2009, 2010; Western *et al.*, 2008). These divergent findings may be accounted for by differences in methodology, time periods covered and countries examined and it remains to be seen whether a robust overarching understanding of the patterns and processes involved can be arrived at.

When it comes to patterns of marriage within and outside other social groups (endogamy and exogamy), the main traditional concern in Ireland was with the Catholic-Protestant divide. In Northern Ireland today, religious endogamy is still quite strong: reluctance to marry a partner from the 'other' ethno-religious community is still a feature of the cleavage of collective identities found in the North (Mitchell, 2006, pp.61-2). In the Republic, where Protestants are a small minority, the core issue in the early decades of the state's existence was inter-marriage between Protestants and Catholics and the impact that the consequent loss of children to the Protestant faith had on Protestant population size (O'Leary, 1999; Sexton and O'Leary, 1996). In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church relaxed its formerly stringent rules on the rearing of children of religiously mixed couples. The demographic effect of such marriages on Protestantism in Ireland reduced thereafter (O'Leary, 1999, p.131). However, inter-marriage continued to be a concern for all minority religions in this country, since irrespective of formal religious rules marriage within the faith is more likely to lead to retention and transmission of religious belief than is inter-marriage (Sexton and O'Leary, 1996). Against the background of the surge in migration into Ireland which occurred in the early years of the present century, new questions now arise about

the role of endogamy and exogamy as factors in the integration of immigrants into Irish society. This has been recognised as an important issue in countries that have a long history of migration (Meng and Gregory, 2005). The CSO has published considerable information on the non-national population in Ireland based on *Census 2006* (CSO, 2008), but as yet there has been no systematic investigation of partnership patterns as an aspect of immigrant integration in Ireland (Fanning, 2011; Hughes *et al.*, 2008).

## 2.2 AIMS OF THE PRESENT ANALYSIS

This chapter provides a brief outline of current patterns in these areas using the aggregated household data from the 2006 CRMF. It examines endogamy and exogamy by age, educational attainment, socio-economic group, religion, nationality and ethnicity. Each of these topics could form a chapter in its own right, as the issues involved are complex and the data available from the source we use are rich enough to throw light on some of these complexities. However, the limited scope of the present report causes us to confine our attention to major patterns highlighted by the data.

The analysis focuses on both married and cohabiting couples and thus does not investigate whether patterns of homogamy differ between these two types of partnership (of the couples counted in *Census 2006* and included in the analysis in this chapter, 13.5 per cent were cohabiting). As with the other topics investigated using the 2006 CRMF, the information from this source used here has strengths and limitations. The main strengths are its complete coverage of the population and the fine breakdowns allowed for by the large numbers of households it encompasses. One limitation is that the data relate only to a single year (2006) and so provide no direct information on trends over time. Below we provide age breakdowns of most of the topics we examine and these offer a proxy for time-trends to a certain degree, but full historical data (which for the most part are not available) would be needed to provide a proper account of change over time. Another limitation arises from the focus of the data on those occupying the same household on census night, which makes it impossible to link separated partners with each other and assess whether marriages between couples who are equally matched on age, education or other social characteristics are more likely to survive.

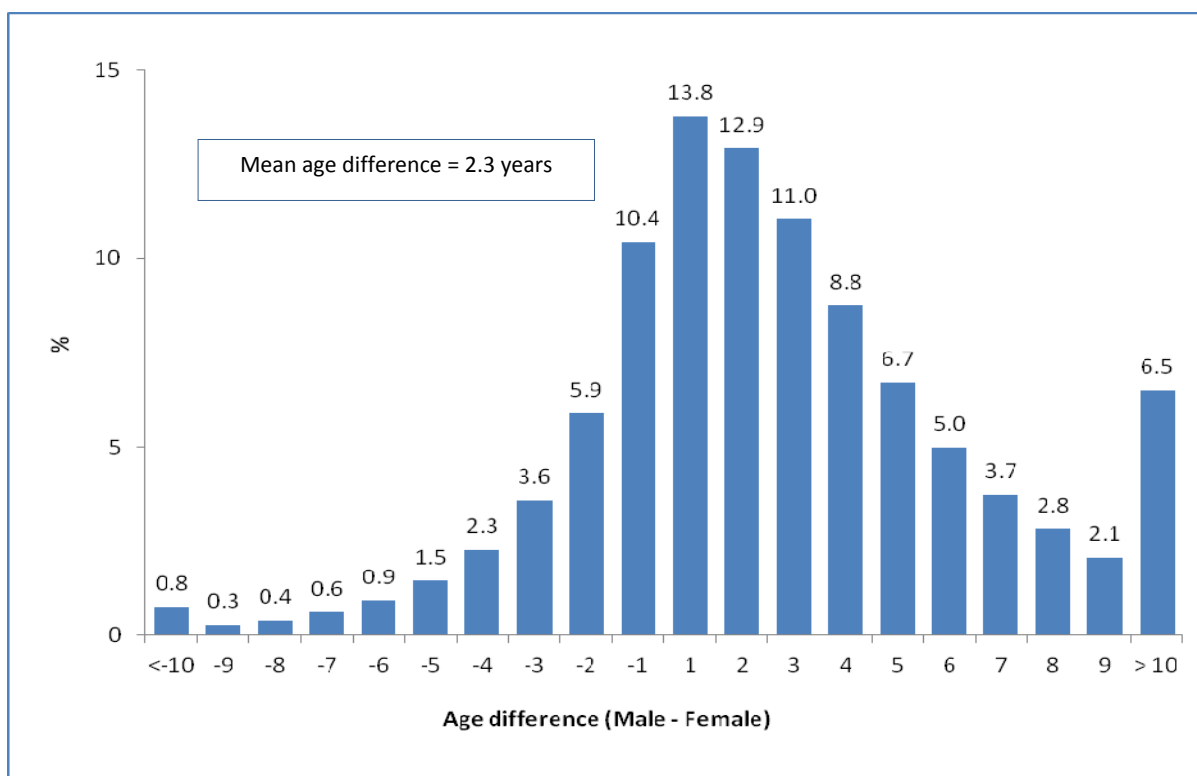
## 2.3 AGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUPLES

As already mentioned, marriage in Ireland has evolved over time towards a pattern of closer matching of partners by age. Marriages between older men and younger women were reasonably common until the mid-twentieth century but subsequently became more unusual. In 1946, for example, data on the ages of brides and grooms

drawn from marriage registrations showed that 22 per cent of grooms were at least 10 years older than their brides. By 1969 this proportion had fallen to 7 per cent (a decline of two-thirds) and it fell a little further to 4 per cent by 1979 (Clancy, 1984, p.13). Similar data for 2007 showed that 7 per cent of grooms were at least 10 years older than their brides, a small rise since 1979 but only a third of the level of the 1940s. It is notable that age differences in the opposite direction, that is, where the bride is older than the groom, were more or less as rare in the past as they are today. In 1946, only 0.8 per cent of brides were at least 10 years older than their grooms (Clancy, 1984, p.13), which is similar to the 0.9 per cent of brides who were in the same position in 2007, according to CSO figures.

Drawing on the census data for heterosexual couples (married and cohabiting) in 2006, which are our main concern here, the distribution of age differences is shown in Figure 2.1. On average, men are 2.3 years older than their partners, but there is considerable variation around this average. Almost a quarter of couples could be counted as having the same ages, if by 'same' we mean that the age difference is no greater than one year (the man is up to one year older than the woman in 13.8 per cent of cases and the woman one year older than the man in 10.4 per cent of cases). In almost 27 per cent of cases, the man is at least five years older than his partner, while at the other end of the spectrum 4.5 per cent of men are at least five years younger than their partners. An age-superiority of five or more years in favour of the man is thus six times more common than a similar age-superiority in favour of the

**Figure 2.1: Distribution of age differences between men and women in couples, 2006**

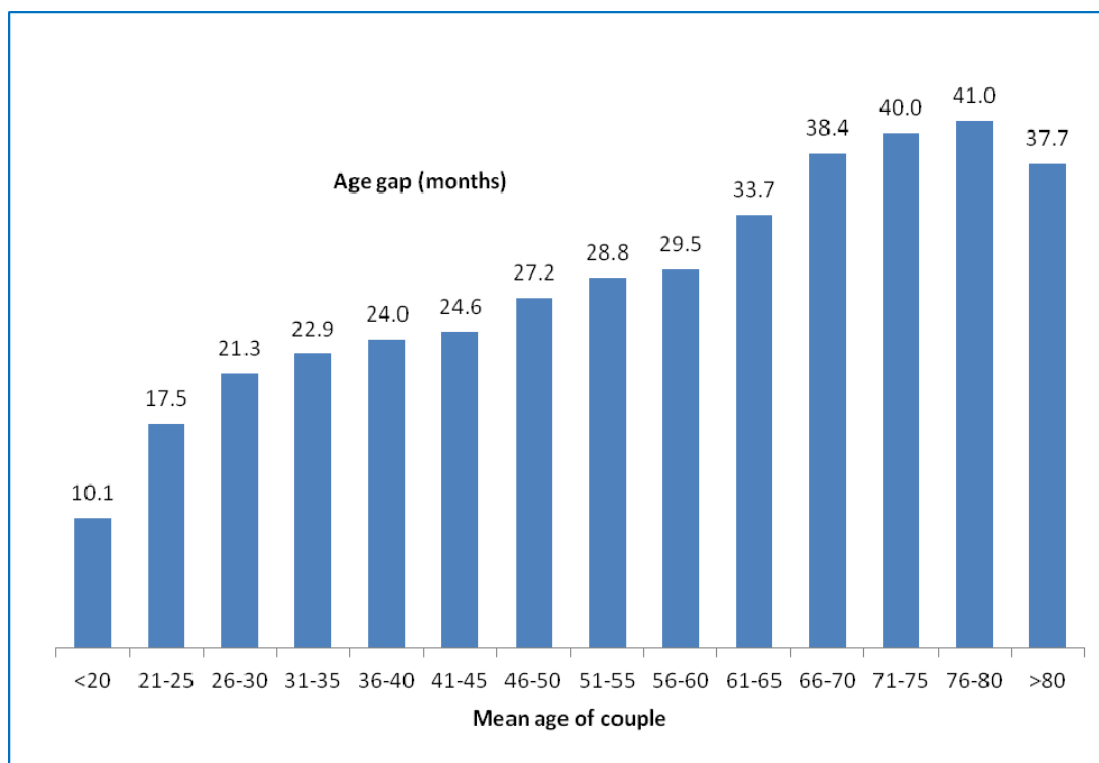


woman. A small proportion of men (6.5 per cent) are at least 10 years older than their partners, but the reverse, where men are least 10 years younger than their partners occurs among only 0.8 per cent of couples.

Figure 2.1 also reveals that the distribution of age differences has strong asymmetry. That is, rather than being symmetrical and smooth, centred around the mean age difference, the distribution undergoes an abrupt change of shape at the point where the woman becomes older. (Compare the steepness and curvature of the distribution for negative numbers in Figure 2.1 with the steadier decline for positive numbers). This asymmetry implies that at least some different factors influence the likelihood of a couple forming if the woman is older than the man. For instance, it is consistent with the existence of a marked resistance to the woman being the older partner – although other explanations are possible.

One factor accounting for differences in age gaps between couples is age itself: older couples have wider age gaps on average than younger couples. As Figure 2.2 shows, the mean age gap between male and female partners for couples aged in their sixties is in the range 33 to 38 months, that is, around three years, and it is wider again, at around 40 months for couples in their seventies. For couples aged in their forties, by contrast, the age gap is 24 to 27 months, a year or so less than that of couples in their sixties. The mean age gap falls steadily, suggesting a trend that has

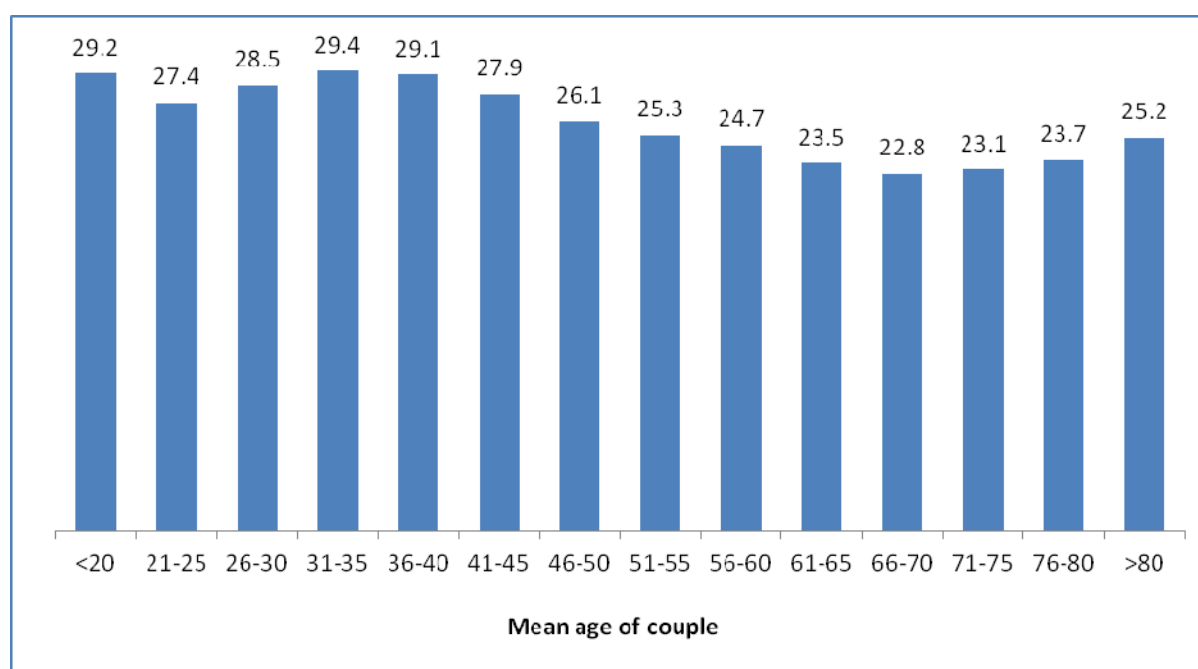
Figure 2.2: Age gap (male-female) by age-cohort of couple, 2006



been ongoing for some time, and is narrower still (at 10 months) among teenage couples.<sup>2</sup>

Differences across age-cohorts in the age gap between partners arises partly from the changing size of the minority of couples where the woman is older. Figure 2.3 shows that that minority is somewhat greater among young couples than among older couples – roughly speaking cases where women are older than their partners are in the high 20 per cents among couples aged in their twenties, thirties and early forties, while they are in the low 20 per cents among couples in their sixties. The higher incidence of age-superiority of women among younger couples goes some way to counter-balancing the usual age-superiority of men and thereby makes a statistical contribution to the narrowing of the age gap among younger couples. However, the higher incidence of age-superiority of women found among younger couples, though real, is still relatively slight. It could be considered remarkable that given the dramatic shift in gender relations since the 1960s, women in their twenties and thirties today are only marginally more likely to partner with men younger than themselves than were their mothers or grandmothers in previous generations.

**Figure 2.3: Percentages of couples where woman is older than man, by age-cohort of couple**



<sup>2</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that the latter data are affected by the presentational device we have adopted here by which couples are placed in age-bands according to the mean of their combined age. This has the statistical effect that teenage couples must have narrow age differences – for example, in that an 18 year-old must have a partner aged 20 years or less for their combined mean age to be less than 20 years.)

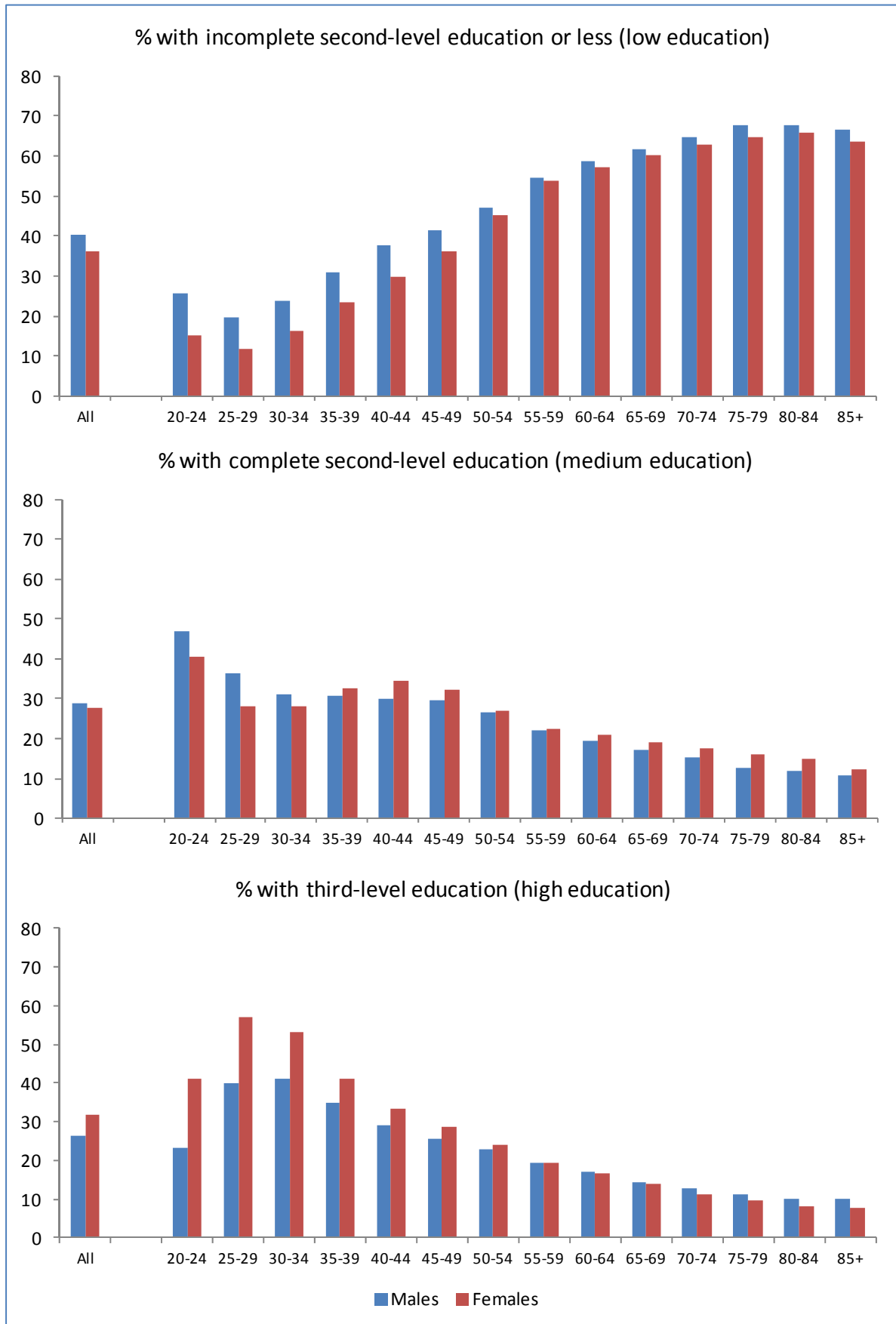
## 2.4 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

As mentioned earlier, the role of education in marriage matching in western countries has attracted considerable interest in recent research because of its possible contribution to a widening of economic inequalities, yet the empirical evidence on this question is mixed. The Irish case adds a further element of uncertainty to this international picture because of the unusual history of gender differences in levels of education in this country.

The standard international pattern is that inequalities in education between men and women reflected gender inequalities more generally – gaps in favour of men were high in the past but have reduced over time and in many countries have been transformed into gaps favouring women (Müller and Kogan, 2010, pp.259-62, Dorius and Firebaugh, 2010, pp.1951-3). Ireland is distinctive, however, in that the gender gap in education in the past has either been narrow or has favoured women, depending on the precise educational level being examined, and has had to undergo less change over time to arrive at the common present-day position where women have an educational advantage over men. In the age-comparisons for European countries presented by Müller and Kogan, for example, Ireland and Sweden were the only two countries where, at older ages (people who would have been in school in the late 1950s and 1960s), there were fewer poorly educated women than men. Women in these age cohorts in all countries had lower participation in tertiary education than men, but in Ireland the female disadvantage in this area was smaller than in most other countries (Müller and Kogan, 2010, p.260). In younger age-groups, according to the same data, Irish gender differentials in education are less exceptional than elsewhere – a distinct female advantage in education is evident among women aged in their 20s but the extent of this advantage in Ireland is about mid-range by comparison with the rest of Europe (Müller and Kogan, 2010, p.260).

Figure 2.4 presents detailed gender and age breakdowns of educational levels among adults in Ireland in 2006 in order to set this context out more fully. The data, which are drawn from *Census 2006*, confirm the unusual gender differentials at older ages just mentioned: older women have a slight educational advantage over men up to the end of secondary schooling but among the small minority in these age-groups with tertiary education, women are slightly in the minority. Among younger age-groups, education gaps consistently favour women and do so by a considerable margin: among 25-29 year-olds, for example, 57 per cent of women have third-level education compared to 40 per cent of men, while only 15 per cent of females have lower secondary education compared to 26 per cent of men. The significance of these patterns for present purposes is that the female catch-up in education, which in other countries is considered likely to have increased the incidence of educational homogamy, did not occur in the same way in Ireland: near equality in education was

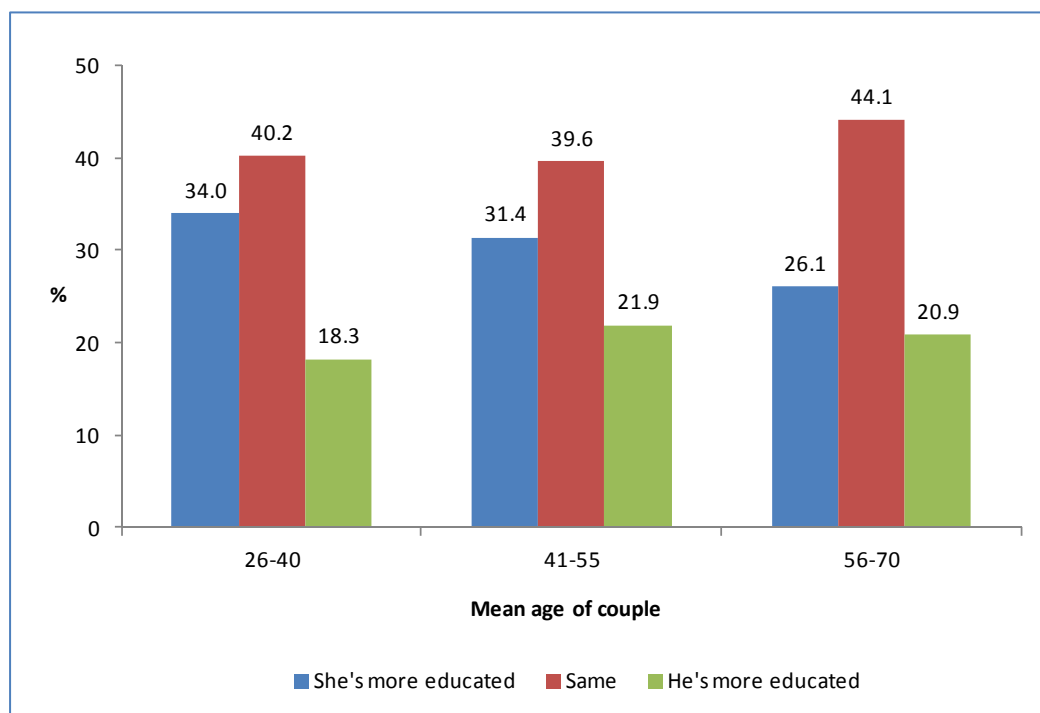
Figure 2.4: Educational profile of males and females by age, 2006



already present in the middle of the twentieth century and the shift that has occurred since then has been towards gender inequality in education in favour of women. We might therefore expect balanced educational matching in couples (i.e. where both partners have the same educational level) to have become somewhat less common over time in Ireland and growing numbers of couples to consist of better educated women partnering less educated men.

Figure 2.5 confirms that this is indeed the case. It shows the broad pattern of educational matching among couples in older, middle-aged and younger age-cohorts. (Note that percentages in this graph do not sum to 100 because couples where at least one partner was a student or for whom information on education was missing are not included.) The data contain no consistent trend across these three age-cohorts in the proportion of couples where partners have the same educational levels: this proportion is 44 per cent among older couples, it drops to 40 per cent among the middle-aged and remains at 40 per cent among the younger couples. This is an almost stable distribution across age-cohorts, but it also indicates that educational homogamy occurs among less than half of couples in all three age-cohorts.<sup>3</sup> Differences between age-cohorts becomes evident when we look at

**Figure 2.5: Changing educational imbalances within couples**



<sup>3</sup> Of course, the extent of homogamy (the proportion of couples in the same educational attainment category) would be reduced by measuring attainment with more than three categories, for instance if individuals with a third-level qualification were split by diploma versus degree, or those with low attainment were separated into those with Junior Certificate and those without. The focus here is on the shift towards the woman having higher attainment. Our analysis found that this trend does not change if the analysis is conducted using more categories and so three categories are reported here for simplicity and clarity.



couples with mismatching education: as we go from the older to the younger age-cohorts, cases where the woman has the higher education become more common and cases where the man has the higher education decline. Thus, for example, among older couples, women have the higher education in 26 per cent of cases while men have the higher education in 21 per cent of cases – an almost even spread between the two types of educational mismatch. Among younger couples, by contrast, women have the higher education in 34 per cent of cases while men have the higher education in only 18 per cent of cases, an imbalance where educational mismatch favouring women has become almost twice as common as educational mismatch favouring men.

Figure 2.6: Educational attainment of couples by gender and mean age of couple

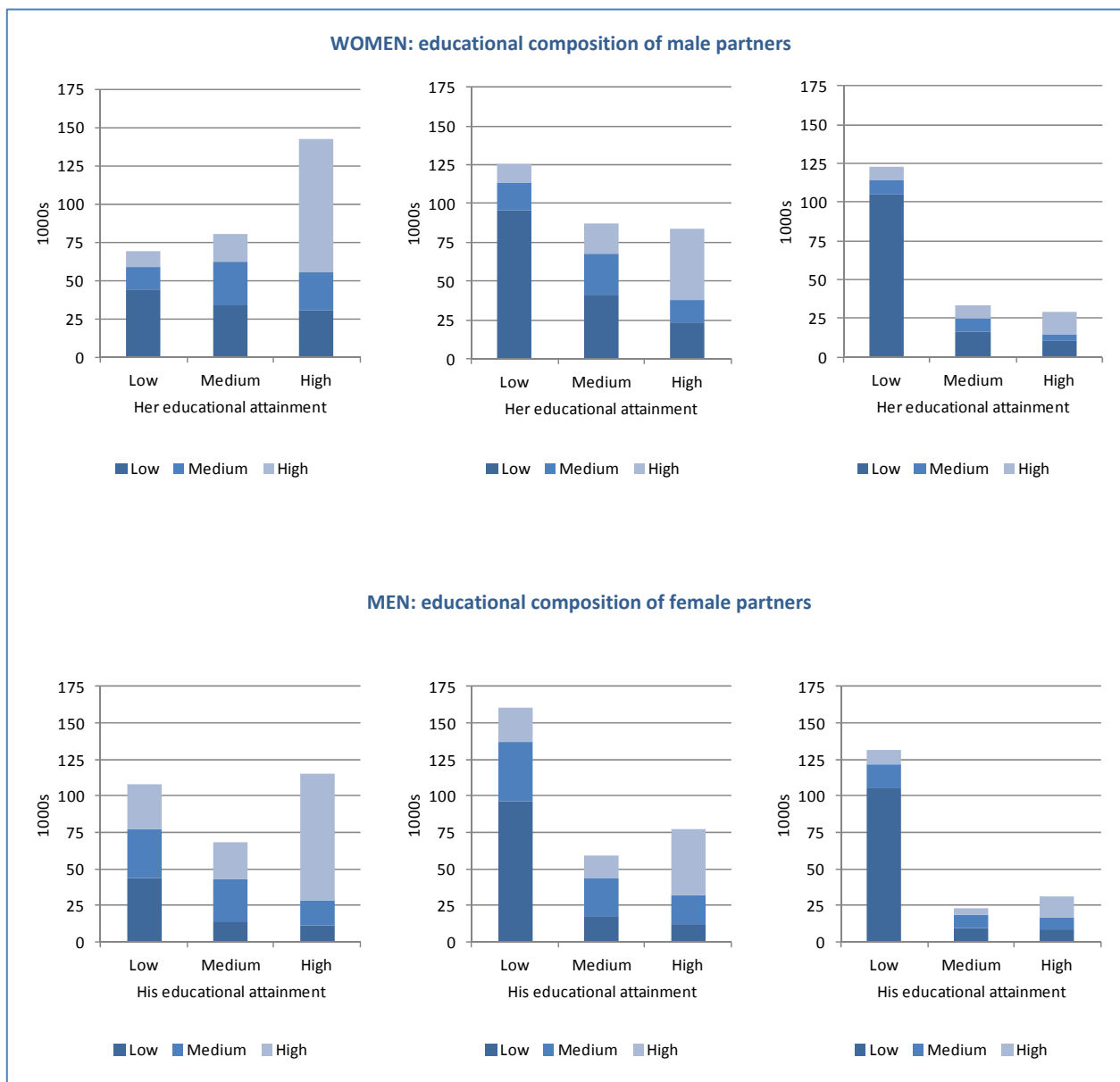


Figure 2.6 expands on the detail of these patterns by presenting absolute numbers of couples in the various educational combinations which can be found in the three age-cohorts just looked at. The three graphs in the top panel take women in each age-cohort as the reference point, group them into high, medium and low education categories and show the educational distribution of the male partners in each group. The three graphs in the bottom panel do the reverse with men taken as the reference and showing the educational distribution of female partners for each group.

The rich and detailed story told in this graph is best illustrated if we focus attention for the moment on the youngest age-cohort of women, those represented in the left-hand graph in the top panel. Looking first within this graph at the low, medium and high education categories, we can see the quite mixed educational distributions of their male partners – in each instance, substantial minorities of male partners are from a non-matching educational category. It is notable especially that highly educated women, who at 141,920 are by far the largest educational category in this age-cohort of women, have a substantial minority of male partners with low education (30,226) and a further minority with medium education (25,467). Thus, adding these two categories together, we get 55,693 or 39 per cent of these 141,920 women who partner downwards in educational terms.

A major reason for this pattern becomes evident when we look at the corresponding age-cohort of men shown in the left-hand graph in the bottom panel. The number of men in this age-cohort who have high attainment is considerably smaller (at 115,000) than it is for the corresponding age-cohort of women – for every 100 highly educated women in this age-cohort there are only 81 highly educated men, or, to express the ratio the other way around, for every 100 highly educated men, there are 123 highly educated women. Thus, in this age-cohort, highly educated men have a large pool of highly educated women from which to find partners, while for women the pool of highly educated men is relatively small. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the proportion of highly educated men who partner downwards in educational terms is considerably smaller (at 25 per cent) than the 39 per cent of highly educated women who do so. Gender differences in levels of educational attainment in this age-cohort thus create different-sized pools of available partners for each gender and result in different rates of upward and downward partnering between men and women.

If we switch our attention to the oldest age-cohort covered in Figure 2.6 – those aged 56-70 years – we can better appreciate the transition that has taken place across time. In this age-cohort, gender differences in levels of educational attainment are relatively slight, with the majority of both women and men having

low attainment. As a result, educational homogamy between the large pools of less-educated women and men is the norm – only 15 per cent of low-educated women and 21 per cent of low-educated men partner outside that category. Among the relatively small groups with medium or high education, by contrast, partnering outside those small pools is more common. Half of both women and men with high attainment partner outside their educational group, while the proportions of those with medium attainment who partner outside the group are even higher.

In sum, therefore, we can conclude that while rising educational homogamy may be a feature of partnering patterns in other countries, it is not present in Ireland. Rather, women’s growing educational advantage over men in this country means that there is an increasing share of couples in which the woman has higher educational attainment than the man.

## 2.5 SOCIAL CLASS

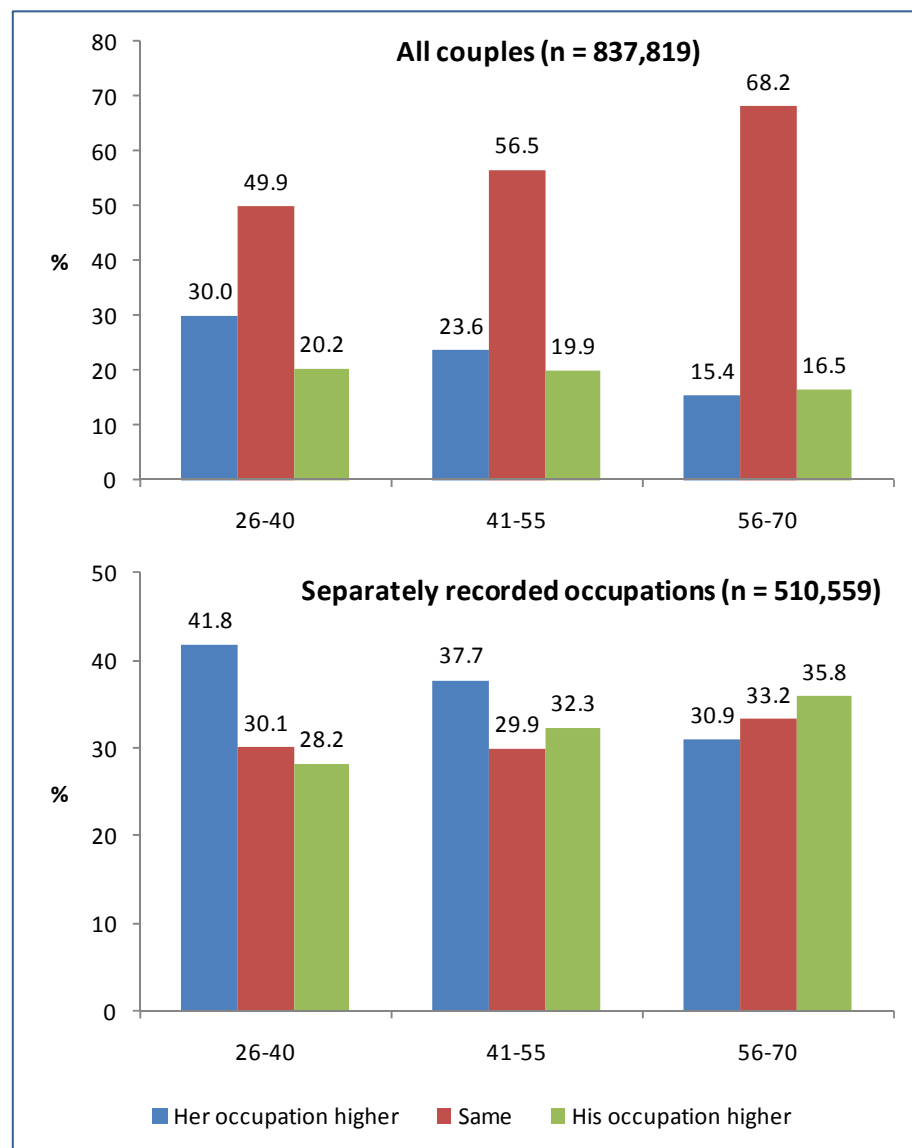
Matching of partners by social class<sup>4</sup> can in principle have similar significance to matching by educational level since both relate to potential pooling of important socio-economic resources. In practice, however, there are limitations when using census data to examine matching by social class as defined by occupation, which is recorded in the census only for those who are currently at work or who are either unemployed or retired (in the latter cases, previous occupation is recorded). For those in other employment statuses, no occupation is recorded and they are assigned the same class as the main income-earner in the household or to an ‘unknown’ category. This system of classification has particular significance for married women, of whom in *Census 2006* only 60.6 per cent were at work, unemployed or retired and thus subject to recording of occupation in their own right. The balance of 39.4 per cent, which consisted mainly of women in ‘home duties’, were assigned either to the classification of their husbands or to the ‘unknown’ category. For present purposes, this has the consequence that a certain proportion of what might be identified as occupational homogamy among married couples is a statistical artefact arising from the classification of women in home duties within their husband’s social class group, thereby creating homogamy by definition. The proportion of married women who are classified in this way is age-related, since fewer older women have an occupation in their own right (in *Census 2006*, 49 per cent of married women aged 55-64 years were in employment statuses for which an occupation is recorded, compared to 74 per cent of married women aged 25-34 years). This fact alone would mean that, if classifications of men and

<sup>4</sup> The census applies two occupation-related classifications of the adult population – an 11-category socio-economic group classification and a 7-category social class classification. This section is based on the latter classification. For details on the occupational composition of these classifications and the manner in which they map onto each other, see Appendices 2-6 in *Census 2006*, Volume 8 – Occupations.

women in couples were taken at face value, occupational homogamy would automatically be higher among older couples.

In order to take account of this feature of the data, Figure 2.7 presents two broad age-based representations of partnering by social class. The top chart covers almost all couples, excluding only the small proportion for which there is no occupational information available. The bottom chart applies the same analysis only to those couples where the man and woman have both reported their occupations and so have been assigned a social class independently of their partner. The charts differ in

**Figure 2.7: Changing social class imbalances within couples**



the manner expected: in the top chart the proportion sharing the same occupation appears to have reduced among younger cohorts, but once the analysis is confined to couples with separately recorded occupation (bottom chart) the effect is slight. Considered alongside Figure 2.5, which shows a similar slight fall in educational homogamy, it is possible that between the older and middle age-cohorts there was a marginal increase in the likelihood of couples bridging socio-economic divides, but if so the change was fairly small.

The more compelling aspect of Figure 2.7 again surrounds the development of a pronounced gender imbalance. For younger couples where the classification differs, it is the woman rather than the man who is considerably more likely to have the higher classification. This imbalance is particularly striking among the 26-40 age cohort and represents a substantial change with respect to the highest age-cohort, born 30 years earlier. This finding, combined with the parallel analysis for educational attainment in the previous section, raises interesting questions with respect to the relationship between childbearing and female labour force participation. The context in which couples must decide how much time to devote to career and to family has probably changed for a substantial and increasing number of younger couples, where allowing the woman's career to be disproportionately affected by having children may entail the potential loss of a greater slice of present and future household income.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.6 RELIGION

Patterns of religious endogamy and exogamy in Ireland are shaped by two background conditioning features: the large share of the population accounted for by Catholics and the uneven gender ratios found in some religious groupings. As Table 2.1 shows, Catholics amounted to 85.4 per cent of the adult population in 2006, while the next two largest categories were those of no religion (5.7 per cent) and members of the Church of Ireland (2.9 per cent). Muslims, with 0.8 per cent of the population, were the next largest individual denomination (among the 'Other Christian' category, Orthodox Christians were the largest denomination, at 0.6 per cent, followed by Presbyterians and Methodists). This distribution means that all religious categories except Catholics have small pools of co-religionists from which to find partners and, therefore, are more likely to have to look outside their own group for partners. The second conditioning factor – uneven gender ratios – is found only

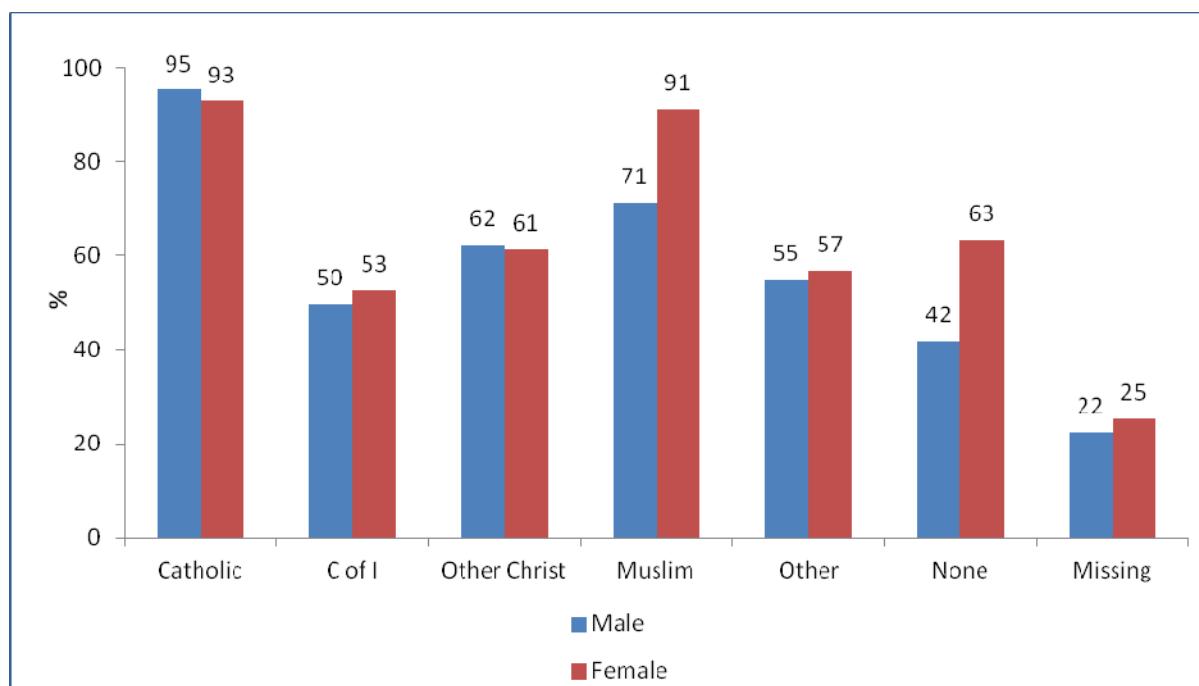
<sup>5</sup> It is possible that the imbalances of Figures 2.5 and 2.7 do not feed through to similarly substantial imbalances in earnings, for at least two reasons. First, there remains evidence of a gender pay gap, whereby women are on average paid less than men with similar qualifications in the same type of work. Second, the analysis above is based on the CSO's seven category classification, which places non-manual occupations such as clerical work, which tend to be done more by women, above skilled manual occupations, which tend to be filled by men, but may in fact pay relatively well. Consequently, repeating the analysis with a three category classification that equalises these types of jobs does reduce overall female superiority somewhat, although it does not diminish the extent of change between successive cohorts.

in three religious categories, where in each case the gender ratio is heavily skewed towards males: among Muslims, there were only 56 adult females per 100 adult males, while among those of no religion and those who did not state their religion, there were 65 females per 100 males. In the latter categories, therefore, in addition to the constraints on partnering within the group arising from small group size, men face an additional constraint arising from the relative scarcity of women within the group.

**Table 2.1: Numbers and gender ratios in adult (20-64) population, classified by religion**

	Number	%	Females per 100 males
<b>Catholic</b>	2,234,215	85.4	101
<b>Church of Ireland</b>	77,074	2.9	103
<b>Other Christian</b>	57,864	2.2	102
<b>Muslim</b>	20,630	0.8	57
<b>Other religion</b>	41,930	1.6	99
<b>No religion</b>	148,286	5.7	65
<b>None stated</b>	37,217	1.4	65
<b>Total</b>	2,617,216	100	98

The differing consequences of these factors for endogamy in different religious groupings are evident from Figure 2.8, which shows the percentage of men and women whose partners share the same religion. As might be expected from the large size of their population pools, endogamy is highest among Catholics, at 95 per cent among men and 93 per cent among women. It is low among members of the Church of Ireland, of whom just about half partner within their own religion. It is also low among those with no religion, particularly among men in this category, of whom only 42 per cent partner with women of no religion, compared to 63 per cent of women in the category who partner with men of no religion. The gender difference in levels of homogamy in this category reflects the imbalanced gender ratio within the category noted above – the excess of men over women with no religion makes it more or less inevitable that more men than women find partners outside the category.

**Figure 2.8: Partnership by religion: per cent with own religion**

It is worth noting the distinctive position of Muslims revealed in Figure 2.8. Although they are a small population in Ireland, they have quite high levels of endogamy (second only to Catholics in this regard), presumably reflecting cultural barriers to inter-marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, as would be expected from the uneven gender ratio mentioned above, levels of endogamy among Muslims differ between men and women: 71 per cent of Muslim men who are in couples have Muslim partners while 91 per cent of Muslim women do so. Muslim men thus partner outside their group to some degree, though given the small size and skewed gender distribution of the Muslim population, it is notable that they do not do so even more. One needs to interpret these data with some caution as separate analysis not presented here suggest that couple data in Ireland do not capture the full circumstances of Muslim partnership. Some 10 per cent of Muslim men in Ireland (about 1,350 out of a total of 13,200) are recorded in the Census as married but no wife is recorded as present in their household, presumably because their wives live in their home countries (the present analysis is based only on cases where both partners in the couple are present in the household). These patterns would merit further investigation since partnering practices have particular implications for social integration among cultural minorities, particularly those with such high levels of cultural otherness as characterise the Muslim population in Ireland.

Figures 2.9 and 2.10 extend the picture of partnering and religion by looking at a particular kind of exogamy, that which exists between the various religious groupings and Catholics, both overall (Figure 2.9) and by age (Figure 2.10). These

graphs reveal the particular demographic constraints faced by the Church of Ireland: its members have a high rate of partnership with Catholics (Figure 2.9) and this option is particularly common among younger members (Figure 2.10). The trend towards higher exogamy among younger couples does not bode well for the future numerical size of the Church of Ireland population. For Muslims, Figure 2.9 shows that partnership with Catholics is the most common option for men who partner outside the Muslim faith: 19 per cent of Muslim men who are in couples have Catholic partners, which represents about two out of three of the Muslim men who do not partner with Muslim women as represented in Figure 2.8. It is notable, however, that there is no age-gradient in Muslim men's partnership with Catholics – in fact, the incidence of partnership with Catholics is slightly lower among younger than older Muslim men. Those of no religion and those who did not state their religion also have high levels of partnership with Catholics, though this pattern is least pronounced among women who have no religion.

Figure 2.9: Partnership by religion: per cent with Catholic

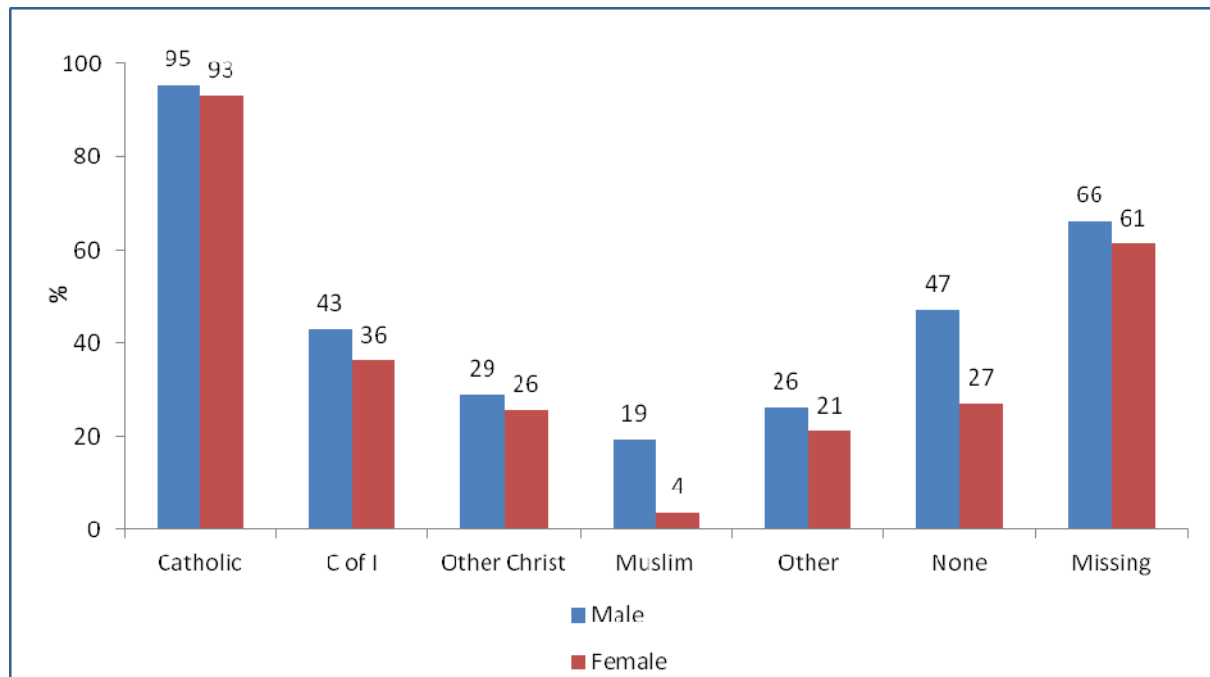
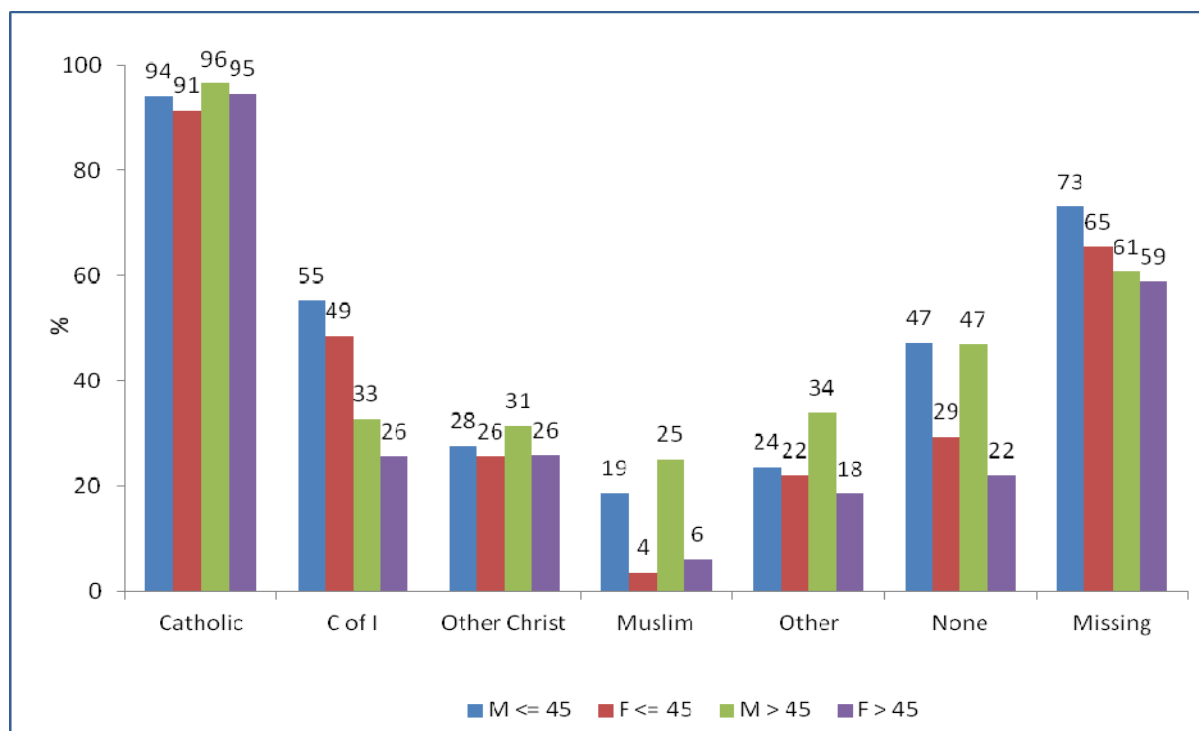




Figure 2.10: Partnership with Catholic by mean age of couple



## 2.7 NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

Previous analysis of data from *Census 2006* has shown that the wave of new immigrants who came into Ireland during the economic boom brought with them distinctive patterns of union formation, particularly in that they had higher levels of early marriage and cohabitation than the native Irish (Lunn *et al.*, 2009, pp.30-31). Here we look at patterns of endogamy and exogamy found among non-national and ethnic minority couples. Before doing so, it is necessary first, as we did with religion, to check the constraints on partnership posed by group size and gender ratios in the adult population. This is done in Table 2.2 for both national and ethnic groupings. Although the combined population of foreign nationals amounted to almost 14 per cent of the adult population, individual nationalities were considerably smaller, with UK nationals the largest at 3.1 per cent. The combined nationalities from what in 2006 were the ten new member states of the EU (the EU-10) amounted to 4.2 per cent, with rest of world accounting for 4.4 per cent. Among ethnic categories, white westerners were overwhelmingly dominant: less than 3 per cent of the population were accounted for by other categories – 1 per cent were black, 0.5 per cent Chinese and 1.1 per cent other Asian. Adult population pools in all these instances, therefore, are small and provide a limited context for endogamy. In most cases, gender ratios provide less of a constraint: in all but two instances, the balance between men and women in national and ethnic groupings was relatively even. The two cases of skewed gender ratios are the EU-10 as a ‘nationality’ grouping, where there are only 62 women per 100 men, and the Chinese, where there are 84 women per 100 men.

In the latter instances, one might expect the scarcity of potential female partners to constrain men towards a level of partnering outside their group that is higher than that found among women in the group.

**Table 2.2: Numbers and gender ratios in adult (20-64) population, classified by national and ethnic groupings**

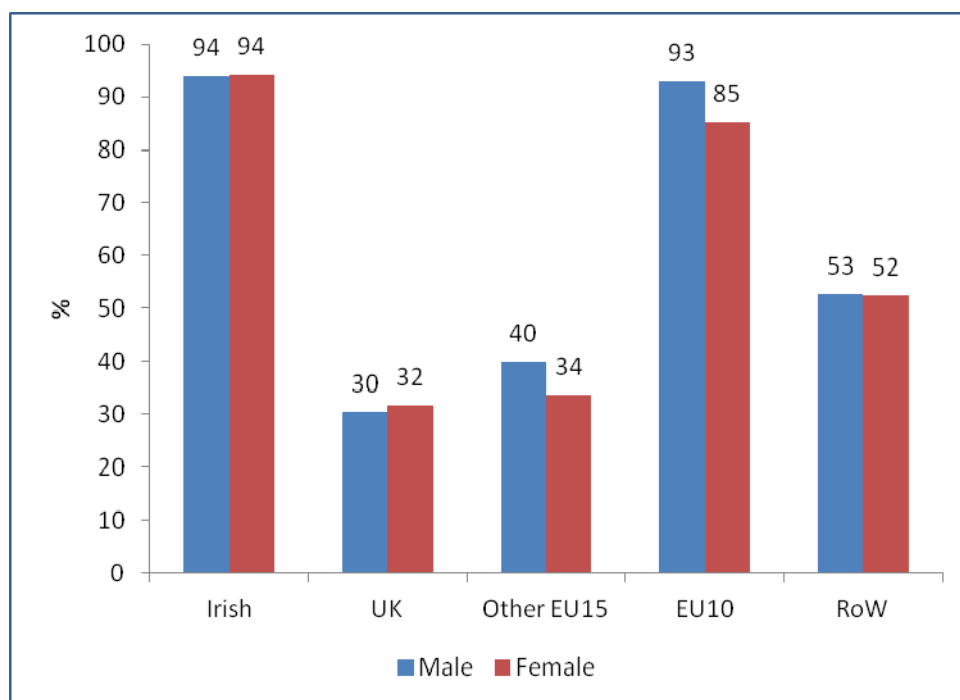
	Persons	%	Females per 100 males
<b>Nationality</b>			
Irish	2,205,562	86.9	100.8
UK	78,845	3.1	98.1
Other EU-15	36,884	1.5	105.9
EU-10	106,362	4.2	61.8
Rest of West	110,516	4.4	93.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,538,169</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>98.5</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
White	2,434,89	97.4	98.9
Black	23,915	1.0	104.2
Chinese	13,556	0.5	84.2
Other Asian	26,512	1.1	95.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,498,372</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>98.9</b>

Figure 2.11, which shows levels of nationality-based endogamy, reveals, surprisingly, that this expectation is not always fulfilled. Figure 2.12 fills out the picture by showing levels of inter-partnership with native Irish. There is a strikingly high level of endogamy among those from the EU-10, well above the level found for any other cultural minority in Ireland. Most surprising of all, endogamy is almost total among men in that minority – at 93 per cent it is just as high as for the native Irish population. This may, however, be a temporary pattern. Most of the EU-10 nationals in Ireland in 2006 had only arrived in the country within the previous two years, so it may be that they had simply not had the time to form new partnerships. Those in couples may mostly have formed their partnership outside Ireland and come to the country as a couple.

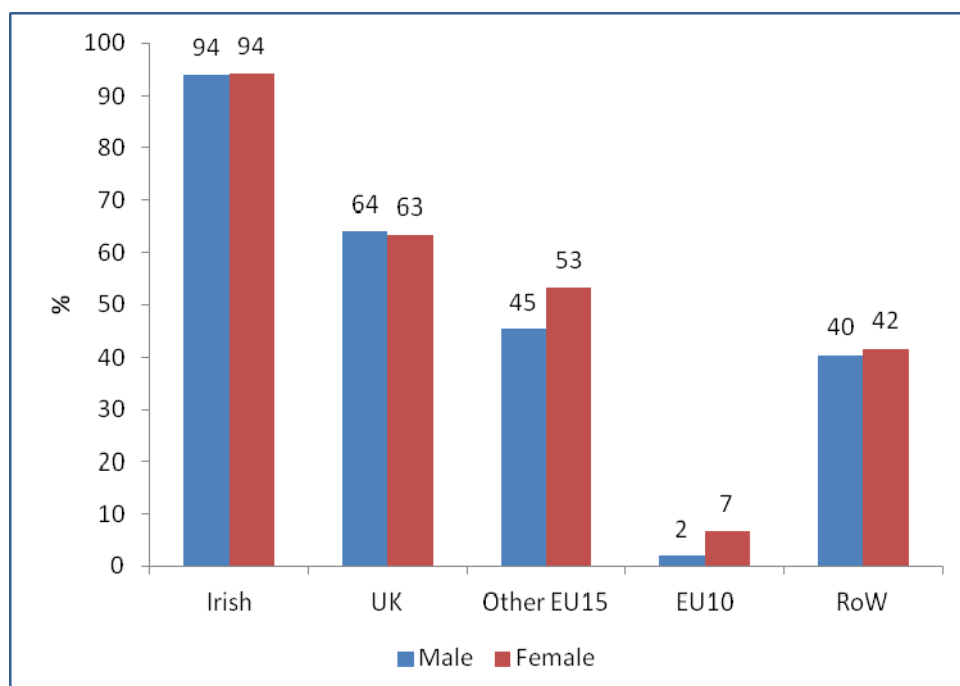
The pattern for other national groupings is more consistent with what might be expected. Less than one-third of UK nationals who are in couples are partnered with other UK nationals, and as Figure 2.12 confirms, the majority of those who partner with other nationalities do so with Irish people – possibly, in the majority of instances, as partners or spouses of former Irish emigrants who returned to Ireland. This confirms previous suggestions that UK nationals are strongly connected to Ireland and are not ethnically distinct in the same way as the new immigrants who

arrived with the economic boom of recent years (for the most part also, UK immigration to Ireland occurred prior to the new immigrant upsurge of the late 1990s and early 2000s – Fahey and Fanning 2010, p.5). Nationals from western Europe (other EU-15) have somewhat higher levels of endogamy than UK nationals and also somewhat higher levels of exogamy with nationalities other than the Irish – combining the totals for this group in Figures 2.11 and 2.12, we are left with 15 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women from other EU-15 nationalities who partner neither within that group nor with the Irish.

**Figure 2.11: Partnership by nationality, per cent with partner in same nationality category**



**Figure 2.12: Partnership by nationality: per cent with Irish**



Figures 2.13 and 2.14 provide similar pictures for ethnic groups – partnership within the ethnic group in Figure 2.13 and with white people in Figure 2.14. These data show that endogamy is quite high overall. It is particularly high for black women, who are more endogamous than black men, but it is somewhat lower for Chinese and other Asian women, who are less endogamous than men in their ethnic group. Why these differences occur is difficult to explain. They cannot be accounted for by differences in the gender ratio between the various ethnic groups referred to earlier. There is in fact a slight excess of black women over black men, and the gender ratio among Chinese and other Asians is the other way around. Yet black women are highly endogamous and both Chinese and other Asian women are slightly less so – the opposite to what one would expect if gender ratios were a determining factor. In any event, a further point we can draw from these data is that in the minority of cases where partnerships cross ethnic boundaries, it is overwhelmingly with white partners: the percentages for each ethnic group in Figures 2.13 and 2.14, if added together, amount to 98 or 99 per cent of the couples in those populations in all cases.

**Figure 2.13: Partnership by ethnicity: per cent with own ethnicity**

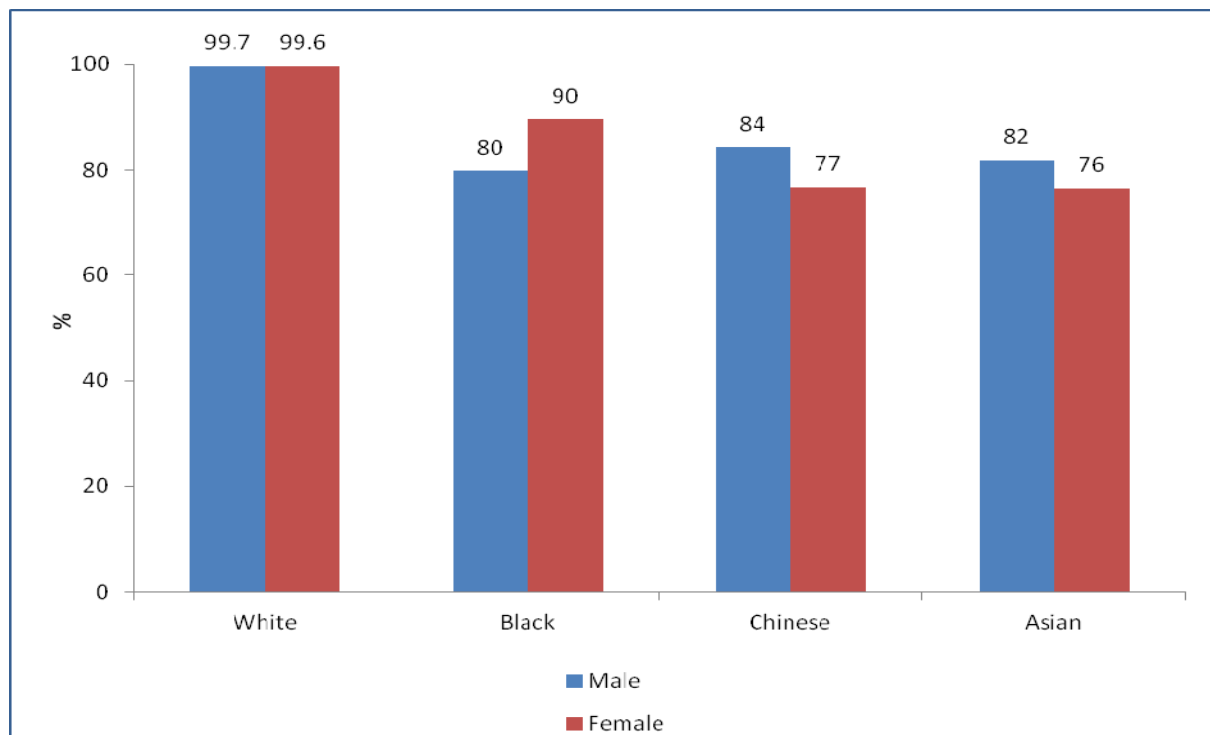
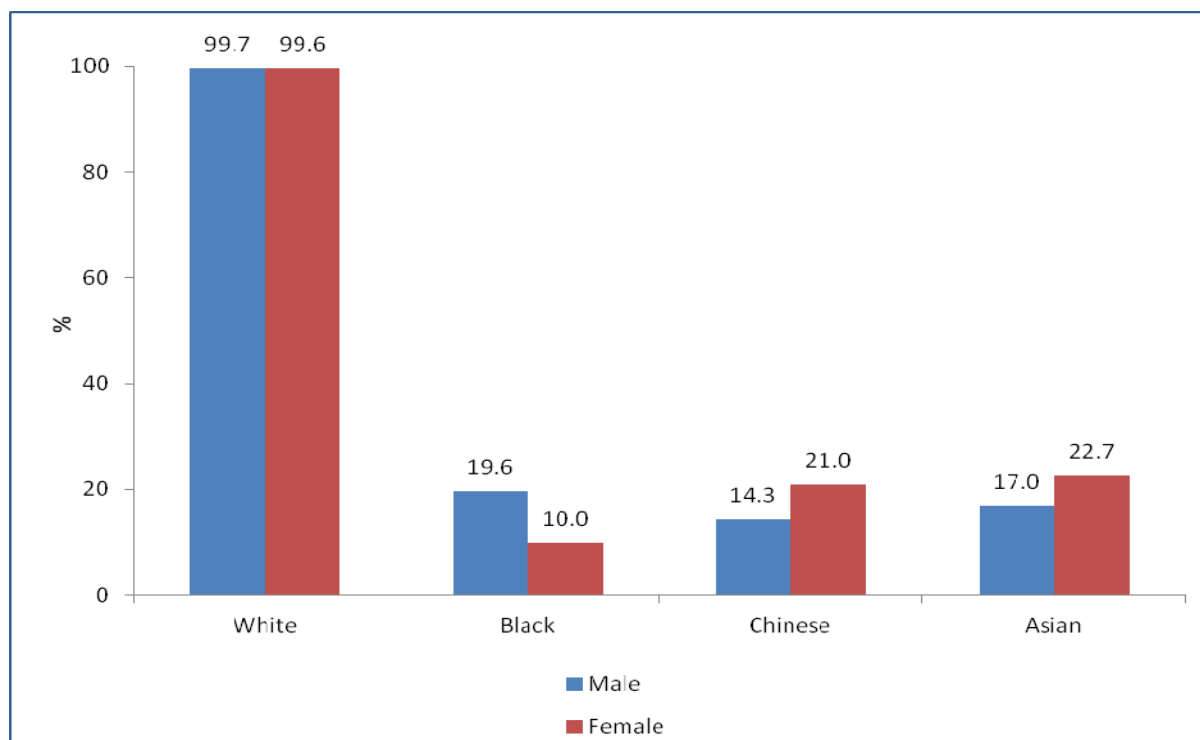
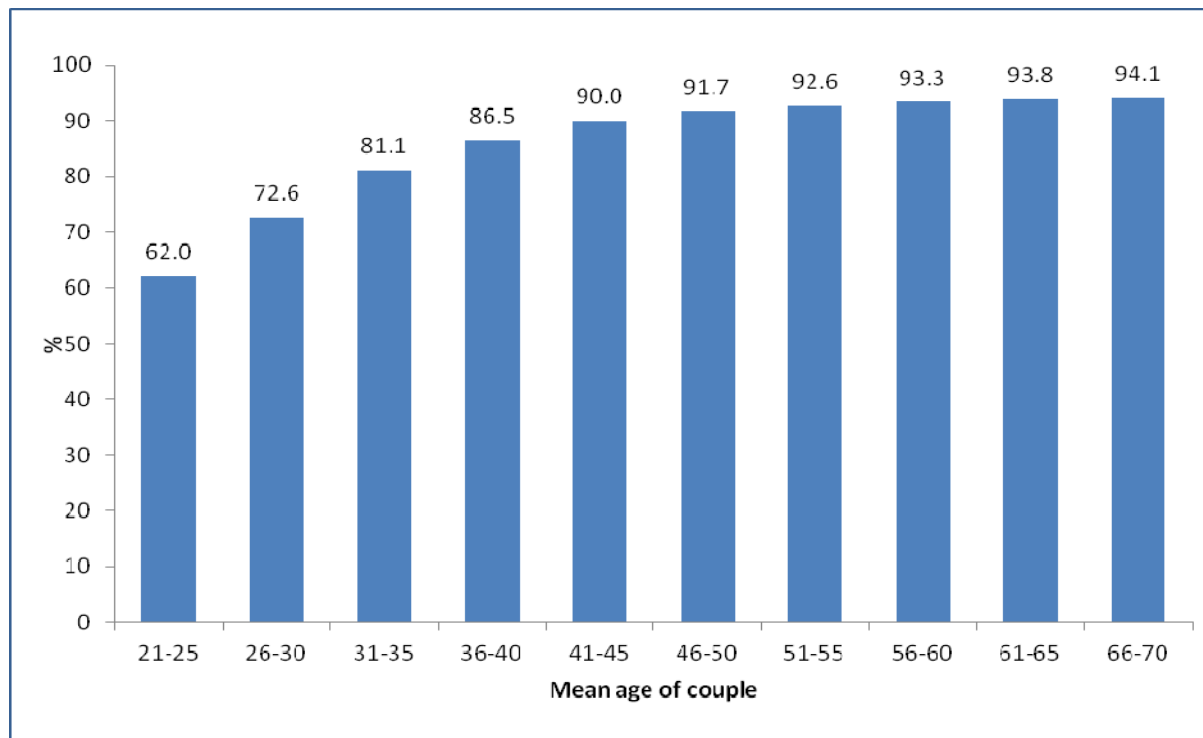


Figure 2.14: Partnership by ethnicity: per cent with whites



For a final perspective on national and ethnic endogamy, it is worth noting the combined effect of nationality and ethnicity on the ethno-national composition of couples across age-bands. Figure 2.15 does this by showing the percentage of couples in five-year age-bands where both partners are white and are either of Irish or UK nationality (we group the latter nationalities together because of the social and cultural closeness between the two noted earlier). This graph highlights the relatively low share of white-Irish/UK couples in the younger ages: they account for less than two-thirds of couples in their early twenties and less than three-quarters of couples aged 25-29. Thus, couples with an outsider ethno-national profile are concentrated in these ages. This is so in large part because the immigrant population is concentrated among the younger adult population. But it is also because, as noted earlier, many of the immigrant populations tend to form couples at young ages, while Irish people are generally late starters in this regard, thus giving outsiders a disproportionate share of the couple population at early ages (for further analysis of the 'late starter' pattern in couple formation among Irish people, see Chapter 4 below).

**Figure 2.15: Couples by ethno-national composition and age: per cent where both partners are white-Irish/UK**



## 2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter has examined a number of features of partnership patterns revealed by micro-data on couples from the 2006 CRMF. It confirms the move towards closer matching by age that has previously been noted as a feature of long-term shifts in marriage patterns in Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, one longstanding feature of these patterns has remained unchanged: men still tend to be older than their partners, albeit that the age-gap has narrowed over time. There is a strong asymmetry in the data suggesting a disinclination to form partnerships in which the woman is older, and it is as unusual today as it was in the middle of the twentieth century to find a woman who is substantially older than her partner. Thus, despite the many changes in gender relations that have occurred in recent decades, there is still a notable though not complete tendency for men to partner downwards and women to partner upwards in age.

A different trend is evident in educational matching of couples: the share of couples consisting of women who partner men with lower educational attainment than themselves has grown. This trend is largely a function of changing gender ratios at each educational level, reflecting women's growing educational advantage over men. At older ages, a large majority of both men and women had low education. Matched education at a low level between partners in marriage was the norm. At younger ages, by contrast, there is a considerable excess of well-educated women

over well-educated men and this constrains substantial proportions of women and men into partnerships of mixed educational composition. This pattern is also replicated in the occupational classification, whereby among younger couples it is considerably more likely that the woman will have the higher occupation. Overall, Ireland shows no signs of the increase in educational homogamy that has been said to characterise partnership patterns in other countries and that has been identified by some as a form of resource pooling that causes growing social inequalities among families.

Religious inter-marriage is now common among all main religious groupings in Ireland bar Catholics and Muslims. Most Catholics marry other Catholics since, as the dominant religious denomination, they provide the largest pools of potential partners. For Protestant minorities, as is evident especially among the still reasonably numerous Church of Ireland population, religious exogamy is found amongst almost half of couples and is particularly common among younger couples. Among Muslims, who are the largest non-Christian denomination, exogamy is rare among women, but in a population with a substantial excess of men over women, it occurs among almost one-in-five men. Partnership patterns among Muslim men in Ireland are complicated by the apparent presence of a substantial proportion of married Muslim men in Ireland whose wives are not present in this country (presumably because they have remained at home while their husbands migrate).

Partnership between nationalities resident in Ireland is most common between Irish and UK nationals. Nationals who migrated to Ireland from eastern Europe over the past decade had for the most part not formed partnerships with natives by 2006, partnering almost exclusively within their own group. Likewise, there is little partnership across the white-black or white-Asian divide. For new national and ethnic minorities in Ireland, therefore, partnerships with natives have not yet emerged as a significant force for social integration. It is important to note, though, there are high levels of coupledness within these minorities and so that form of social integration is there for the majority (in contrast to the past experience of Irish migrants to Britain, many of whom never formed families in their new home).

# Chapter 3

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## Cohabitation

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The four-fold increase in the number of cohabiting couples between 1996 and 2006 represents a rapid and significant change in the process of family formation in Ireland. The shift towards cohabitation shadows similar shifts experienced earlier by other developed countries (Kiernan, 2004; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008), and there is every chance that the trend towards increased cohabitation has longer to run. As with other large changes affecting family structures that have occurred over recent decades, such as the decline in fertility and the rise in marital breakdown, Ireland may be subject to many of the same forces that have driven similar trends in other countries, yet there are also likely to be factors at play that are unique to the Irish context.

The increase in cohabitation is mainly but far from exclusively concentrated among people in their mid-to-late twenties. One potential explanation is simply that a substantial proportion of the most recent cohort of young adults has developed a less favourable attitude to marriage. This possibility might imply that, as this pioneering cohort ages, cohabitation will become a long-term alternative to marriage. Alternatively, it may be that over a relatively short time period, people have come to recognise the potential benefits of periods of cohabitation, or merely to accept cohabitation a reasonable and legitimate way for couples to form. Such a shift in attitudes might extend well beyond the specific cohort that displays the greatest change in behaviour. Those in their mid-to-late twenties may be simply the group most likely to take advantage of the opportunity to experience a trial period of living together before marriage, or to live with someone as a young adult without making a long-term commitment. The first account of the rise in cohabitation above represents an explanation based on a *cohort effect*: the observed increase is primarily caused by a difference in behaviour exhibited by a new cohort of young adults. The latter explanation suggests a broader cause and puts the observed pattern down to an *age effect*, whereby those aged in their mid-to-late twenties just happen to be the age most affected. One could also conjecture that cohabitation is driven by recognition of the benefits of cohabitation only among the younger cohort, leading them to be more likely to cohabit but nevertheless similarly likely ultimately to marry.



It is particularly difficult to distinguish between age and cohort effects when change is rapid, because it is not possible to observe the behaviour of different cohorts over an extended period. In the present analysis, we are also constrained by the cross-sectional nature of the data, which offers only a snapshot of the situation on census day in 2006 and does not include information on the history of relationships over and above what can be inferred from current marital status. Nevertheless, the very large number of cases and the detailed information with respect to the age of all the respective family members permits new evidence to be presented and some inferences to be made.

The initial individual-level analysis of Lunn, Fahey and Hannan (2009) showed that the rise in cohabitation had occurred broadly across social groups, notwithstanding some significant differences particularly between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, as indicated by ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation. Analysis by individual year of age revealed a very sharp increase in the proportion of married individuals in their late twenties and early thirties, matched by a fall off in cohabitation, suggesting that for most people cohabitation remains a prelude to marriage. Yet a small proportion of cohabiting individuals have children in cohabiting relationships and remain unmarried well into their thirties. Hence, there may be a minority for whom cohabitation represents a genuine alternative to marriage.

### **3.2 AIMS OF THE PRESENT ANALYSIS**

The present analysis goes beyond previous work by offering a much more detailed picture of the structure of those families that centre on a cohabiting couple and how they compare with those based on a married couple, within the same cohort. Of particular interest is the impact on the likelihood of marriage of the presence and age of children. An important distinction here is between the preferred partnership state for people living together, and the preferred state for those who decide to have children, which represents a greater degree of commitment in a society in which living together unmarried has become acceptable. The previous analysis of Lunn *et al.* (2009) employed the answers to the specific question on fertility reintroduced to the census in 2006, which asked women how many children they have previously given birth to. In this chapter, we instead look at family structure by the presence and age of children currently in the household, which provides a much clearer picture. We are also able to take into account the characteristics of male partners. These two advantages, using information on partners and more complete information with respect to the number and ages of children, make it possible to offer greater insight into the likely forces that determine the decision to remain cohabiting or get married.

One characteristic of particular interest is previous marital history. In approximately one quarter of cohabiting couples, one or both partners have been in a married relationship prior to their current relationship. We examine how these cohabiting couples differ from those in which both partners have never been married. The data also allow at least an initial analysis of factors related to the decision to remarry or cohabit in a second relationship.

We focus also on the educational attainment of both partners, since this variable is a good indicator of socio-economic status and is mostly determined prior to partnership decisions. Socio-economic influences on the likelihood of cohabitation versus marriage may depend on the characteristics of both partners and could, therefore, alter previous conclusions based on analysis at the individual level. Similarly, we look at how the cultural characteristics of both partners affect the decision to cohabit or marry, concentrating in particular on religious affiliation. Lastly, we look at how certain background characteristics combine with the age of children with respect to the relative likelihood of cohabitation or marriage.

Ultimately, our analysis does not provide or support an unambiguous explanation for the rapid increase in cohabitation over the past decade or more, or a definite conclusion regarding the long-term relative prospects for cohabitation and marriage. But in offering a more detailed description of the relative characteristics of cohabiting and married couples, it allows some conclusions to be drawn, particularly in respect of the influence of having children on partnership status.

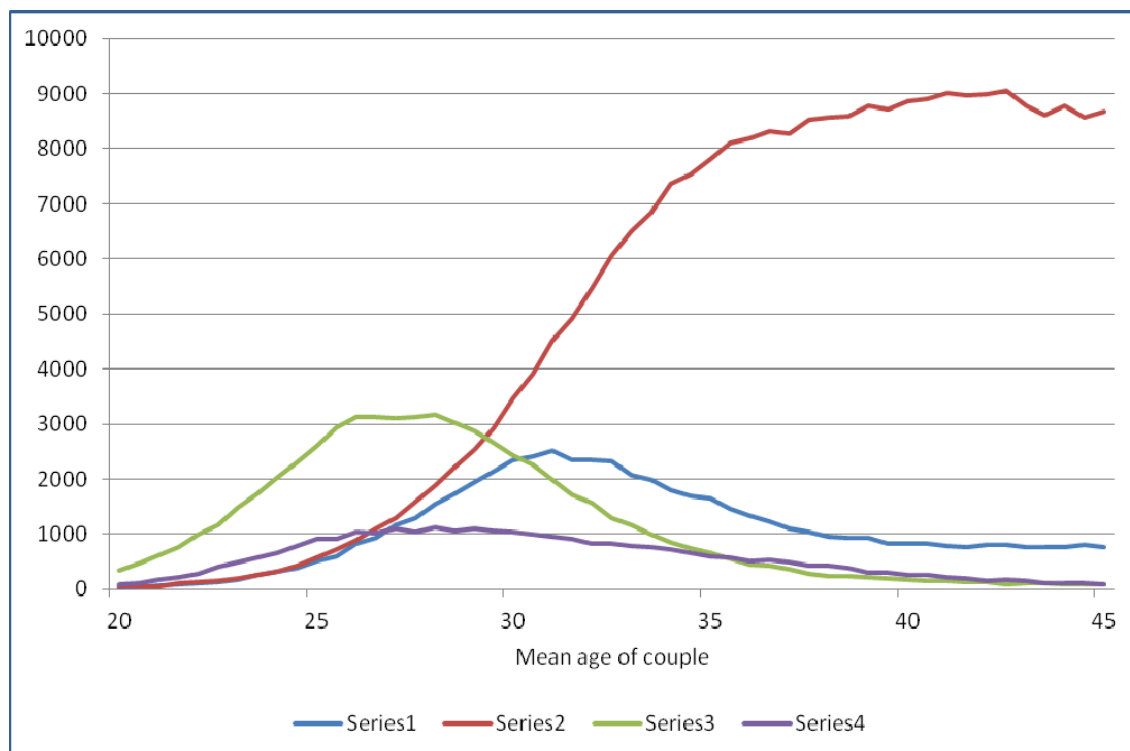
### 3.3 COHABITATION, MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

The extent to which cohabitation and marriage are linked to having children is revealed by Figure 3.1. The analysis excludes those who have experienced marital breakdown and compares only cohabiting couples where both partners have never been married, with couples where both partners are in their first marriage. The numbers of couples of these two types are plotted by the average age of the couple, with separate lines for couples with and without children. A striking difference is apparent in the likelihood of being married between couples with and without children.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis does not distinguish between step-families and non-step-families, both of which are included in Figure 3.1, but excluding step-families from the analysis makes an almost imperceptible difference.

**Figure 3.1: Numbers of first marriages and never married cohabiting couples by mean age of couple and presence of children**



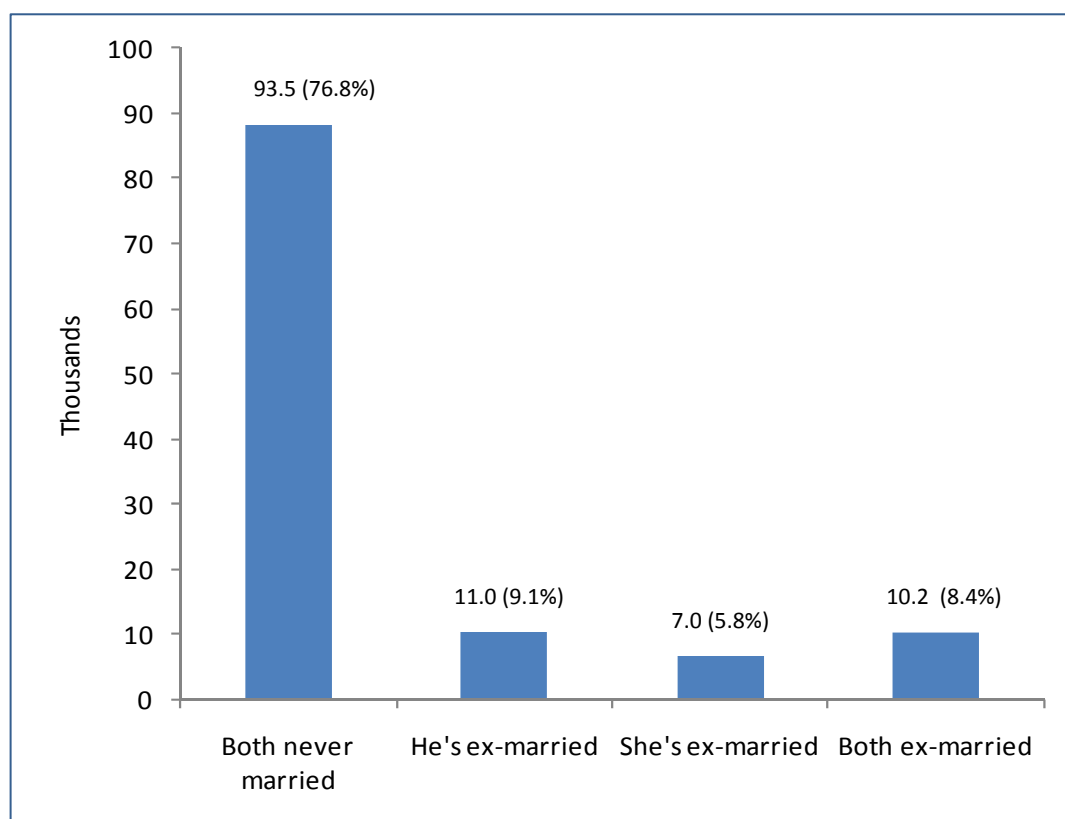
In 2006 there was a total of 62,000 cohabiting couples under the age of 45 without children, amounting to more than half of all cohabiting couples. This exceeded the 56,000 married couples with no children. Yet for couples with children, the balance was very different: 29,000 versus 255,000. To some extent, this difference reflects the fact that cohabiting couples are likely to have been together for a shorter period of time. Also, a far greater number of younger couples cohabit and they may not be as likely as their predecessors to go on to marry as they age and have children. But even among couples in their twenties, who are generally much more likely to cohabit than couples in their thirties, there is a striking difference in the likelihood of marriage associated with the presence of children. From a mean age of 26.5 onwards, marriage is the preferred state for couples with children, and rapidly becomes the very much preferred state.

The strength of the relationships depicted in Figure 3.1, in the context of the four-fold increase in cohabitation over the preceding ten years, suggests that it is perhaps not appropriate to think of the dramatic increase in cohabitation as a change in preferences regarding the status of couples. It is arguably more accurate to characterise the development as the change from a situation where marriage was the norm for couples who lived together, to one where marriage is the norm for couples who have children together.

### 3.4 COHABITATION FOLLOWING MARITAL BREAKDOWN

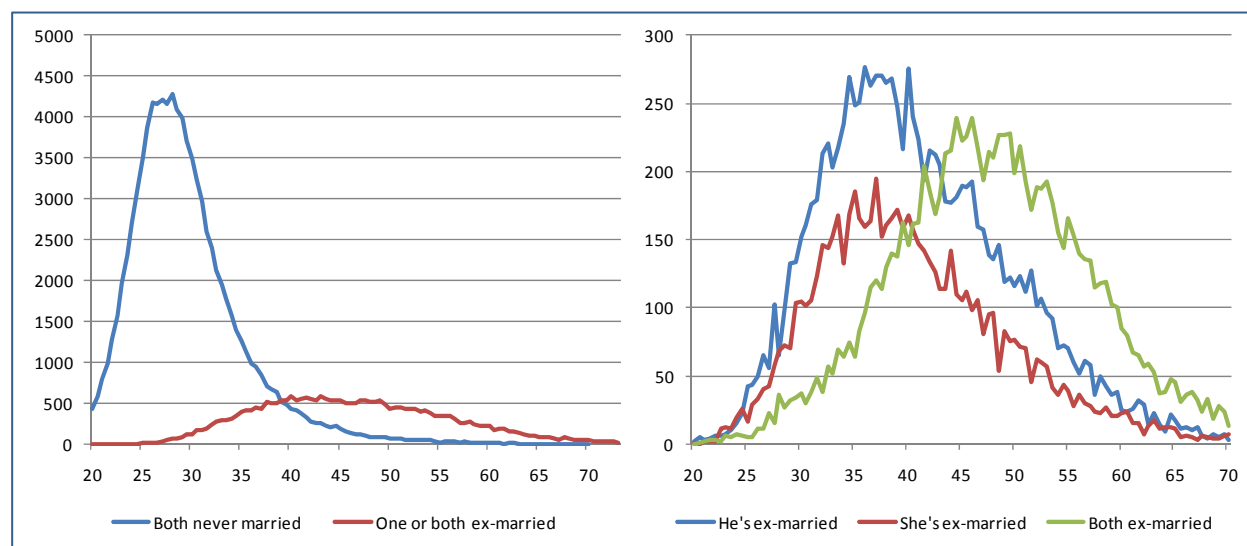
Adding together the two groups of cohabiting couples from Figure 3.1 (and including the small number above age 45), neither partner was formerly married in over 90,000 (of the 120,000) cohabiting couples. Analysis in Lunn *et al.* (2009) suggests that this is likely to be a slight overestimate, because a number of individuals, males especially, are inclined to state their marital status on the census form as “Single” when they have in fact previously been married (i.e., they do not categorise themselves as “Separated” or “Divorced”). This leaves perhaps 30,000, around one quarter of all cohabiting couples in 2006, consisting of at least one individual who has experienced marital breakdown and has found a new partner. Figure 3.2 gives an indication of how these couples break down according to the marital history of the two partners. In over one-third of the remaining cohabiting couples, or just over 10,000, both partners have previously been part of a married couple, while among the rest there is a considerably greater likelihood that the male partner is the one with the broken marriage. The respective willingness to acknowledge a previous marriage on the census form means that this gender difference is probably underestimated.

Figure 3.2: Number of cohabiting couples categorised by the marital history of both partners



As might be anticipated, these different categories of cohabiting couples have different profiles. Figure 3.3 plots the incidence of different types of cohabiting couples by the mean age of the couple. It is to be expected that cohabiting couples in which one partner was previously married might be somewhat older. Yet in fact the age profile extends far into middle-age and beyond, with a peak after age 40, very much greater than the peak in the late twenties among never-married couples (Figure 3.3, left panel). This suggests that couples who cohabit following marital breakdown do not tend to be the result of one (or both) individuals marrying young and forming a second relationship following a relatively short marriage. Rather, the rapid change in the incidence and acceptability of cohabitation has not only affected the present cohort of younger adults, but has also changed the opportunities for older adults to enter into second relationships. It is possible that this finding partly reflects previous under-recording of cohabitation following marital breakdown, which for reasons of acceptability may have been somewhat disguised in the past, but in the context of the scale of cohabitation among older people revealed by Figure 3.3, this represents only a minor qualification. Breaking the age profiles down further into the three categories of post-marriage cohabiting couples confirms that there is no significant gender difference in this respect, over and above the greater likelihood that men form a second relationship (Figure 3.3, right panel).

**Figure 3.3: Mean age of cohabiting couples by marital history**



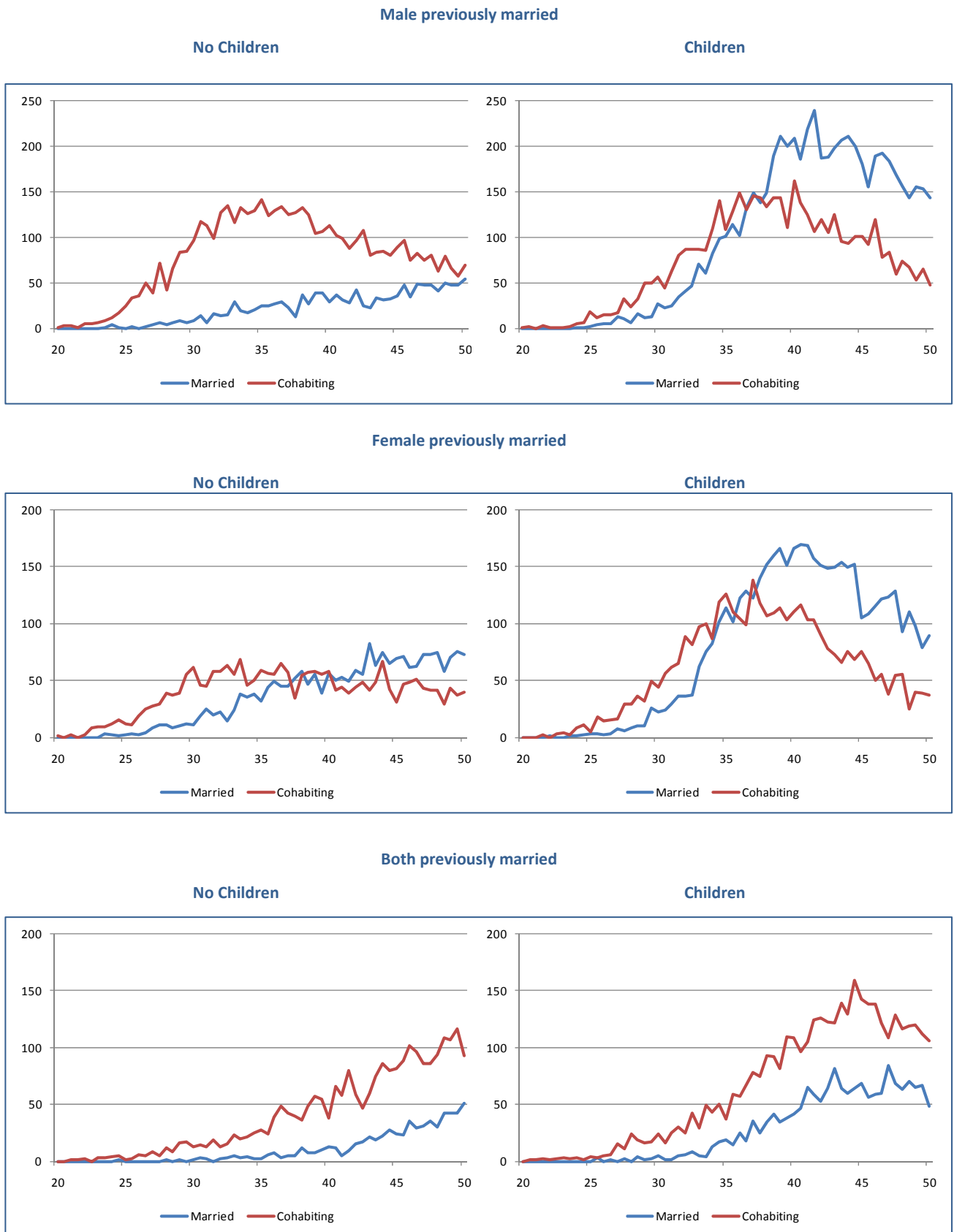
These cohabiting couples in which one partner was formerly married are more likely to have children than their younger never-married counterparts. The proportions are 46 per cent for couples where the man was formerly married, 56 per cent where the woman was, and 50 per cent where both were, compared to 32 per cent for never-married cohabiting couples. In many cases the children are from the second relationship and in some cases step-children from a first relationship. The findings

raise the interesting question of whether going through a marital breakdown might change people's willingness to enter a second marriage, or might have an impact on whether marriage is the preferred form of partnership for having children. These are questions we return to in Chapter 4 when examining the family circumstances of children.

Further analysis is complicated by the possibility that the rate of second marriages is affected by the slowness and possible difficulty of securing a divorce. A proportion of these cohabiting couples may want to get married but be unable to do so at present. The data provide no indication of this or of how long ago the separated or divorced partner's first marriage ended. These complications are clearly most likely to affect couples where both partners were previously married. Nevertheless, Figure 3.4 gives an indicative answer to the questions raised, by comparing the incidence of cohabitation and second marriages among couples where at least one partner was previously married. Among these couples, it is again the case that the likelihood of remarriage is strongly linked to the presence of children. This is especially true where the male is the previously married partner, primarily because the likelihood of cohabitation rather than marriage is much higher in this case among couples with no children (the difference between the two top-left panels in Figure 3.4 is much greater than between the two top-right panels). Put another way, women who do not have children and who embark on a second partnership are more likely to get remarried than their male counterparts.

It is interesting to note that where both partners were previously married, having children does not seem to affect the relative likelihood of cohabitation or (re)marriage (Figure 3.4, bottom panels). These couples tend to be older and it is more likely that children are from a previous relationship. They may have to overcome greater obstacles to remarriage, but it is also possible that they are less positively inclined towards marriage.

**Figure 3.4: Numbers of couples who have married or cohabit, after one or both partners were previously married, by mean age of couple and presence of children**



### 3.5 COHABITATION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The individual-level analysis of Lunn *et al.* (2009) showed that increases in cohabitation had occurred right across social groups, notwithstanding some significant yet mostly modest differences. The present analysis, by taking into account the characteristics of both partners simultaneously, permits a more detailed analysis and, as we will show, somewhat alters the picture. What follows employs multivariate logistic regression models to analyse the determinants of whether couples in 2006 were married or cohabited, which acts as the dependent variable for the analysis. Models are estimated separately for three age groups (based on the mean age of the couple), 26-30, 31-35 and 36-40 years, with populations of 75,000, 109,000 and 113,000 couples respectively. The models control for the number and age of children; age difference between partners; both partners' educational attainment; occupation; ethnicity; nationality; religion and health status; plus the residential location (urban, suburban, rural) and region of the household.

We first consider the impact on partnership status of educational attainment. Table 3.1 presents the results for the three age groups by three levels of educational attainment (lower second level, upper second level and third level; as in Chapter 2), giving nine possible combinations. The figures presented are odds ratios, which are estimated using the multivariate model. The odds ratio is defined as the odds that a couple is cohabiting rather than married relative to a reference category, which is a couple in which both partners are in the lowest educational attainment category and is given the value 1.00. Thus, numbers increasingly greater than 1.00 imply a higher likelihood of cohabitation, while numbers decreasing from 1.00 imply a lower likelihood.

The individual level analysis of Lunn *et al.* (2009) did not reveal strong differences in the likelihood of entering cohabitation as opposed to marriage by educational attainment. But once we control for the characteristics of both partners and the number of children, both of which were not possible in the previous analysis, the influence of educational attainment is revealed to be much stronger. The odds ratios decrease markedly as educational attainment increases. For couples over 30 years of age this effect applies to the educational attainment of both partners, but it is the woman's attainment that is the more influential in the 26-30 year group. The impact of educational attainment is also generally stronger among older couples. Where both partners have a third-level qualification, the odds of cohabitation rather than marriage are less than half the equivalent odds for the reference group.



**Table 3.1: Estimated odds ratios for cohabitation versus marriage by mean age of couple and educational attainment**

Age 26-30		HER		
		<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Third level</i>
	<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	1.00	0.99	0.89
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	1.02	0.89	0.88
	<i>Third level</i>	1.00	0.89	0.87
<b>Age 31-35</b>				
		HER		
		<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Third level</i>
	<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	1.00	0.76	0.64
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	0.76	0.60	0.54
	<i>Third level</i>	0.65	0.57	0.45
<b>Age 36-40</b>				
		HER		
		<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	<i>Third level</i>
	<i>Lower 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	1.00	0.69	0.67
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Upper 2<sup>nd</sup> level</i>	0.79	0.53	0.53
	<i>Third level</i>	0.69	0.55	0.40

While these results do not alter the fact that the incidence of cohabitation has increased broadly across social groups, they do suggest that it has done so differentially by socio-economic group. More educated couples in otherwise similar circumstances are significantly and substantially less likely to cohabit.

### 3.6 COHABITATION BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

The multivariate models largely confirm the previous findings with respect to cultural background characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation, each of which is significantly linked to partnership status (see Lunn et al., 2009, for detail). Yet the analysis does throw up some new and interesting findings, particularly with respect to religious affiliation, which we explore in more depth in this section.

Table 3.2 presents estimated odds ratios for cohabitation versus marriage by religion, in the same manner as Table 3.1 above. To preserve sub-population size, religions are grouped into four categories: “Catholic”, “Other Christian”, “Non-

Christian” and “No Religion”. In the large majority of cases where a couple falls into the same “Other Christian” or “Non-Christian” category, they have an identical affiliation. The reference category in this case is a couple in which both partners describe themselves as “Catholic”. A general comparison of Tables 3.1 and 3.2 immediately suggests that there is greater variation in partnership status across religions than across categories of educational attainment. Recall that these odds ratios are estimated from a multivariate model that controls for the nationality and ethnicity of both partners, although it is possible that the Non-Christian category still partly acts as a proxy for immigrants from non-Christian countries.

**Table 3.2: Estimated odds ratios for cohabitation versus marriage by mean age of couple and religious affiliation**

Age 26-30		HER			
		<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Other Christian</i>	<i>Non-Christian</i>	<i>No Religion</i>
	<i>Catholic</i>	1.00	1.11	1.21	2.58
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Other Christian</i>	1.15	0.42	0.55	1.65
	<i>Non-Christian</i>	1.19	0.91	0.25	1.33
	<i>No Religion</i>	2.17	1.60	2.09	1.87
Age 31-35		HER			
		<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Other Christian</i>	<i>Non-Christian</i>	<i>No Religion</i>
	<i>Catholic</i>	1.00	1.53	0.90	2.88
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Other Christian</i>	1.45	0.62	1.22	2.70
	<i>Non-Christian</i>	0.94	1.12	0.43	2.82
	<i>No Religion</i>	2.23	1.45	1.94	2.61
Age 36-40		HER			
		<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Other Christian</i>	<i>Non-Christian</i>	<i>No Religion</i>
	<i>Catholic</i>	1.00	2.04	0.83	3.63
<b>HIM</b>	<i>Other Christian</i>	1.68	0.85	1.19	2.78
	<i>Non-Christian</i>	1.04	1.09	0.57	2.91
	<i>No Religion</i>	2.51	2.64	0.99	3.43

Note that despite the strength of these associations and similarly the associations of cohabitation with nationality and ethnicity, they account for less of the variation in partnership status across the population as a whole than associations with socio-economic status, because the population itself is more homogeneous on these

cultural dimensions. The large majority of people in Ireland state their ethnicity as “White”, have Irish nationality and list their religion as “Catholic”, and most of the variation in the incidence in cohabitation occurs within these categories rather than between them and other categories.

An initial interesting comparison surrounds the odds ratios for couples with the same religious affiliation, which lie on the diagonals of the table. Couples affiliated to non-Christian religions or to non-Catholic Christian religions are much less likely to cohabit than Catholic couples, while non-religious couples are much more likely to do so. Turning to the off-diagonal terms, couples in which one partner is a Catholic and the other from another Christian religion are more likely to cohabit. The picture varies somewhat for other mixed couples, but for both partners the odds ratios for “Other Christian” and “Non-Christian” are at their lowest on the diagonal, implying that cohabitation is less likely among couples who share a faith. There are a number of possible interpretations of this result. It may reflect a greater tendency to form partnerships outside of their own faith among those who are less traditional in their views about marriage. Alternatively, people in mixed relationships may, on average, be more inclined to favour a trial period of cohabitation prior to possible marriage. Mixed couples may also face greater challenges or constraints with respect to their extended family, friends or wider religious group. The data do not allow us to test any of these hypotheses, but they do reveal that whatever drives the effect, it is strong.

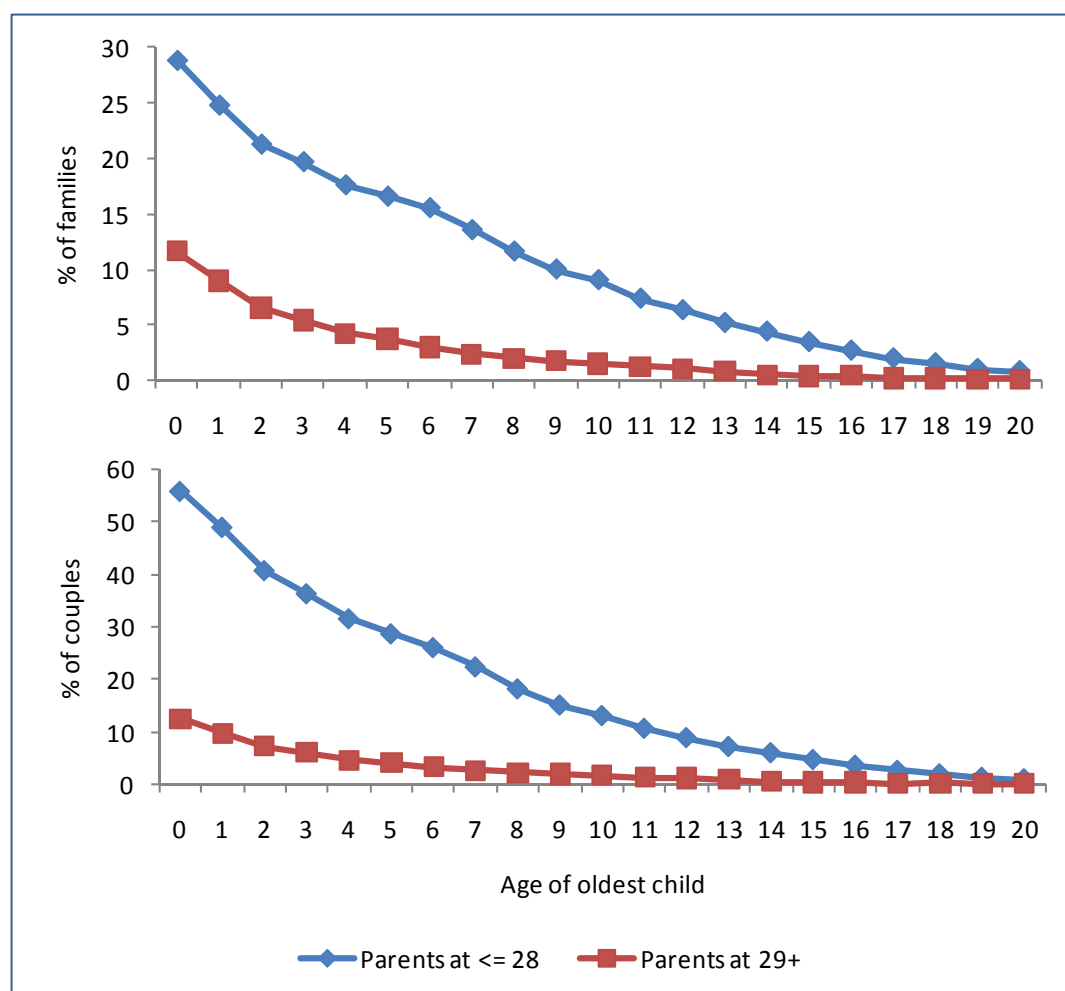
Lastly, people who identify themselves as non-religious have a completely distinct pattern of partnership. Looking across Table 3.2, if either partner is non-religious, the likelihood of cohabitation is high, and it apparently makes little difference whether just one or both partners is non-religious. However, above the age of 30 there is a clear gender difference: where the woman is non-religious, the odds of cohabitation rather than marriage are particularly high.

### **3.7 COHABITATION BY AGE OF CHILDREN**

The analysis in Sections 3.3 and 3.4 shows that having children is strongly related to whether a couple is married or cohabits, for people in both first and second partnerships. The aggregated 2006 CRMF allows us to examine also the likelihood of cohabitation by the age of children in the household, for different categories of parents. This gives not only a further indication of the strength of the association between having children and marriage, but also insight into the timing of couples’ decisions to marry or to have children, and how this might differ according to parental age or across social groups.

Figure 3.5 shows how the likelihood of cohabitation falls sharply as the first child grows older. The data are plotted separately for parents who had a first child when the average age of the couple was 28 years of age or less, and those who had a first child at 29 years or more.<sup>7</sup> The top chart plots the proportion of families cohabiting, the bottom chart the proportion of couples (i.e. lone parents are excluded). Rates of cohabitation are much higher among parents who had their first children at a younger age. Almost 30 per cent of the younger parents with a first child under one year-old are cohabiting, compared with 22 per cent who are married and 46 per cent who are lone parents. Thus, the majority of younger couples who have children are cohabiting. However, for both younger and older couples, the data suggest that the

**Figure 3.5: Proportions of families with children (top) and couples with children (bottom) who are cohabiting, by age of the oldest child, for younger parents (mean age of 28 years or less at birth) and older parents (29 years or more)**



<sup>7</sup> The top panel of Figure 3.5, which expresses cohabiting couples as a proportion of families includes lone parent families. For comparison with groups based on the mean age of couples, we place lone mothers who had first children at 27 years of age or less and lone fathers who had first children at 29 years or less into the younger parent category.

likelihood of remaining cohabiting diminishes fairly sharply after the birth of a first child, as the curves in Figure 3.5 decline steeply. This constitutes further evidence of a strong link between having children and marriage.

A comparison of the relative strength of this effect, i.e. the relative steepness of the two curves in Figure 3.5, is made more difficult by the large difference in the absolute likelihood of cohabitation between the older and younger parents. Figure 3.6 therefore reworks the same data to produce estimates of the probability that couples who had a child while cohabiting get married, for each increasing year of age of the first child. The calculation is based on the proportional difference between the likelihood of cohabitation when the child is under one year-old and when the child is older. This is an approximation, because there is no guarantee that parents who at present have a child aged under one will take the same decisions as did parents who at present have a child aged one, two, three etc. It nevertheless gives an indication.

**Figure 3.6: Estimated probability that cohabiting couple marries by age of oldest child, for younger parents (mean age of 28 years or less at birth) and older parents (29 years or more) – see text for assumptions behind estimate**

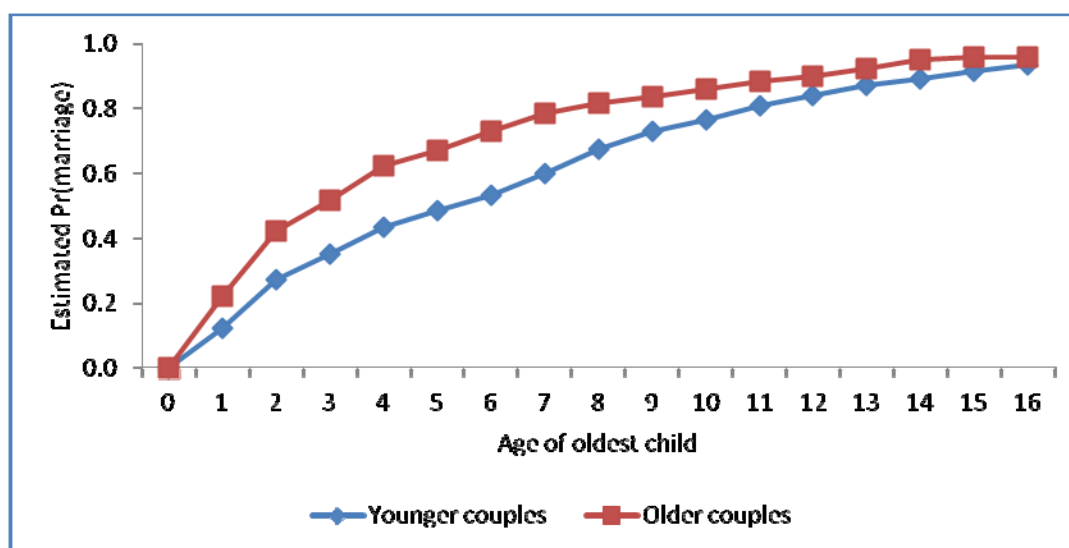


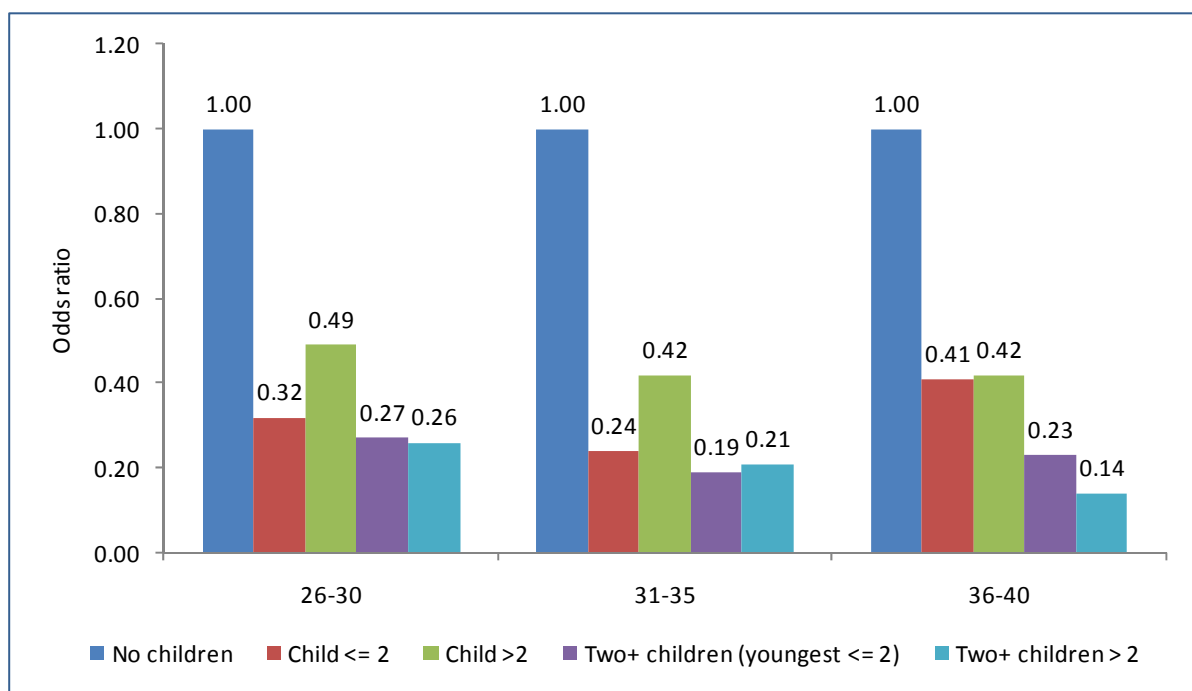
Figure 3.6 reveals that the older parents are not only less likely to be cohabiting when they have a first child, but also that those older parents who are cohabiting then tend to get married more quickly after having a child. The estimates suggest that more than half of older parents who are cohabiting when their first child is born get married within three years, while for the younger parents the equivalent figure is six years. This finding that the link between having children and marriage is weaker for the younger parents is interesting, because it might imply that the extent to which marriage is the preferred partnership status for having children is weakening among more recent cohort of parents. The finding requires further analysis,

however, because other explanations are possible. Younger parents have different characteristics, such as lower educational attainment and lower income.

To test this, we use the multivariate model described above, which controls for a broad range of background characteristics, to look at the strength of the relationship between having children and the likelihood of being married rather than cohabiting. If the relationship is genuinely changing among younger cohorts, the patterns of odds ratios should be different across the three age groups. Figure 3.7 provides the answer. The odds ratios provided give the relative odds that couples cohabit compared with couples with no children, who are the reference category and are assigned the value 1.00. All couples with children in all three age groups are less than half as likely to cohabit if they have children. There are only small differences between the three age categories, suggesting little change in the relationship between marriage and having children between these cohorts of parents.

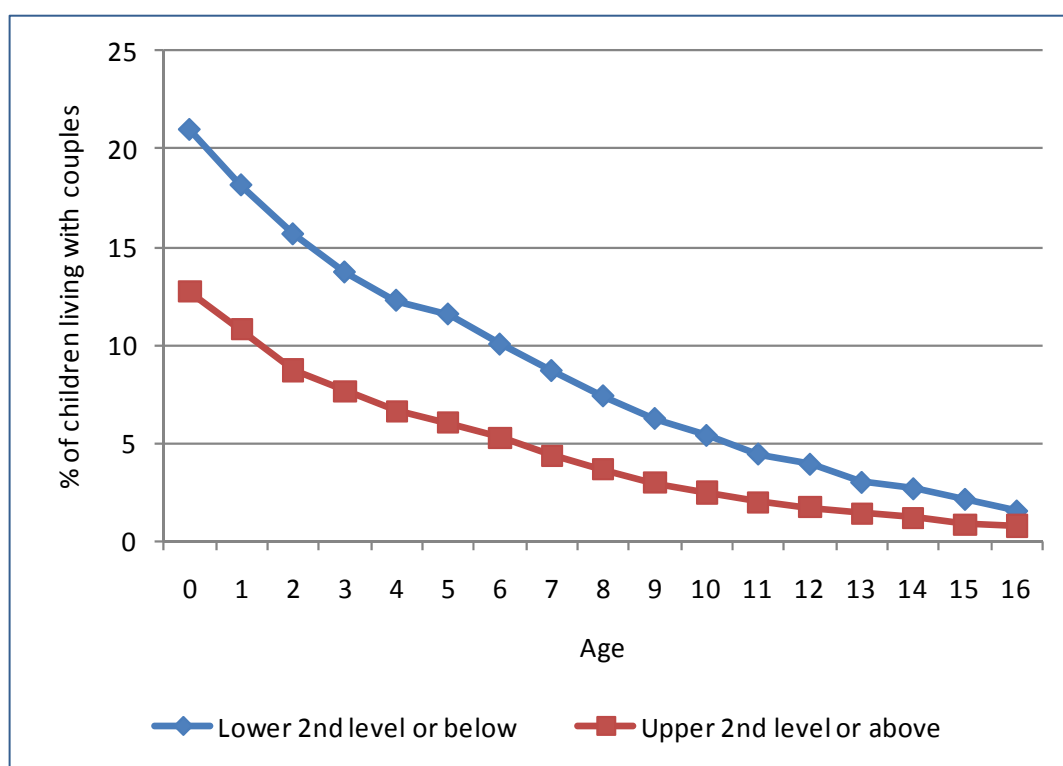
Note that this result holds despite the much greater incidence of cohabitation in the younger cohort. Thus, while the younger cohort is more likely to cohabit and to have children in a cohabiting relationship, compared with the cohort ten years older, the impact of having children on the likelihood of marriage is the same. The slower move to marriage after having a first child among younger parents probably reflects their different socio-economic profile.

**Figure 3.7: Estimated odds ratios for cohabitation versus marriage by number and age of children, for couples with mean age 26-30, 31-35 and 36-40 years**



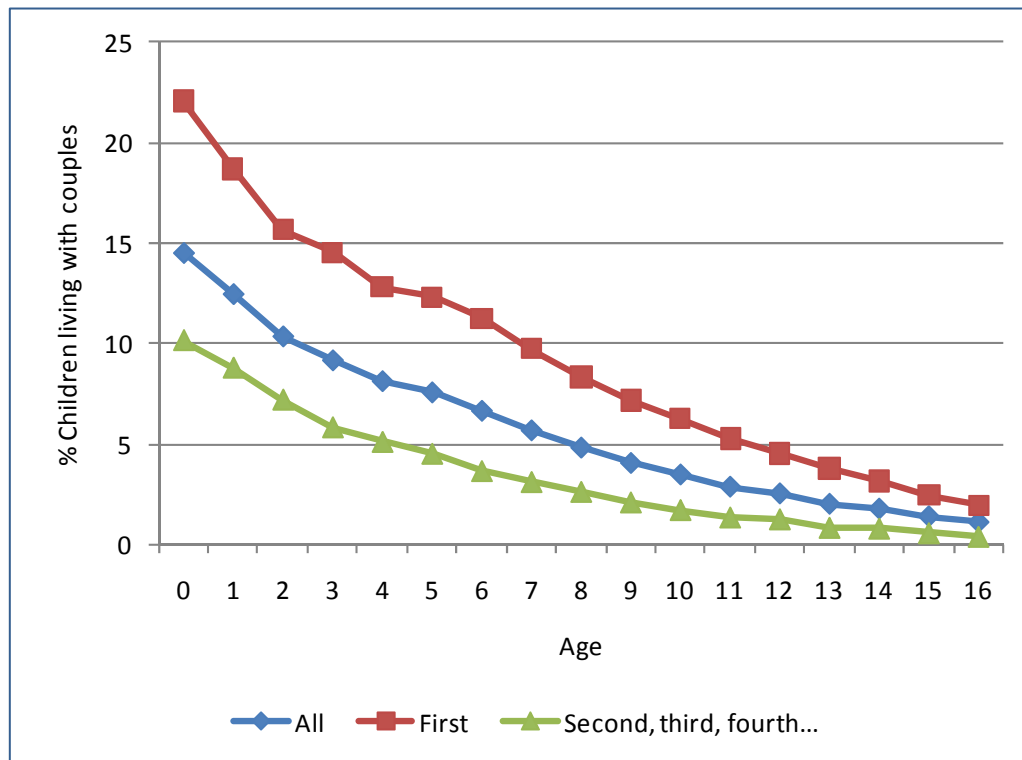
The result of this pattern is that different children have substantially different likelihoods that their parents will cohabit or be married. Figure 3.8 plots the likelihood that a child living with a couple, regardless of birth order, has cohabiting rather than married parents, by age and the educational attainment of the mother. Children of more educated mothers are much more likely to have married parents. Although the likelihood that parents cohabit falls with age for both groups, it does so more steeply for those with educated mothers, such that between the ages of 8 and 15 years the likelihood of having cohabiting parents is more than twice as high among the group with lower maternal education.

**Figure 3.8: Proportion of children living with two parents who live with a never married cohabiting couple, by age of child and mother's educational attainment**



A final implication of the relationship between having children and partnership status is that first born children are much more likely to have cohabiting parents. Figure 3.9 shows the extent of this effect by comparing the likelihood that a first born child of a couple has cohabiting rather than married parents with the equivalent likelihood for children with higher birth orders. At all ages children with higher birth orders are less than half as likely to have cohabiting parents.

**Figure 3.9: Proportion of children living with two parents who live with a never married cohabiting couple, by age of child and birth order**



### 3.8 SUMMARY

While there has been a dramatic increase in cohabitation, including in the incidence of cohabiting couples with children, a strong link persists between cohabitation and the absence of children – people are much more likely to marry rather than cohabit if they have children. One might reasonably conclude that it is now widely accepted for people to live together without being married, but once children arrive they still prefer to marry.

In one quarter of cohabiting couples, one or both partners was previously married – more often the male. Most of these couples have a mean age of over 40 years but such couples exist right across the age spectrum. This implies that, while cohabitation following the breakdown of a first marriage is relatively uncommon, it is not only the present cohort of younger adults who tend to take up that option. While around half of these cohabiting couples have children, a comparison with couples who have remarried suggests that remarriage is again more likely where children are involved, with the exception of couples in which both partners have previously been married.



The present analysis was able to examine the factors associated with the decision to cohabit rather than marry while simultaneously controlling for both partners' characteristics and the number and age of children. Within this framework, which is more sophisticated than previous analysis, it becomes apparent that there is a significant relationship between the likelihood of cohabitation and educational attainment. Couples where both partners have lower educational attainment are substantially more likely to cohabit.

Analysis of cohabitation by religious affiliation, controlling for other background characteristics, including the number and age of children, shows that where couples share a non-Catholic religion they are much less likely to cohabit. Mixed religion couples tend to be more likely to cohabit than couples who share a religion, while couples in which one partner is non-religious are particularly likely to cohabit, especially where the female is non-religious.

The likelihood of cohabitation falls sharply following the birth of a first child. This increased preference for marriage after having children is stronger among parents who have children at an older age. In principle, this might imply that younger parents are more willing to have children in cohabiting relationships, but the effect is removed by controlling for other characteristics, suggesting that it is probably the result of the different socio-economic profile of younger parents. While people in their twenties are more likely to cohabit and to have children in a cohabiting rather than married relationship, they appear to be similarly likely to get married after having children as people ten years older, and more so if they have high educational attainment. The upshot of this pattern is that children of lower socio-economic status are more likely to have cohabiting rather than married parents, and that first-born children are much more likely to have cohabiting parents than children of later birth orders.

# Chapter 4

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## Children's Family Circumstances

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we turn our attention more fully to children and examine their family circumstances. Some aspects of these circumstances have been touched on in previous chapters and some issues, particularly the growth of lone parent families, have been extensively examined in previous research (for an analysis of lone parenthood based on *Census 2006*, see Lunn *et al.* 2009, pp.77-88). Here, however, we focus especially on 'reconstituted' or 'blended' families made up of partners who have been in previous unions and have had children with previous partners. Families of this type can create complex step-parenting and step-sibling relationships for children, and further diversity is caused by the emergence of cohabitation as a form of partnership and thus by the existence of cohabiting as well as married couples both in first and subsequent unions. These developments have created a range of family circumstances for children about which little is known, as they are not readily identifiable in available statistics and are not dealt with in the usual accounts of family patterns.

Uncertainties in this area are relevant to policy as well as having general interest. There has been some concern in recent years, for example, that welfare supports for lone parents, of which the One Parent Family Payment is the centrepiece, may have a disincentive effect on partnership and may give rise to a higher incidence of lone parenthood than would arise with a more couple-friendly system of family income support (Working Group on Lone Parents, 2006, pp.80-2; Fahey and Field, 2008, pp.44-6). It is difficult to establish whether such disincentives exist or have any real effect (for the international literature on this, see Gonzalez, 2007) and it is beyond the scope of this report to examine these questions here. Yet it would help to clarify matters if we had better information on the full range of family types where different patterns of partnership, separation and re-partnership may become visible.

The household-level data from the 2006 CRMF are a step forward in this context as they provide more information on the relationships between children and other members of the household than has previously been available. The key feature here is that *Census 2006* recorded relationships between household members on a 'grid' where the relationships of all household members with each other were taken into

account. This contrasts with previous practice where relationships only with the 'household reference person', or what used to be called the 'household head', were recorded, an approach which was less useful for capturing complex household patterns. The grid system records most parental and sibling relationships in the household and, for children, makes it possible to pick out step-parent and half-sibling relationships as well as full biological relationships (though as we outline below, there are some limitations in how well this approach worked in practice, see Box 4.1). In addition, censuses since 1996 have identified cohabiting as well as married couples and, for those who are married, have distinguished between those who are married for the first time and those who are remarried following dissolution of a first marriage or widowhood. All of these features together mean that the 2006 CRMF provides extensive new information on the family circumstances for children, particularly in situations involving re-partnership of parents and the formation of step-families.

At the same time, the data have a number of limitations. Census forms are normally completed by householders themselves rather than by interviewers and, therefore, are always open to some element of misreporting. Previous analysis has suggested, for example, that some men who are divorced or separated report themselves as single on census forms, leading to substantial undercounts of divorced and separated men in the census (Lunn *et al.*, 2009, p.48). It is likely that men who are in second or subsequent unions may have a similar tendency to report these as first unions. In addition, people may simply misunderstand or overlook response options on certain questions in the census or accidentally mis-record information. For example, the household grid used to record household members' relationship with each other lists 'son or daughter' and 'step-child' as separate response options – an important distinction for our concerns here. However, it appears that some members of the public do not understand what the term 'step-child' means (see Box 4.1) and, as we shall see below, counts of step-children in *Census 2006* are small and may reflect some degree of under-reporting. Furthermore, there is no response option for adopted children though the guidance from the census was that they should be recorded as 'son or daughter'. One may guess that adopted children are likely to be recorded as sons or daughters, but that is only a guess. In addition, as mentioned earlier, census data take account only of relationships between people who live in the same household and does not record family types that span households, as in the case of a father who may have children in both his current household and that of a former wife or partner or children who have step-siblings in another household. The overall point is that while census data are undoubtedly of high quality, they are not perfect and do not give the final word on the topics they deal with.

## 4.2 AIMS OF THE PRESENT ANALYSIS

Drawing on data from the 2006 CRMF, this chapter seeks to present a more detailed picture of the family circumstances of children in Ireland than has previously been available. The results raise interesting questions as to whether the experience of children in Ireland is to some extent unusual by international standards. Thus, the chapter also examines some international comparative data and tries to identify certain distinctive aspects of Irish patterns in this area.

Sections 4.3 to 4.5 focus on children's family circumstances as revealed in the 2006 CRMF data. We construct a detailed typology of family types, examine the distribution of children across those family types, and analyse how this distribution varies according to the socio-economic status of the family (as measured by the educational level of parents). Section 4.6 then draws on a limited range of aggregate data from Eurostat and the OECD in an effort to contextualise the dynamics of couple formation, dissolution and re-formation in Ireland and thus illuminate some distinctive aspects of the family context of children's lives in this country. Data limitations constrain what can be done on the comparative front, but it is nevertheless possible to provide an additional perspective from which to view the family circumstances of children in Ireland.

## 4.3 CHILDREN AND FAMILY TYPES

As already mentioned, the focus in this chapter is on the family circumstances of children and it therefore limits its attention to families with children. 'Families' for present purposes encompasses only parents and children – we make no references to other relatives such as grandparents, even where they live with the families we examine. The population of children we focus on consists of all those aged under 21 years who live with one or both of their parents. We thus exclude the substantial proportion of older teenagers who do not live with at least one of their parents.

The data in the 2006 CRMF enable us to distinguish between families so defined along two dimensions. One relates to the status of children vis-à-vis their parents and gives rise to a three-way classification of families: first, those with non-step-children only (that is, where all children are biological offspring of both adult partners in the household, or in the case of lone parent families, are the offspring of that lone parent); second, those with a mix of step-children and non-step-children (where some children are the offspring of both partners but others are the offspring of only one); and third, those with step-children only (where one adult partner in the household is step-parent to all the children, or rare cases where a lone parent is a step-parent to the children). This breakdown is shown in Table 4.1, which reveals that of the 1.148 million children aged under 21 counted as family members in

*Census 2006*, the vast majority – 97.5 per cent – live in non-step-families: all the children in these families are the biological offspring of both parents or of the lone parent in lone parent families. Of the balance of 2.5 per cent who live in step-families (29,168 children), just over half (1.3 per cent, or 14,941 children) were themselves step-children who were the offspring of one partner in the couple only while the others were non-step-children in that they were the biological offspring of the both adults in the couple.

**Table 4.1: Children in non-step-families and step-families, 2006**

	All children u-21	Children in non-step-families	Children in step-families	Of which: step-children in step-families
<b>Number</b>	1,147,968	1,118,800	29,168	14,941
<b>%</b>	100	97.5	2.54	1.30

These data suggest, therefore, that the population of step-children in Ireland is small, which implies that re-partnering among parents who have children from previous unions is uncommon. Box 4.1 provides detail on how the numbers of step-families and step-children were arrived at and considers the possibility that the incidence of step-families and step-children is, in reality, probably higher than this. But even if some under-recording is present, the data generally suggest that while some new family forms have become widespread in Ireland, ‘blended’ or reconstituted families that place children in households with step-parents are still in a small minority.

The second dimension of classification derives from the relationship between the adults in the family and gives rise to three major categories – married, cohabiting and lone-parent families. Each of these has four sub-categories. For married and cohabiting couples, the four sub-possibilities are that neither partner was previously married, that the man was previously married but not the woman, that the woman was previously married but not the man, or that both were previously married. For lone parent families, a distinction is drawn between lone mothers and lone fathers and for each of these a further distinction is drawn between those who have never been married and those who previously married and are now separated, divorced or widowed. A final residual category contains those for whom the information entered on the census form was too incomplete or unclear to allow classification.

**BOX 4.1: THE IDENTIFICATION OF STEP-FAMILIES AND STEP-CHILDREN IN CENSUS 2006**

The count of step-families and step-children we use here is based on Question 3 in the individual section of the census form (as depicted here for the case of 'Person 5'). This grid is designed to record the relationships of all individuals with up to four members of the household who appear first on the form (i.e. the form for 'Person 6' still only has four columns, not five). Families are considered as step-families if at least one person in the house ticks either Response 4 or Response 7 in respect of one of the four relationships.

There is a number of ways that this recording method may introduce inaccuracies:

- (1) If the step-relationship exists between two members of the household neither of whom is among Persons 1 to 4, it will not be recorded. This cannot be corrected.
- (2) If the family do not use the terms 'step-child', 'step-son', 'step-daughter' etc., or for some reason do not wish to, Responses 3 and 6 may be selected instead of 4 and 7, even if the child is not the biological child of the parent. This cannot be corrected.
- (3) The grid structure is complex and a significant minority of responses are ambiguous or tick more than one box. It is sometimes possible to clear up these ambiguities by close inspection of the data. Where significant ambiguity remained, we did not count the family as a step-family.
- (4) Some families appear not to understand the terms 'step-child', 'step-mother' or 'step-father' or accidentally mis-record step-relationships. The most common error, amounting to several thousand households, occurs where children are recorded as having the same two parents and the second child is recorded as being a step-child of the first. In this case, the error is clear and can be corrected, but in others ambiguity cannot be resolved. There could also be a considerable incidence of step-relationships that are not recorded as such. Where this occurs, it cannot be identified or corrected and may lead to undercounting of step-relationships.

The balance of measurement errors identified here mean that it is likely that the figures we report to some degree underestimate the true incidence of step-families in Ireland. Our figures are lower than those reported by Punch (2007) based on the same data source. The primary reason for this is our definition of 'children' as being only those aged under 21 years and the exclusion of ambiguous cases.

**3 What is your relationship to Persons 1, 2, 3 and 4?**  
See example on back page.  
✔ one box only for each person.

Relationship of PERSON 5 to	Persons			
	1	2	3	4
Husband or wife	1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partner	2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Son or daughter	3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Step-child	4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brother or sister	5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother or father	6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Step-mother/father	7	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Son-/daughter-in-law	8	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandchild	9	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other related	10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unrelated (including foster child)	11	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Table 4.2 shows the distribution of children across these family types, distinguishing in each case between the non-step/step categories used in Table 4.1. If we look first at the distribution of all children (column 1 in Table 4.2), we see that 75.3 per cent live with a married couple, of whom the vast majority (72.8 per cent) are with couples in their first marriage. Families consisting of married couples where one or both partners have previously been married thus account only for some 2.5 per cent of children (though we should recall here the earlier caveat about a possible undercount of men in second unions and thus a possible undercount of this family type). Just over 6 per cent of children live with cohabiting couples and for almost one-third of these, one or both partners in the couple have previously been married (again here, the possibility of an undercount of men in this situation should be noted). If we add together all the couple families (married and cohabiting) where one or both partners had previously been married in order to get the total of second-union families, the number of children living in such families is 53,606 (4.6 per cent of all children in families). Thus only a small minority of children live in second-union families.

Eighteen per cent of children live with lone parents, of which the majority (16 per cent) are with lone mothers. The lone mother family is thus, after the 'standard' family based on a married couple in their first marriage, the second most common family type for children. For somewhat more than half of children in lone mother families (9 per cent out of the 16 per cent), the lone mothers have never been married. Among children with lone fathers, two-thirds of the fathers (1.3 per cent out of 2 per cent) are separated or divorced, suggesting that separation or divorce is, in relative terms, a more common route to lone parenthood for men than it is for women, though in absolute terms lone fatherhood is much less common than lone motherhood.

Table 4.2: Children by family type

	(1) All children aged u-21	(2) Children in non- step-families	(3) Children in step-families	(4) Of which: step- children in step-families
N				
HW, both 1st married	835,237	822,422	12,815	5,640
HW, male ex-marriage	14,677	12,629	2,048	1,088
HW, female ex-marriage	10,812	6,681	4,131	2,229
HW, both ex-marriage	4,140	2,170	1,970	1,337
<b>All married families</b>	<b>864,866</b>	<b>843,902</b>	<b>20,964</b>	<b>10,294</b>
COH, neither ever married	47,371	44,027	3,344	1,847
COH, male ex-marriage	8,512	7,418	1,094	615
COH, female ex-marriage	7,209	5,541	1,668	973
COH, both ex-marriage	8,256	6,862	1,394	913
<b>All cohabiting families</b>	<b>71,348</b>	<b>63,848</b>	<b>7,500</b>	<b>4,348</b>
LM, never married	103,594	103,379	215	86
LM, ex-marriage	85,882	85,623	259	102
LF, never married	6,477	6,408	69	35
LF, ex-marriage	14,722	14,610	112	52
<b>All lone parent families</b>	<b>210,675</b>	<b>2,100,20</b>	<b>655</b>	<b>275</b>
Unclear couple	1,079	1,030	49	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,147,968</b>	<b>1,118,800</b>	<b>29,168</b>	<b>14,941</b>
%				
HW, both 1st married	72.8	73.5	43.9	37.7
HW, male ex-marriage	1.3	1.1	7.0	7.3
HW, female ex-marriage	0.9	0.6	14.2	14.9
HW, both ex-marriage	0.4	0.2	6.8	8.9
<b>All married families</b>	<b>75.3</b>	<b>75.4</b>	<b>71.9</b>	<b>68.9</b>
COH, both never married	4.1	3.9	11.5	12.4
COH, male ex-marriage	0.7	0.7	3.8	4.1
COH, female ex-marriage	0.6	0.5	5.7	6.5
COH, both ex-marriage	0.7	0.6	4.8	6.1
<b>All cohabiting families</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>29.1</b>
LM, never married	9.0	9.2	0.7	0.6
LM, ex-marriage	7.5	7.7	0.9	0.7
LF, never married	0.6	0.6	0.2	0.2
LF, ex-marriage	1.3	1.3	0.4	0.3
<b>All lone parent families</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>1.8</b>
Unclear couple	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Notes: HW = husband & wife; COH = cohabiting; LM= lone mother; LF = lone father.  
 "Ex-marriage" includes separated, divorced and widowed.



Turning to children in non-step-families (column 2 in Table 4.2), the distributions are almost the same as in column 1 since these children account for such a large proportion of all children. The most notable feature here relates to what we referred to earlier as second-union families – those based on married or cohabiting couples in which one or both partners have previously been married (as we have just seen, these account for 53,606 children). These are the family types most likely to take a step-family form, given the involvement of at least one of the partners in a prior union. However, in fact a large majority of children in these families – 41,301, or 77 per cent of children in second-union families – are in non-step-families in the sense that those families contain only the biological offspring of both partners (though again this high proportion may reflect some under-reporting of step-children). Thus it appears that entry into second unions following the breakdown of a first marriage does not typically lead to the formation of a blended family unit containing the children of the first and second union but rather most often creates a new family unit containing only the children of the second union. It may of course occur that one partner in such unions (most often the man) may have children from a first union who live in another household and who become the step-siblings of the children of the second union. However, step-relationships between households of this kind are beyond the capacity of the census to count and are not tracked here, though there is no reason to believe that they are more common than co-residential step-families.

Although co-residential step-families are relatively few, they do occur. Columns 3 and 4 in Table 4.2 show the distributions of children by family type for all children in step-families and for step-children in step-families. These distributions are distinctive partly because, as one might expect, very few step-families are headed by a lone parent, with the result that the lone parent family hardly features as a category for step-families. The married couple is the dominant family type for step-children (69 per cent), and for over half of these, both the husband and wife are in their first marriage (in which case, the step-children were born to one of the parents as an unmarried parent prior to marriage). The cohabiting family also features quite prominently for step-children, though it is still secondary to the married family: 29 per cent of step-children live with cohabiting parents. For over half of step-children living with cohabiting parents, one or both of the partners had previously been married. This means that a bigger share of cohabiting than of marital second unions involve step-children even though in absolute terms the majority of step-children live in married families. Step-children are more likely to live with mothers who previously were married than with fathers who previously were married, though in the case of the child population as a whole (column 1 in Table 4.2) the reverse is true – their fathers are more likely to have previously been married than their mothers. These patterns can be taken to reflect the tendency for mothers to have custody of children after the break-up of a previous union and thus to be more likely than

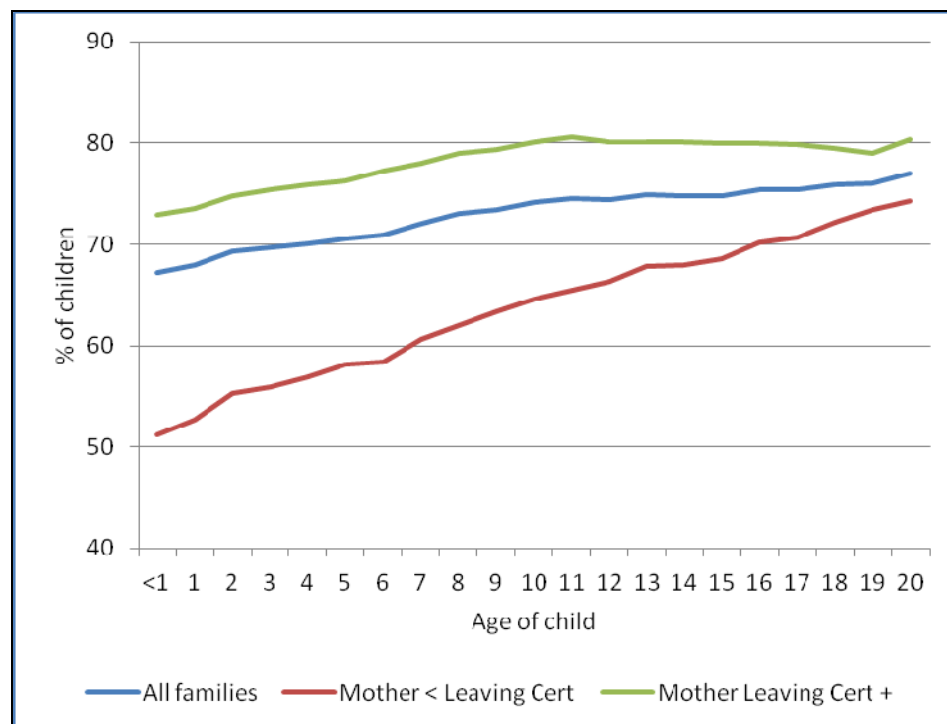
fathers to bring these children into a second union, even though men in general are more likely to form second unions than women (see Lunn *et al.*, 2009, pp.56-7).

#### 4.4 AGE OF CHILDREN AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF MOTHER

In addition to the overall distribution of children by family type, it is of interest to examine how the distributions for the most common family types differ by age of children and by the educational level of the mother. Age of child in this context can be interpreted partly as an indicator of family cycle stage and partly as a reflection of changes in family behaviour between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s, the period during which the children we are dealing with were born. The educational level of the mother can be viewed as an indicator of the socio-economic status of the family.

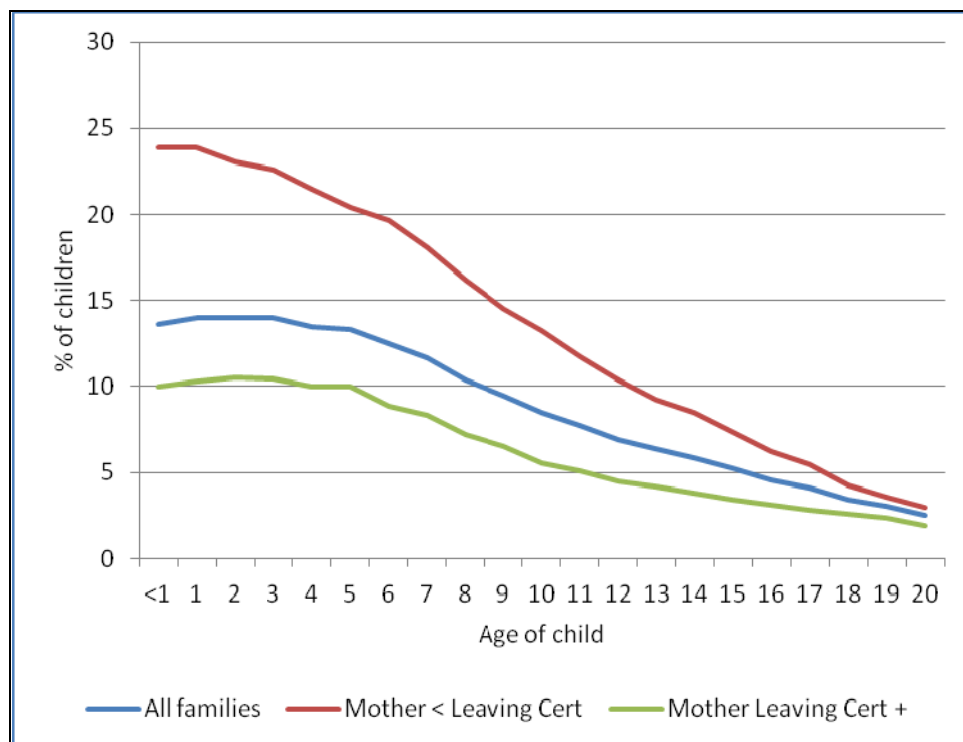
Figure 4.1 examines these distributions for what, as we saw from Table 4.2, is the dominant family type – the married couple where both partners are in their first marriage. The percentages of children who live in this dominant family type differ quite widely by the educational level of mothers, but this difference narrows considerably as we move from younger to older children. At under one year of age (children born in 2005-06), just over half of children whose mothers have less than a Leaving Certificate (51 per cent) live in this family type compared to 73 per cent of those whose mothers have a Leaving Certificate or more, a difference of 18 percentage points. Among ten year-olds (i.e. children born in 1995-1996), the percentages of children in this family type are higher for both educational categories with the gap between them narrowing only slightly to 16 percentage points. From this age on, the proportion of children of better educated mothers living in this family type levels off at around 80 per cent while the corresponding proportion among the children of less educated mothers continues to rise, reaching 74 per cent by age 20 and reducing the gap between the two groups to six percentage points.

**Figure 4.1: Children living in first-marriage couple families by age of the child and educational level of mother**



The upward slope of the curves in Figure 4.1 reflects the balance of parental transitions into and out of marriage as children age. As noted in the previous chapter, the likelihood that a couple is married rather than cohabits increases sharply after the birth of a first child. If we look to the second largest family type – lone mother families – we can get some sense of the other main drivers of the shifting balance of numbers in the major family categories. In Figures 4.2 and 4.3, we distinguish two sub-types of lone mother families – those headed by never-married lone mothers versus those headed by lone mothers who are separated, divorced or widowed (we already saw in Table 4.2 that the never-married lone mothers are somewhat more common than those who were formerly in a marriage). These graphs together show, first, that the incidence of children in these two types of lone mother families moves in opposite directions as children age: the children of never-married lone mothers become less common while those of previously married lone mothers become more common. These movements counterbalance each other, with the result that the proportion of children living in lone mother families of both types combined is close to constant as children age (in the range 15-16.5 per cent of all children). With the flow of children into and out of lone parent families roughly equating as children age, the increasing likelihood of living with married parents primarily reflects the decreasing likelihood of living with cohabitating parents.

**Figure 4.2: Children living in never-married lone-mother families by age of child and educational level of mother**

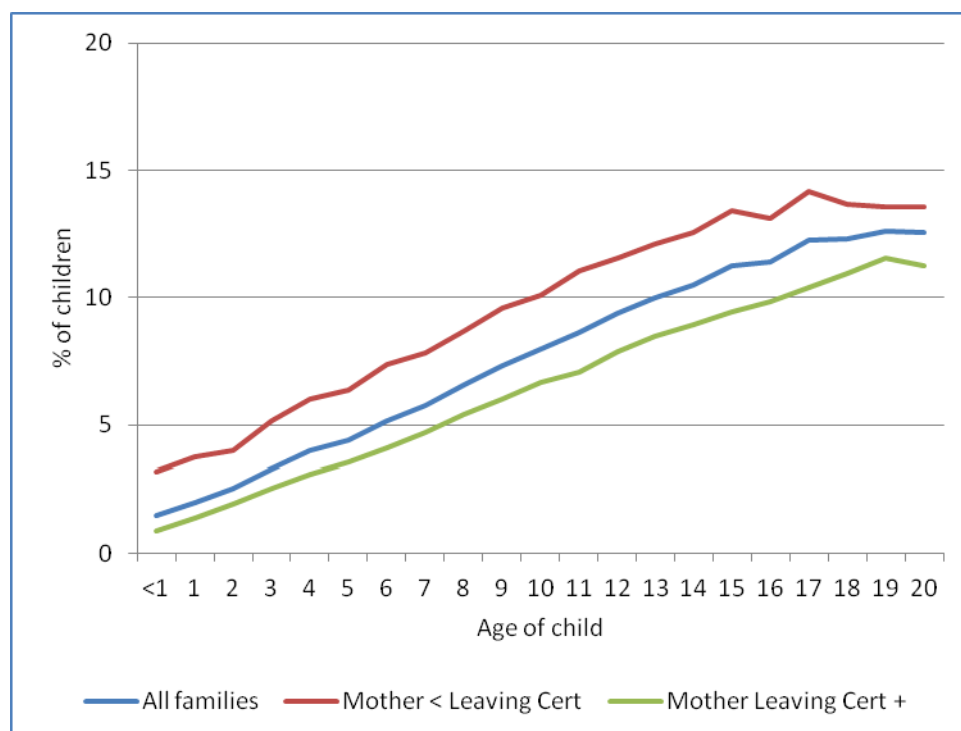


The graphs also show that the incidence of both types of lone mother families is differentiated by the educational level of mothers – both are more common among less educated mothers. However, these educational gaps evolve in different ways as children age: they start wide and become narrow in the case of children of never-married lone mothers while they start at a more moderate level and stay that way in the case of children with previously married lone mothers. This narrowing gap among the children of unmarried lone mothers reflects previous findings that the likelihood of unmarried lone motherhood is particularly high among less educated women in their twenties, while gaps by education level are less extreme at older ages.

It is also worth noting what Figure 4.2 suggests about the family situations of children who are recorded in birth registration data as born outside of marriage. Among children from birth up to the age of five, according to Figure 4.2, the proportion living with never-married lone mothers lies in the range 13-14 per cent (for further details, see the Appendix Table at the end of this chapter on births outside marriage and never-married lone parenthood). According to annual birth registration data, the proportions of children born outside marriage in the birth cohorts from which those children are drawn (i.e., births for the years 2001 to 2006, approximately) lie in the range 31-33 per cent. Looking at these two sets of figures together, we can conclude that young children counted in the census in 2006 as

living with never-married lone mothers represent considerably less than half (more precisely, in the range 41-42 per cent) of the children who were recorded at birth as born outside of marriage. The implication is that the balance of those aged under five years who were born outside marriage (that is, 58-59 per cent of these children) are counted in the census in 2006 as living with mothers who are in couple relationships and, therefore, do not appear in the count of lone-parent families. This is simply to remind us that births outside marriage do not equate to lone parenthood but rather, in over half of cases, occur to cohabiting parents.

**Figure 4.3: Children living in separated/divorced/widowed lone-mother families by age of child and educational level of mother**



As can also be seen from Figure 4.2 (see also Appendix Table), the proportion of children counted as living with never-married lone mothers begins to drop after the age of five: by age ten, 8.5 per cent are living with never-married lone mothers, compared to 13.2 per cent at age five, and by age 15, only 5.2 per cent are living with never-married lone mothers. These declines are due partly to the lower incidence of births outside marriage in earlier birth cohorts: in the birth cohort for 1991, for example (which corresponds approximately to 15 year olds in *Census 2006*), 16.9 per cent were born outside marriage, compared to 32.7 per cent for the 2006 birth cohort. But it may also be due to a somewhat lower 'survival' of such children in never-married lone mother families, that is, to the transition over time of some of those children into couple families as their mothers enter either cohabitation or marriage. For example, the proportion of 15-year olds counted in

*Census 2006* as living with never-married lone mothers is 5.1 per cent, which is the equivalent of less than one-third of those born outside marriage 15 years earlier and which contrasts with the four out of ten or so of under-fives who are in a similar position. If we make the assumption that these contrasts between the proportions of younger and older children living with unmarried lone mothers reflect a transition from lone parent families to couple families that occurs as these children grow older, then we can say that between age five and age 15 almost one-in-ten children born outside of marriage make that transition – and also that such transitions only begin to occur after children reach age five. This analysis suggests that a significant number of women who become never-married lone parents go on to form a partnership later, but it could also be remarked that the proportion who do so is quite small: based on the crude cross-sectional estimates presented here, it appears that only a minority of never-married lone mothers go on to form a partnership, perhaps of the order of one in ten. The more common experience for mothers who have children outside marriage is that either they are already in a couple when their child is born (as happens in almost six out of ten cases) or they remain alone as solo parents as their children grow up and begin to leave home (roughly three out of ten never-married lone mothers). It must be emphasised the linkages between birth registration data and census data on which these estimates are based are crude, but they nevertheless give useful pointers as to what the typical trajectories for never-married lone mothers may be. The low estimated likelihood that they enter marriage or cohabitation may be one of the reasons that the incidence of step-families and step-children remains low.

#### 4.5 CHILDREN IN STEP-FAMILIES

Some further insight into the population of step-families in Ireland can be gleaned by looking at the age-profile of and structure of children in such families and at the educational profile of their parents. Figure 4.4 shows the age-profile of children in step-families, distinguishing between non-step and step-children in those families. This shows that, as one might expect, step-children tend to be somewhat older (in view of the time needed for their parents to enter second unions) while their half-siblings tend to be younger (since they have arrived after the second union is formed). Step-children as a proportion of all children in families peak at age 13 (at 2.2 per cent) and decline thereafter, with a steeper decline after age 17. This steepening decline in older teenage years may partly reflect the novelty of step-family formation in Ireland, which would mean that it was less common in the families of older teenagers. It may also reflect a possible tendency for older step-children to leave the family home earlier than non-step-children.

Figure 4.4: Age-profile of children in step-families and the proportion made up by step-children

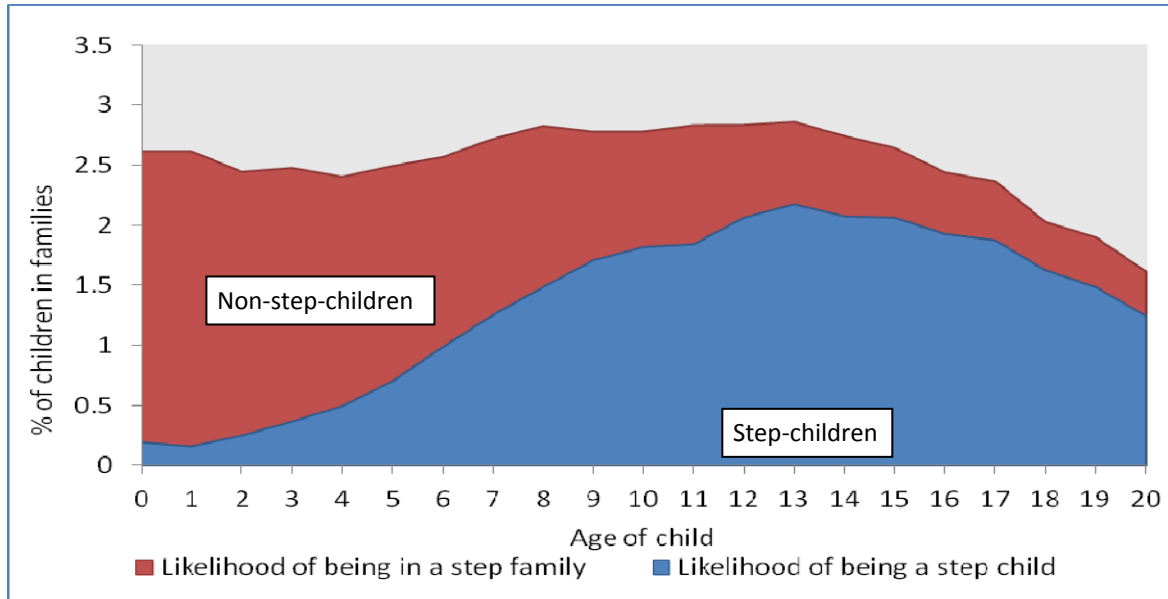
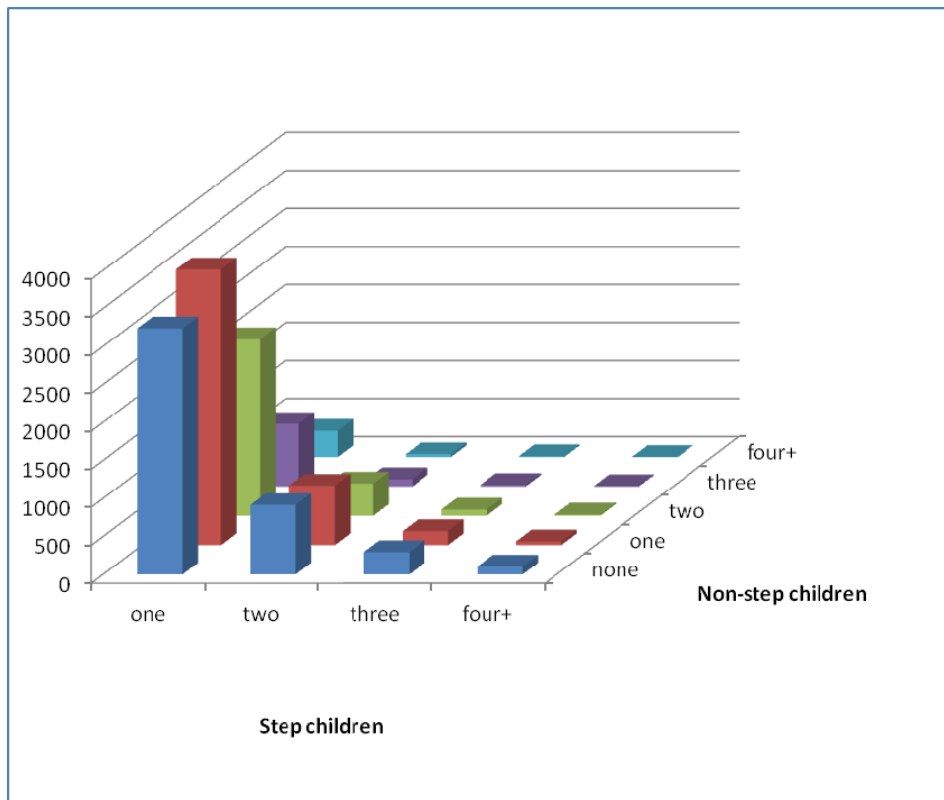


Figure 4.5 charts the distribution of step-and non-step-children within step-families. The large majority of step-families consist of a single step-child, who in most cases has younger half-siblings, with an age gap to the oldest half-sibling of eight years on average. Very few step-families have more than two step-children. Note that the

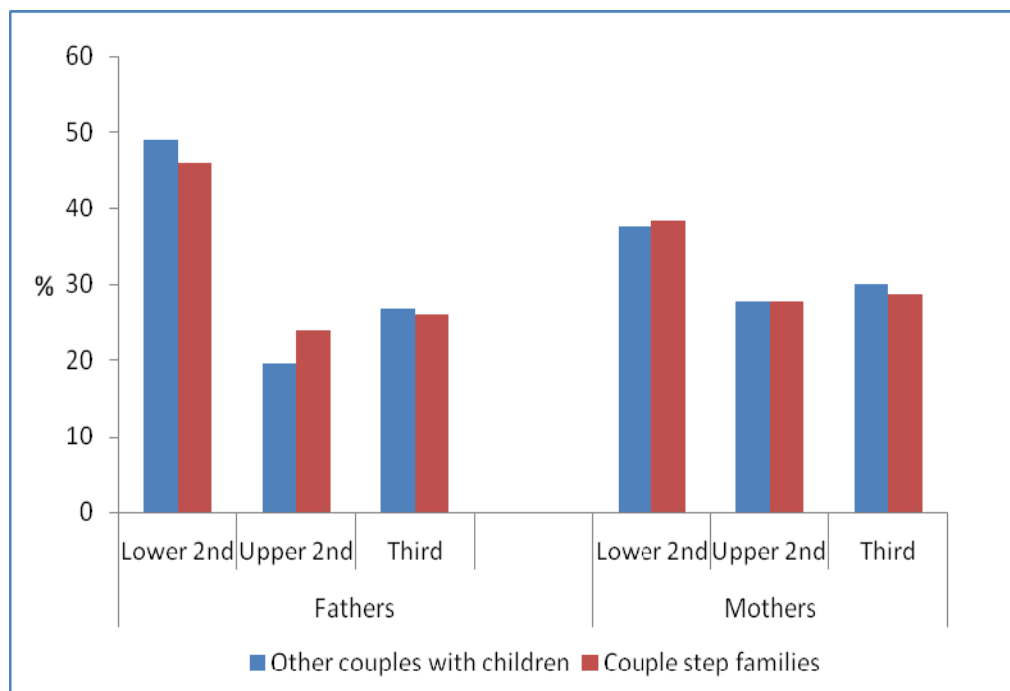
Figure 4.5: Distribution of step-and non-step-children in step-families



distribution in Figure 4.5 is likely to underestimate the number of non-step-children in the final family structure, because the chart gives a snapshot in 2006 – more non-step-children may be born after that date, whereas additional step-children are highly unlikely. Note also, however, that there may be cases where the step-child has older siblings from their biological parent's first relationship, who have either left home or who live with the parent's former partner. These extended family relationships are not captured by the census.

Previously we have seen that most aspects of family behaviour tend to differ by the educational level of parents. In Figure 4.6, however, we see that the incidence of step-families does not do so: the educational profile of both fathers and mothers in such families is more or less the same as it is for other couple families. For example, the proportion of mothers with lower second level education is just under 38 per cent for all couple families and just over 38 per cent for step-families. In view of the consistent pattern of differences in family behaviour by socio-economic status noted elsewhere in this and other studies in Ireland, this similarity in educational profile of parents between step-and non-step-families is surprising and is not easy to interpret. (The greater concentration of fathers than mothers in lower second level education shown in Figure 4.6 is a reflection of the patterns of educational matching of partners in Ireland examined in Chapter 2 above – these show that men tend to partner up in educational terms and women tend to partner down.)

**Figure 4.6: Educational profile of fathers and mothers in step-families and other couple families**



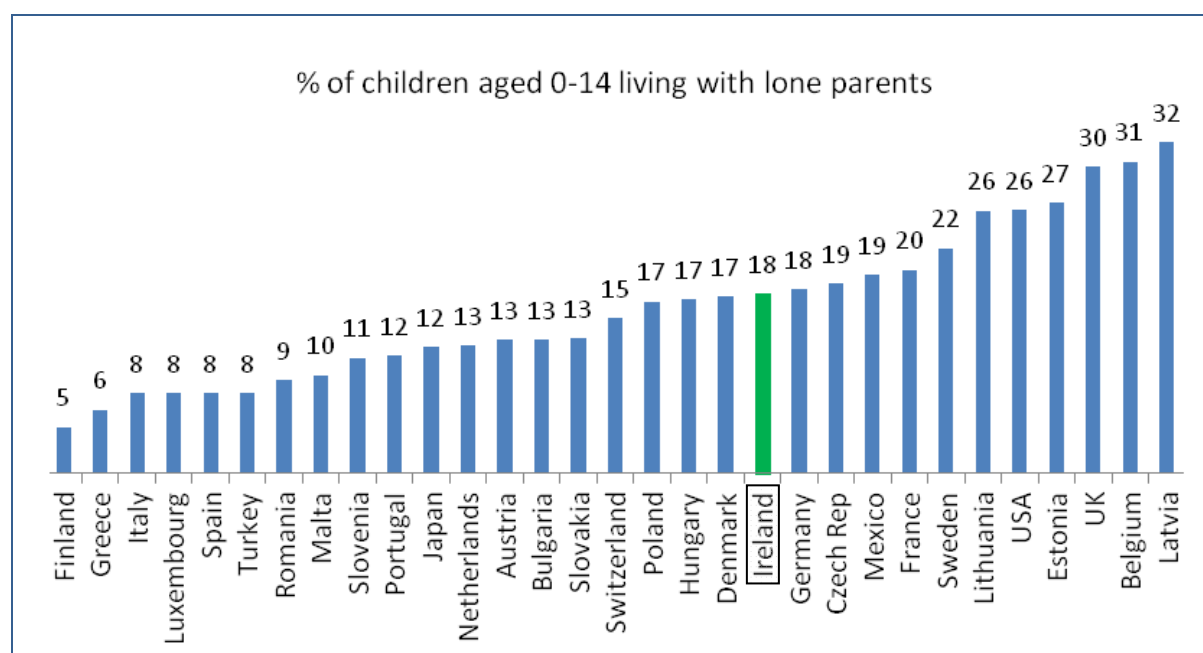


#### 4.6 INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

The central message emerging from the analysis of children’s family circumstances just presented is that ‘blended’ families are few in Ireland and therefore that step-children account for only a small proportion of all children. This in turn means that while some non-traditional family forms have grown quite rapidly, particularly the lone parent family, blended families created by the formation of second unions following the break-up of a first union have not. In order to throw some further light on these patterns, it is worth drawing on a range of international indicators to place the Irish case in context. These indicators are not detailed enough to be fully informative yet they provide some hints on distinctive features of the Irish situation.

First, according to the data shown in Figure 4.7, the incidence of lone parent families in Ireland is somewhat high: it is above the median for the 31 countries shown in Figure 4.7, in that 19 countries have lower rates while only 11 countries have higher rates. This somewhat high placing for Ireland is not entirely what one would expect in view of the rate of non-marital child-bearing found in Ireland, which is average by international standards, and the rate of marital breakdown, which is low (as documented in Lunn *et al.*, 2009). These two features together, which relate to entry into lone parenthood, might be expected to have produced a somewhat below-average rather than slightly above-average rate of lone parenthood in Ireland.

Figure 4.7: Children in lone parent families in 31 OECD countries



Notes: Data relate to 2007, except Ireland (2006), Switzerland (2000), Mexico and Sweden (2005). Data for Denmark, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland relate to children aged 0-17 years.

Sources: OECD Family Database, Table SF1.3.A, except Ireland – Census 2006 (data for Ireland are missing from OECD Family Database).

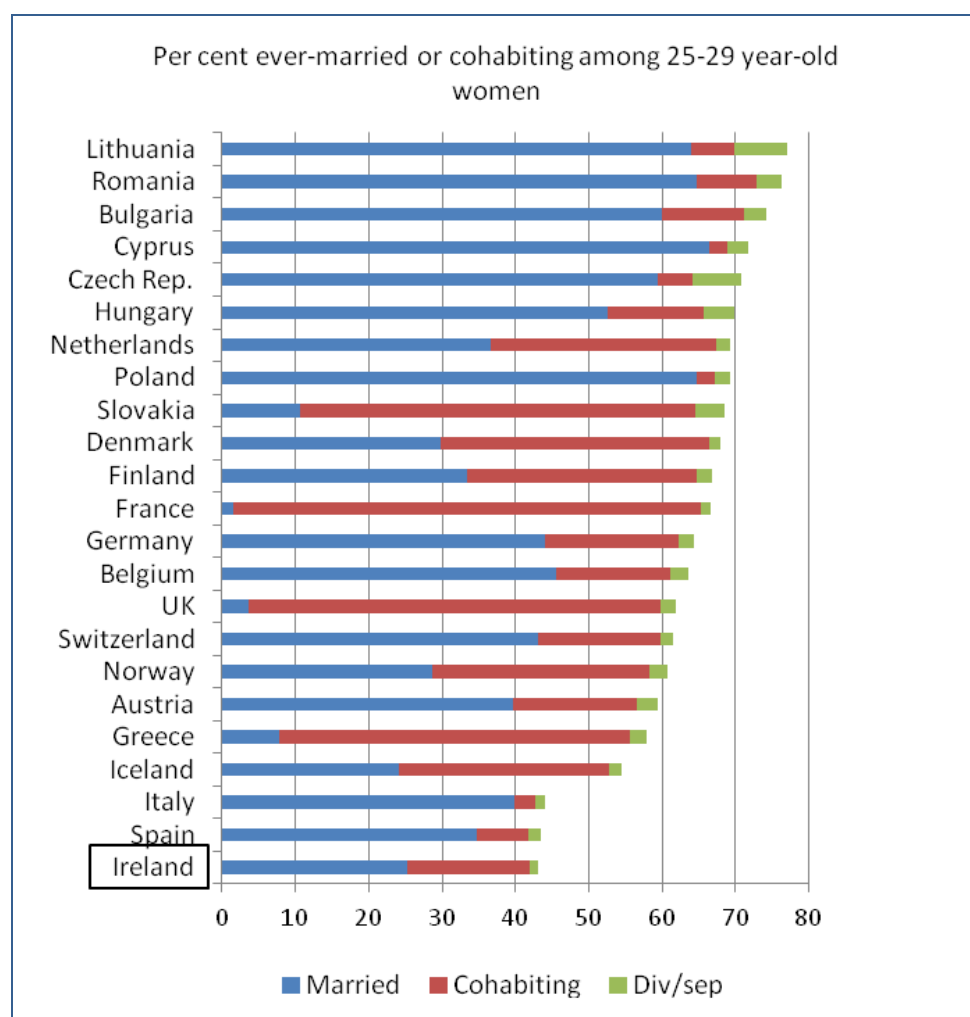
The two logical possibilities that might explain this slightly higher than expected rate of lone parenthood in Ireland are, first, that the rate of entry into lone parenthood is in fact higher than it appears from the data on non-marital births and marital breakdown and, second, that the rate of exit from lone parenthood through formation of second or subsequent unions is lower than in other countries.

As far as entry to lone parenthood is concerned, the standard international pattern is that the dominance of unmarried motherhood over marital breakdown as an entry route to lone parenthood noted earlier for lone parent families in Ireland is unusual. Among fifteen countries for which Bradshaw and Finch (2002) assembled family data in the late 1990s, Ireland was the only country where unmarried lone parents counted for more than half of all lone parents. The more usual pattern was that separation or divorce gave rise to 60-70 per cent of lone parent families, compared to 31 per cent in Ireland (Bradshaw and Finch, 2002, p. 27; see also Andersson, 2002). The dominance of unmarried motherhood as an entry route to lone parenthood in Ireland is unsurprising given the low rate of marital breakdown in this country. However, since the overall rate of lone parenthood is moderately high in Ireland despite a low contribution from marital breakdown, the contribution from unmarried motherhood must, therefore, be quite high by international standards. How can this be explained?

Here we can offer only some passing comment on this complex question. The key to the required explanation lies not in the rate of unmarried childbearing in Ireland, which is moderate by international standards, but in the degree to which unmarried mothers are in cohabiting couples or not. Some countries with high levels of unmarried parenthood, such as Denmark and Sweden, have low or moderate rates of lone parenthood because the majority of unmarried mothers live in cohabiting unions (in Sweden in the 1990s, for example, while 57 per cent of births were to unmarried mothers only 3 per cent were to lone mothers – Kennedy and Thomson, 2010, p. 491). The question then is whether Ireland is distinctive in the opposite direction, that is, in the degree to which unmarried mothers are *not* in cohabiting unions. This question cannot be answered directly as international data on the partnership status of unmarried mothers are not available. However, an indirect indication can be obtained from data on the partnership status of the young-adult population as a whole, that segment of the population within which most unmarried childbearing takes place. Figure 4.8 shows that among 25-29 year-old women in EU countries, Ireland, along with Spain and Italy, has a distinctively low proportion who are or have been in couples and thus a relatively large proportion who are not or were not previously in a marriage or an on-going partnership. This leaves these countries with a relatively large population of women in this age-band who are 'at risk' of unmarried lone motherhood (in Ireland at least, considerable levels of sexual activity occur within this population – see Layte *et al.*, 2006). In Italy and Spain, this

'risk' does not translate into high actual rates of lone parenthood – as Figure 4.7 above shows, both these countries have among the lowest rates of lone parenthood in Europe. So there is no necessary connection between high rates of singlehood among young women and high rates of lone parenthood. However, both Italy and Spain also have low rates of parenthood in general. They were among the lowest-fertility countries in the world in the 1990s and into the early 2000s so that they are characterised by a reluctance to have children under any circumstances and not just by a reluctance to have children as unmarried lone parents. Ireland, on the other hand, has long had and continues to have among the highest fertility rates in the developed world, of which, as we saw earlier, in the region of 86 per cent occurs to either married or cohabiting women. Furthermore, since Irish women delay entering cohabitation or marriage until relatively late ages, average age of childbearing is higher in Ireland than in other developed countries. It might be thought unsurprising, therefore, that the balance of childbearing which occurs among the quite large population of young women who are not in couples is as high as it appears to be.

Figure 4.8: Partnership status of young adult women in EU countries

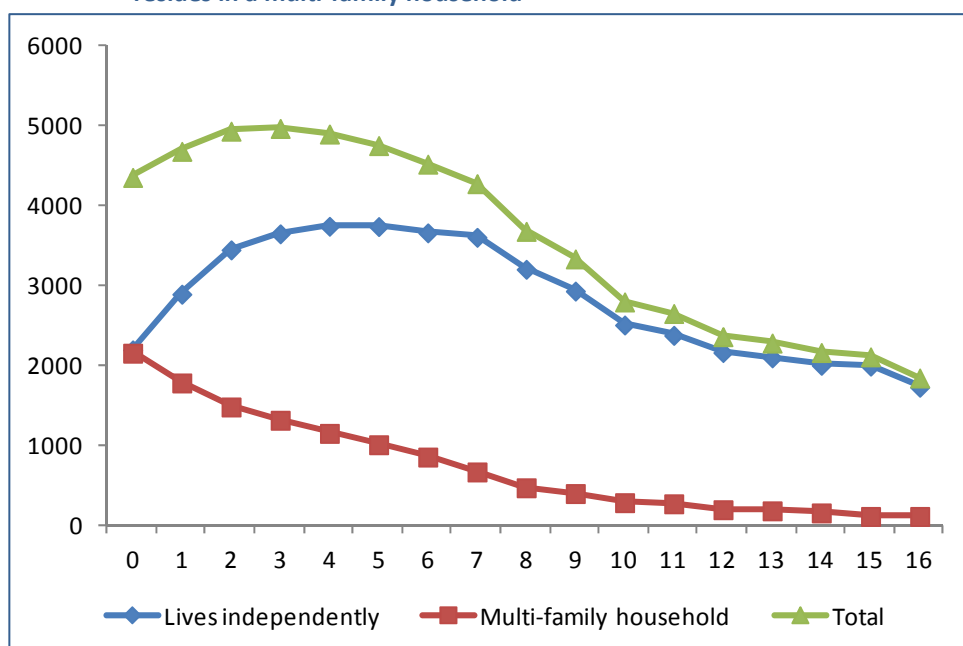


Source: Own calculations from Eurostat database. Data are drawn from the 2001 census round.

The implication of these reflections is that Irish levels of entry into unmarried lone motherhood has to be seen in the light of two intersecting tendencies among Irish women: to have more children than their counterparts in most other developed countries, and to delay having those children until the comparatively late ages at which they form ongoing unions. The latter 'waiting strategy' could be thought of as quite demanding to sustain consistently throughout the entire population of young adults and as prone to a certain level of breakdown particularly, as we saw earlier, among less educated young women. Unmarried lone motherhood in Ireland could thus be thought of as an outcome where the waiting strategy breaks down and, for the women involved, leads to an expression of the willingness to have children that occurs somewhat earlier in life and in less favourable partnership circumstances than it does for the majority of women.

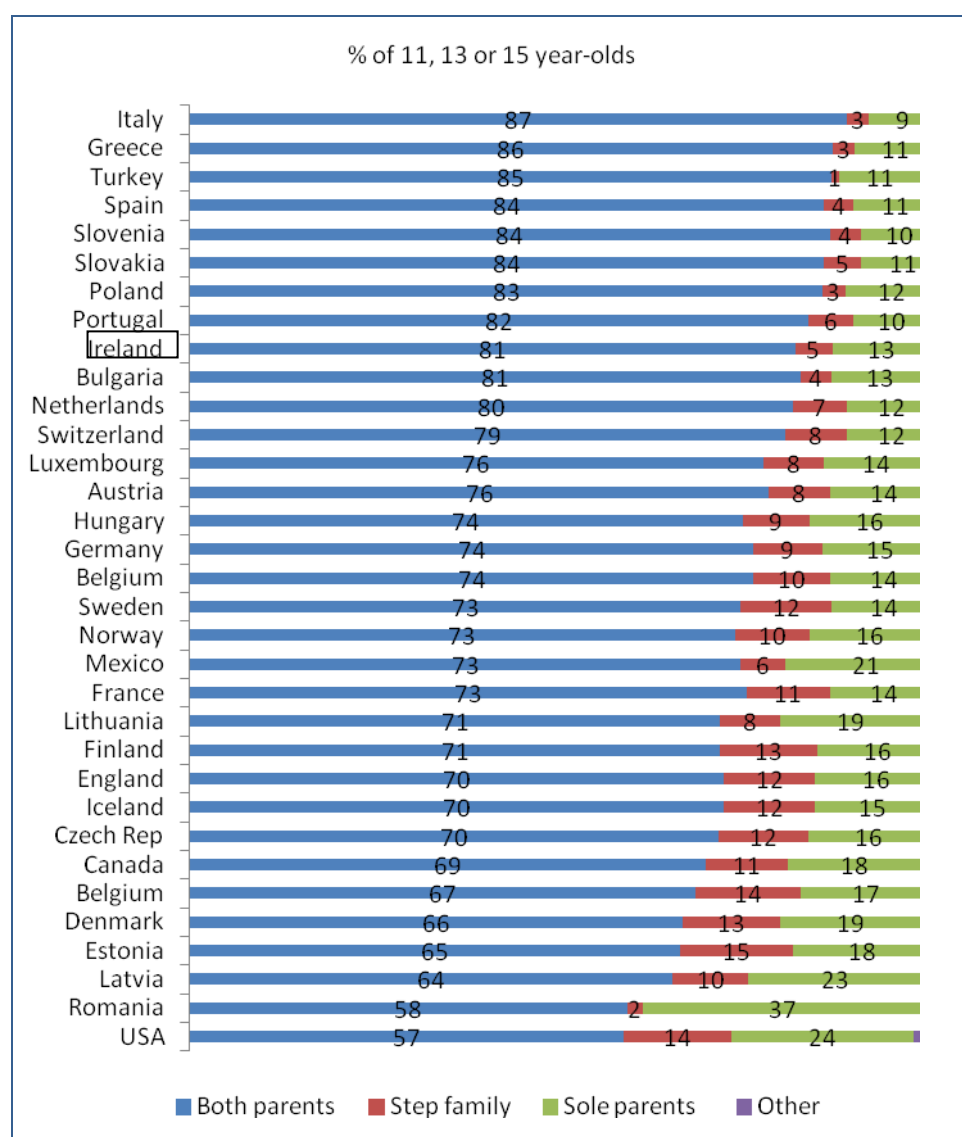
A further indication of this pattern is provided by the proportion of unmarried lone mothers recorded in the CRMF who reside in multi-family households, in the large majority of cases with their own parent(s). Figure 4.9 plots the number of never-married lone mothers by the age of the oldest child, distinguishing between those living independently in their own household, and those living in multi-family households. More than half of lone mothers of children under one year old do not live independently. While the likelihood of living independently increases quickly with the age of the child, it remains the case that more than 20 per cent of never-married lone mothers of children aged 16 or under, or almost 13,000, live in a multi-family household. This suggests that many mothers in this group are surrounded by an extended family support network, especially when their child is young. It also suggests that a significant proportion of never-married lone mothers in Ireland have children before they leave their own parents' family home. Additional analysis of this pattern by educational attainment reveals that the likelihood of living in a multi-family household does not differ greatly by socio-economic status.

**Figure 4.9: Number of never-married lone mothers by age of the oldest child and whether the family resides in a multi-family household**



In addition to rates of entry into lone parenthood, the second major set of determinants of the level of lone parenthood relates to rates of exit from lone parenthood through formation of second or subsequent unions, a process which leads to the creation of step-families. We have seen already that according to census data step-families are few in Ireland, implying a low rate of exit from lone parenthood through this mechanism (see Section 4.4 above). Figure 4.10 presents some international evidence on this issue based on survey data collected from 11, 13 and 15 year-olds. This evidence suggests that step-families are more common in Ireland than was suggested by census data reported above: 5 per cent of young Irish adolescents report themselves in this situation compared to less than 2 per cent identified in *Census 2006*. It also suggests that lone parenthood is somewhat less common than is reported in *Census 2006* at 13 per cent of children here compared

Figure 4.10: Living arrangements of young adolescents, 2005/06

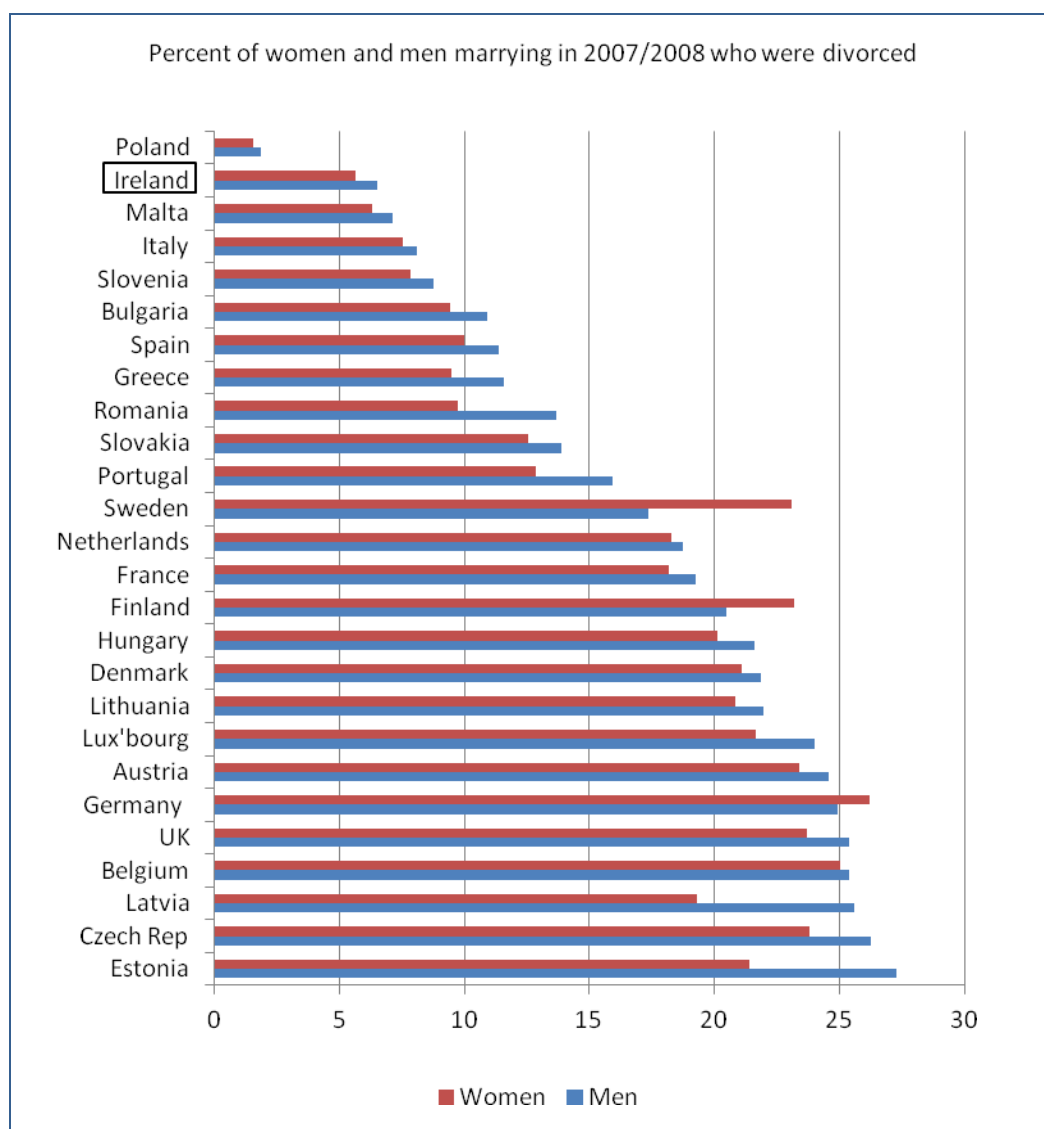


Source: OECD Family Database, Table SF1.3.B (data from Health Behaviour of School Aged Children surveys).

to over 18 per cent in the census. These divergences raise the possibility that there may be an intermediate phase in the transition from lone parent family to step-family where the partnership status of the lone parent may be unsettled or may be viewed differently by different members of the same family. In any event, despite uncertainties about the precise incidence of step-families in Ireland, the data in Figure 4.10 broadly confirm that that incidence is relatively low by international standards: Ireland lies in the bottom third of countries reported in the graph as far as share of children living in step-families in concerned.

Figure 4.11 adds a further pointer to this issue by showing that re-marriage following divorce is relatively unusual in Ireland: in 2007/08 only Poland had a smaller proportion of marriages where one or both of the partners had previously been

**Figure 4.11: Marriages where at least one partner was previously divorced**

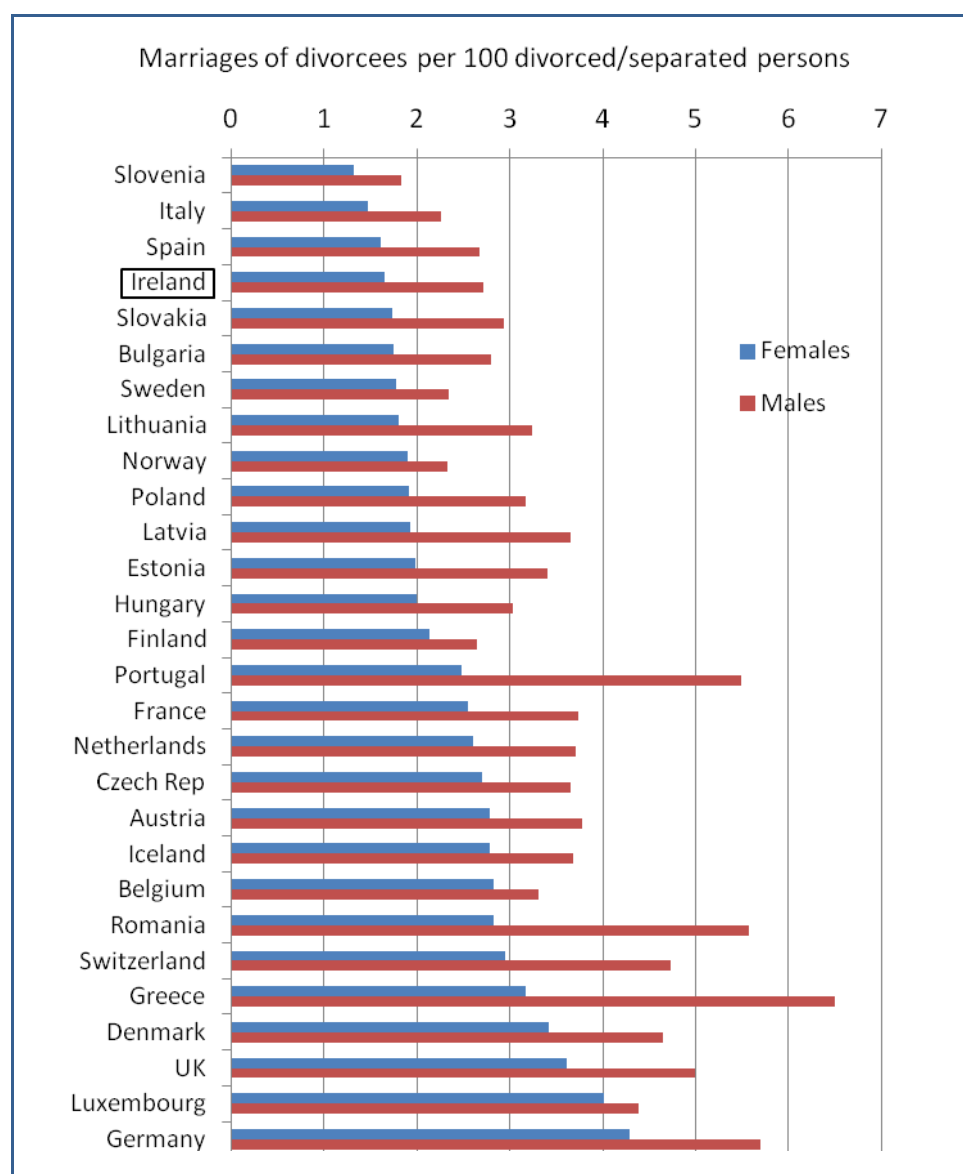


Note: Data for Ireland and France are for 2007, for all other countries, 2008.

Source: Eurostat database.

divorced. Furthermore, as Figure 4.12 shows, the small proportion of marriages in Ireland that involve divorcees arise not only because there are relatively few divorcees in this country but also because, even among those whose marriages have broken down, the re-marriage rate is low. More generally, these data reveal how a view of disruption in children's family circumstances based on lone parenthood alone can give an incomplete picture, since countries also differ in the degree to which couple families include significant proportions of step-families.

Figure 4.12: Re-marriage rate among the divorced or separated



Note: Data for Ireland are for 2006; data for all other countries are for 2001.

Source: Own calculations from Eurostat database and CSO data.

## 4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter has sought to add to our knowledge of children's family circumstances by exploiting the data on family structures available from the *Census 2006* CRMF. The value of those data lie in the new information they provide on complex family patterns, particularly those involving re-partnership and step-families.

The central overall conclusion of the chapter is that while this new information confirms the existence of complex family histories and structures in Ireland, it also suggests that the extent of these complex situations is more limited than might be expected. According to these data, only 2.5 per cent of children live in step-families and, of these, only half are step-children (the other half are children born to both parents after the step-family has been formed). Two major family types which are of relatively simple structure and are already well recognised dominate the scene: the two-parent family containing only the children of both parents and the lone-parent family. There are sub-varieties within these two major types: for about one-in-thirteen children living in two-parent non-step-families, the parents are cohabiting rather than married and for a considerably smaller minority (about one in twenty) one or other of the parents has been married before. It is possible in the latter cases that the children involved have step-siblings who live with the former partner for whom the present family is a second family, but these cases are likely to be few and if included in the count of step-families, would have little effect on the overall total. Among lone parent families, in something over half the parent has never been married and for the remainder the parent is separated, divorced or (in a small number of cases) widowed. The dominance of this limited range of family types means that the picture of bewildering complexity and diversity in family structure which is often portrayed as a feature of modern life could in fact be an exaggeration.

It might be said in particular that the 'serial family' in which partners form a family, leave it and then form another is relatively rare in Ireland. The more general pattern is that people make one attempt at family formation, perhaps starting either with marriage or with a period of cohabitation prior to marriage, in most instances they persist with that attempt, and in cases where the relationships fails or where it fails to get off the ground in the first instance, they are slow to make a second attempt. Furthermore, the tendency for people to wait until their late twenties or early thirties before they make their first foray into partnership adds to the sense that caution dominates behaviour in this area and also helps explain why the survival rate of partnerships (as indicated by the low rate of marital breakdown) is reasonably high.

A final point to note is that the dominance of the unmarried route into lone parenthood found in Ireland is unusual by international standards, prompting



questions about what underlies this feature. While it arises partly because marital breakdown is low and, therefore, adds less to lone parenthood than it does in other countries, it is also affected by what appears to be a greater tendency for women who become pregnant outside of marriage to go it alone and not cohabit with or marry the father of the child. It is in this connection that the possible disincentive effects on partnership of income supports for lone parents come into play, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Welfare payments to lone parents are conditional on their partnership status, so financial disincentives not to form or to conceal partnerships do exist. We cannot offer a firm view here on whether these disincentives have a substantial effect. However, we would caution against jumping to conclusions on this issue as there are general features of family behaviour in Ireland which are largely independent of welfare incentives and may also have a strong influence on behaviour. We identified these features here as the widespread tendency to delay union formation until a relatively late age, coupled with a greater willingness to have children than is evident in other countries. Willingness to have children is also reflected in what appears to be a low level of abortion among Irish women (see Fahey and Field, 2008, p. 39), although since abortion remains illegal and women who have abortions travel to do so, the available data to examine this issue are limited.

The general cultural features just described could be seen as conducive to levels of un-partnered child-bearing that are relatively high partly because the population of un-partnered young people who are at risk of such an outcome is large and partly because of reluctance to have recourse to abortion among women who become pregnant outside marriage. It should be recalled here also that part of the original rationale for the introduction of welfare supports for unmarried mothers in the 1970s was a desire to encourage women with crisis pregnancies to avoid the abortion option (McCashin, 2004, p. 178). Thus a rounded assessment of the incentives effects of lone parent family supports would have to take account of their possible downward impact on abortion rates as well as their possible upward impact on un-partnered parenting. A further consideration is that un-partnered parenting may itself indirectly make some contribution towards holding down the rate of partnership break-up. Those women who become pregnant and proceed to give birth as solo parents may not have had particularly promising relationships with the father of the child in the first place and, therefore, may be selecting out of potential unions with a higher than average risk of eventual failure and break-up. It would be quite a challenge to come up with data that would make it possible to test for the presence of such indirect effects. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that complex effects could be present and that it is, therefore, difficult to predict what the knock-on consequences of reform in social security provision in this area might be. Further research on the factors behind the incidence of lone parenthood and the possible role of financial incentives is required.

**Appendix Table: Children born outside marriage and children living with unmarried lone mothers: a comparison of birth registration and census data**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	
<b>Year of birth*</b>	Age-cohort <i>Census 2006*</i>	No. of births in birth cohort, reg. data	No. in age-cohort <i>Census 2006</i>	Age-cohort as % of birth cohort	No. of non-marital births in birth-cohort, reg. data	% non-marital births in birth-cohort	No. in age-cohort living w/unmarried lone mothers <i>Census 2006</i>	% in age-cohort living w/unmarried lone mothers	Column 6 as % of Column 4	No. living in families in <i>Census 2006</i>	Children in families as % of total**
<b>2006</b>	<1	65,425	61,076	93.35	21,397	32.7	7,953	13.02	37.2	58,419	95.6
<b>2005</b>	1	61,372	60,454	98.50	19,501	31.8	8,186	13.54	42.0	58,622	97.0
<b>2004</b>	2	61,972	60,672	97.90	19,798	31.9	8,266	13.62	41.8	59,048	97.3
<b>2003</b>	3	61,529	60,431	98.22	19,210	31.2	8,268	13.68	43.0	59,028	97.7
<b>2002</b>	4	60,503	59,619	98.54	18,879	31.2	7,849	13.17	41.6	58,188	97.6
<b>2001</b>	5	57,854	58,163	100.53	18,114	31.3	7,560	13.00	41.7	56,916	97.9
<b>2000</b>	6	54,789	58,197	106.22	17,266	31.5	7,091	12.18	41.1	56,863	97.7
<b>1999</b>	7	53,924	58,412	108.32	16,790	31.1	6,661	11.40	39.7	57,132	97.8
<b>1998</b>	8	53,969	57,117	105.83	15,492	28.7	5,809	10.17	37.5	55,961	98.0
<b>1997</b>	9	52,775	56,436	106.94	14,149	26.8	5,236	9.28	37.0	55,143	97.7
<b>1996</b>	10	50,655	54,491	107.57	12,797	25.3	4,505	8.27	35.2	53,271	97.8
<b>1995</b>	11	48,787	53,789	110.25	10,862	22.3	4,063	7.55	37.4	52,659	97.9
<b>1994</b>	12	48,255	53,469	110.81	10,049	20.8	3,610	6.75	35.9	52,186	97.6
<b>1993</b>	13	49,304	55,018	111.59	9,826	19.9	3,398	6.18	34.6	53,636	97.5
<b>1992</b>	14	51,089	57,105	111.78	9,211	18.0	3,226	5.65	35.0	55,383	97.0
<b>1991</b>	15	52,718	58,318	110.62	8,912	16.9	2,959	5.07	33.2	56,734	97.3
<b>1990</b>	16	53,044	56,551	106.61	7,767	14.6	2,520	4.46	32.4	54,864	97.0
<b>1989</b>	17	52,018	56,716	109.03	6,671	12.8	2,200	3.88	33.0	53,814	94.9
<b>1988</b>	18	54,600	58,326	106.82	6,483	11.9	1,740	2.98	26.8	50,694	86.9
<b>1987</b>	19	58,433	60,346	103.27	6,347	10.9	1,399	2.32	22.0	45,930	76.1
<b>1986</b>	20	61,620	64,091	104.01	5,946	9.6	1,095	1.71	18.4	43,477	67.8
<b>Totals</b>		<b>1,164,635</b>	<b>1,218,797</b>	<b>104.65</b>	<b>275,467</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>103,594</b>	<b>8.50</b>	<b>37.6</b>	<b>1,982</b>	<b>0.2</b>

\* Matching of age-cohorts in *Census 2006* with data recorded in their years of birth is approximate: *Census 2006* was taken in April 2006, so that those recorded at each year of age in *Census 2006* overlap two birth years (e.g., those aged under one year were born between April 2005 and April 2006 and thus are drawn from the birth cohorts for 2005 and 2006). In addition, matching takes no account of migration, which causes greater deviation between age-cohorts and births cohorts as age increases. Matched values are, therefore, intended to indicate relative orders of magnitude in age-cohorts and birth cohorts rather than precise estimates.

\*\* Counts children living with parental families only; excludes children living with other relatives, in institutions and cases where the family structure is unclear on the census form.

Sources: CSO Vital Statistics and Census 2006 CRMF.



# Chapter 5

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## Fertility

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The modern decline in fertility rates commenced in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and aside from a recovery during the 'baby boom' years of the 1940s and 1950s maintained a steady downward course until the end of the twentieth century (Therborn, 2004). By the 1990s, no country in Europe had a total fertility rate (TFR, see Section 5.4 for definition) above the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman and the average TFR for the European Union as a whole was below 1.5. A number of countries in southern and eastern Europe and in Asia had even lower fertility, with some falling below 1.3, a threshold which came to be referred to as 'lowest-low' fertility (Kohler, Billari and Ortega, 2002, 2006). Over the past decade, however, fertility decline has halted and a modest recovery has set in, at least in Europe: by 2008, no EU country had fertility below the 'lowest-low' threshold and the TFR for the EU as a whole had risen to 1.6. Scholars were coming to the conclusion that the years of very low fertility which had characterised the 1990s were more a transitory result of the widespread postponement of births than a permanent shift to critically low levels of child-bearing (Goldstein, Sobotka and Jasilioniene, 2009). By historical standards, European fertility today remains low – most of the continent is still well below the replacement level of 2.1 – but the extremely low levels of the 1990s have not persisted.

The fall in family size that was almost universal in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century occurred only slowly in Ireland (Guinnane, 1997), with the result that by mid-twentieth century fertility in Ireland was uniquely high by contemporary western standards, even though it was considerably lower than it had been in Ireland (and in most of Europe) half a century earlier. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, a combination of falling family size and declining rates of couple formation caused fertility in Ireland to converge downwards towards the international norm for developed countries. By the time the Irish TFR bottomed out in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it had fallen to below 2. This placed it below the level of the United States – the new top performer in fertility among developed countries – but it continued to be among the highest in Europe. Since the mid-1990s, the general modest European rise in fertility occurred in Ireland, as the TFR rose from 1.84 in 1995 (its lowest level ever) to 2.07 in 2009. The result is that over the past two decades or so, fertility in Ireland has no longer been the international exception that

it once was but it has continued to be at the top edge of the range found in developed countries. Irish performance in this area has been strong enough that Ireland does not face the prospect of a sharply declining population containing an increasing proportion of older people, which is the fate of a number of EU countries, especially in Southern Europe.

One factor which has undoubtedly been important, both in fertility and in overall population trends in Ireland and in Europe generally, is migration. Inward migration has a direct effect on population through its role in boosting numbers of residents but it also has an indirect effect through its impact on fertility and the size of the child population. Migrants tend to consist of young adults who are in (or are about to enter) the family formation stages of the life cycle and thus have an impact on fertility trends and patterns in the countries they move to. It is likely that at least some of the recovery in European fertility that has occurred since the mid-1990s is due to a sustained surge in immigration and its consequent effects on birth rates, particularly where immigrants have higher fertility than natives (Sobotka, 2008). In Ireland, the CSO *Vital Statistics* series has recorded data on births by nationality of mother only since 2007, and since 2010 information on nationality of fathers. These data confirm the importance of the migration effect on fertility: over the years 2007-2010, between 20 and 25 per cent of births were to non-Irish mothers.<sup>8</sup> Similar data are not available for the years prior to 2007, so there is some interest in exploring other sources, such as the 2006 CRMF, for what it can reveal on this question in these earlier years. In addition, there are two further aspects to the migration effect on fertility and the size of the child population in Ireland which need to be explored. One is the contribution of return Irish migration to fertility, an issue which is not captured in data nationality of parents since the parents in question would record themselves as Irish nationals. The other is the role of migration among children themselves, an issue which could be important to the extent that adult migrants have started their families before they move and thus bring children with them.

Many other factors affect fertility and these are not well understood. This is partly so because the influence of some factors seems to change over time (Kohler et al., 2006). In the 1970s, the countries with higher fertility rates tended to be those in which people married earlier and were less likely to divorce. Yet over the subsequent 20-year period, these correlations vanished. Meanwhile, the previously negative correlation between fertility and extra-marital births reversed and became positive. Of particular importance for modern fertility rates, the negative correlation between female labour force participation and fertility also reversed. More advanced

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<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to be more precise than this, because of the significant and variable proportion of cases for which information on the nationality of the mother is missing.

statistical techniques using cross-country panel data suggest that better labour market opportunities are now associated with higher fertility rates (D'Addio and D'Ercole, 2005; see also Bongaarts, 2002; Kohler, Billari and Ortega, 2006; Goldstein, Sobotka and Jasilioniene, 2009). Note that this change did not come about because better job prospects for women increased fertility in some countries, but rather because countries with less advantageous labour markets for women experienced the largest declines in fertility over recent decades.

In Ireland, the economic boom from 1994 to 2007 may have helped to maintain its high fertility rate. That boom was partly driven by a very large and rapid increase in female labour force participation. Thus, the Irish case is consistent with the view that better job prospects for women limited the extent of the decline in fertility. Interestingly, however, Ireland's TFR has thus far held up during what has been a very severe recession. More generally, there may be many other factors that help to explain high Irish fertility, just as other factors are required to explain the international variation. Changes in fertility continue to defy simple explanations.

## 5.2 AIMS OF THE PRESENT ANALYSIS

The international and domestic patterns of fertility just discussed provide essential context for the present analysis, which uses the 2006 CRMF to look more closely at patterns of fertility in Ireland at the individual level. The aim is to build upon the previous analysis of Lunn, Fahey and Hannan (2009), which examined relationships between individual background characteristics and responses to the specific survey question on fertility reintroduced for *Census 2006*. This question asked women simply to state how many children (born alive) they had given birth to. Multivariate analysis revealed that the likelihoods of having had at least one child by age 30, at least one child by age 40, and four or more children at age 40-44, were strongly linked to a woman's educational attainment. Controlling for a range of background characteristics, including age, those with higher attainment were inclined to have had fewer children. The analysis also found strong effects of other background characteristics, specifically, the likelihood of having had children was strongly related to women's religious affiliation, ethnicity and nationality. This suggests an influence of belonging to particular social groups, perhaps mediated through norms or values.

The findings are consistent with some international evidence. The negative relationship between educational attainment and fertility at the individual level has

typically been found in other countries too.<sup>9</sup> However, some more recent work in the US suggests that fertility may have begun to increase among better educated women there (Shang and Weinberg, 2009). International research has also suggested a role for norms and/or values. Changing attitudes to female roles help to explain cross-country fertility differences (D’Addio and D’Ercole, 2005). Ethnicity is strongly associated with fertility in the US, where recent work has also found strong individual-level effects of religiosity and even geographic effects linking higher fertility to areas more inclined to vote Republican (Preston and Sten Hartnett, 2008). This potential role for norms and/or values, in addition to socio-economic influences on fertility, raises interesting questions about the importance of fathers’ background characteristics, perhaps especially where the father and mother do not share the same cultural background. Information on fathers is not explored in most work on the determinants of fertility, usually because it is not available in the data.

The 2006 CRMF data aggregated to the household level has two distinct advantages over individual-level data for investigating these issues more deeply. First, it allows us to isolate births that took place in specific years prior to *Census 2006*. The analysis in Lunn *et al.* (2009) was based on data on women’s fertility which provided no information on the ages of their children or the year they were born – it simply reported the total number of children for each woman. Thus, the results for women in the later stages of their childbearing years would have been indicative of behaviour in the preceding one to two decades, with very recent changes in fertility potentially blurred out. The present analysis can identify the ages of children still resident in their mother’s household and, therefore, enables us to isolate more recent changes in childbearing trends and to relate them to background characteristics. The second advantage is that, where the father is resident in the household, it is possible to address the extent to which his characteristics are related to a couple’s decisions to have children. Since we have only information on present partnership status and no information on the history of relationships, this analysis focuses only on births in the year prior to *Census 2006*.

These advantages allow us to investigate the following issues. We first compare the number of resident children enumerated in *Census 2006* to the number of births in Ireland in the preceding years, as recorded in the CSO’s *Vital Statistics* series. This

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<sup>9</sup> It is somewhat paradoxical that this individual-level relationship holds, while at the aggregate level, countries with higher female educational attainment now tend to have higher fertility levels. In part, this may reflect the extent to which individual-level analyses tend to lag behind country-level analyses. A fuller explanation probably requires a combination of factors that vary internationally and domestically to differing degrees. For instance, one or more factors with substantial cross-country variation might relate higher aggregate educational attainment to higher fertility, such that women at all education levels are more likely to have children (e.g., the ease of combining work and childbearing), while one or more factors with greater domestic variation (e.g., returns to educational attainment) might mean that within each country those with lower attainment are likely to have more children.

allows us to gauge the extent to which births in Ireland translate into resident children, which provides insight into the net migration patterns of very young children, as well as being important from a planning perspective also. We then present a detailed analysis of recent changes in the distribution of mothers' ages at childbearing by educational attainment, which suggests that the usual association between fertility and educational attainment may be changing. Further analysis encompasses the background characteristics of fathers as well as mothers, focusing particularly on education and religion. Lastly, we look at the influence on childbearing of whether couples are married or cohabit, and how this may differ by educational attainment.

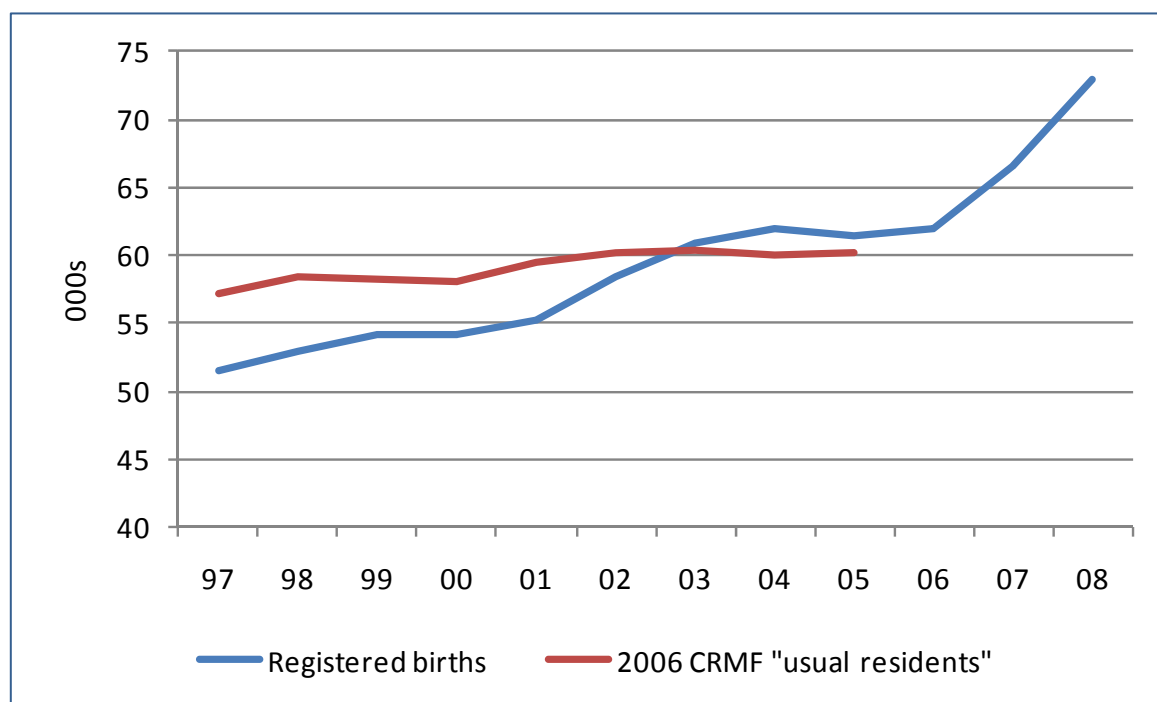
### 5.3 THE NUMBER OF BIRTHS

The annual number of births in Ireland has risen dramatically in recent years. The decade from 1998 to 2008 saw births climb from 53,000 to almost 73,000 per year – an increase of 38 per cent. However, the demographic significance of this recent baby boom requires careful interpretation, because its impact on the size of the child population in Ireland can be affected in complex ways by migration, particularly migration among families with young children. Furthermore, we need to understand more clearly whether the surge in births was due to an increase in the number of women close to peak childbearing age, rather than an increase in the inclination to have children. This section briefly examines these two issues in order to contextualise the increase in the number of births.

Figure 5.1 compares the trend in the number of births, as recorded in the CSO's *Vital Statistics*, with that in the number of resident children born in each year as enumerated in *Census 2006*. A small difference between these measures due to mortality is to be expected, but the changing relationship between the trends shown in this figure suggests that substantial levels of net migration occurred among young children in the decade prior to 2006. Furthermore, the crossover between the two trends for the 2002 birth cohort suggests that the balance of migration changed over this period: for the birth cohorts from 1997 to 2001, net migration was inwards (*Census 2006* counted considerably more children in these birth cohorts than were born in Ireland), while for the birth cohorts from 2003 to 2005, the opposite occurred in that *Census 2006* counted fewer children in these birth cohorts than were born in Ireland.



**Figure 5.1: Comparison of number of recorded births and the number of resident children by year of birth enumerated in *Census 2006***



Source: CSO Vital Statistics/2006 CRMF.

Thus, the substantial rise in the number of births during this period apparently did not translate directly into a similarly substantial increase in the number of resident children. Given the high level of overall net *immigration* at the time, this changing pattern of migration among young children is not straightforward to explain and may reflect a number of potential factors. One is that during this period there was a decline in the proportion of new immigrants accounted for by returning Irish emigrants, who may have been more likely than non-Irish immigrants to arrive with children. Another is the significant change to the composition of nationalities making up the non-Irish immigrants, which may have been related both to fertility and to the likelihood of long-term residency. Another possibility is that at least some people at this time came to Ireland for a relatively short period during which they had a child.<sup>10</sup>

A further aspect of Figure 5.1 is the sharp increase in the number of births after 2006, which coincided with a much more modest rise in the TFR. Lunn *et al.* (2009) noted that the demographic profile recorded in *Census 2006* was such that there were over 12 per cent more 25 year-old women than 30 year-old women. With such

<sup>10</sup> Until 2005, children born in Ireland were automatically entitled to citizenship. This entitlement was removed partly in response to concerns that it was being used as a tactical method for immigrants to gain access to the EU. It is thus possible that this entitlement increased the number of babies born in Ireland around that time to parents intending to be only temporary residents.

a large imminent rise in the numbers approaching peak childbearing age, a sharp increase in the birth rate in subsequent years was inevitable. Consequently, it is worth noting that the recent pressures experienced by Ireland's maternity hospitals were at least partly foreseeable on the basis of the *Census 2006* data.

To what extent will the much higher number of births in recent years translate into higher numbers of resident children? This will largely depend on the degree to which the recent increase in emigration caused by the recession involves families with young children. Around half of the difference between the numbers of resident 25 year-old and 30 year-old women in 2006 was down to the age profile of non-Irish nationals, who may (or may not) be more likely than Irish nationals to leave Ireland in difficult economic times. It is, therefore, possible that a significant proportion of young children born in Ireland will head elsewhere. We will have to wait for the detailed results of *Census 2011* to get a proper estimate. The scale of the increase in births is such that its translation into more resident children could have important planning implications, not least for the provision of schools.

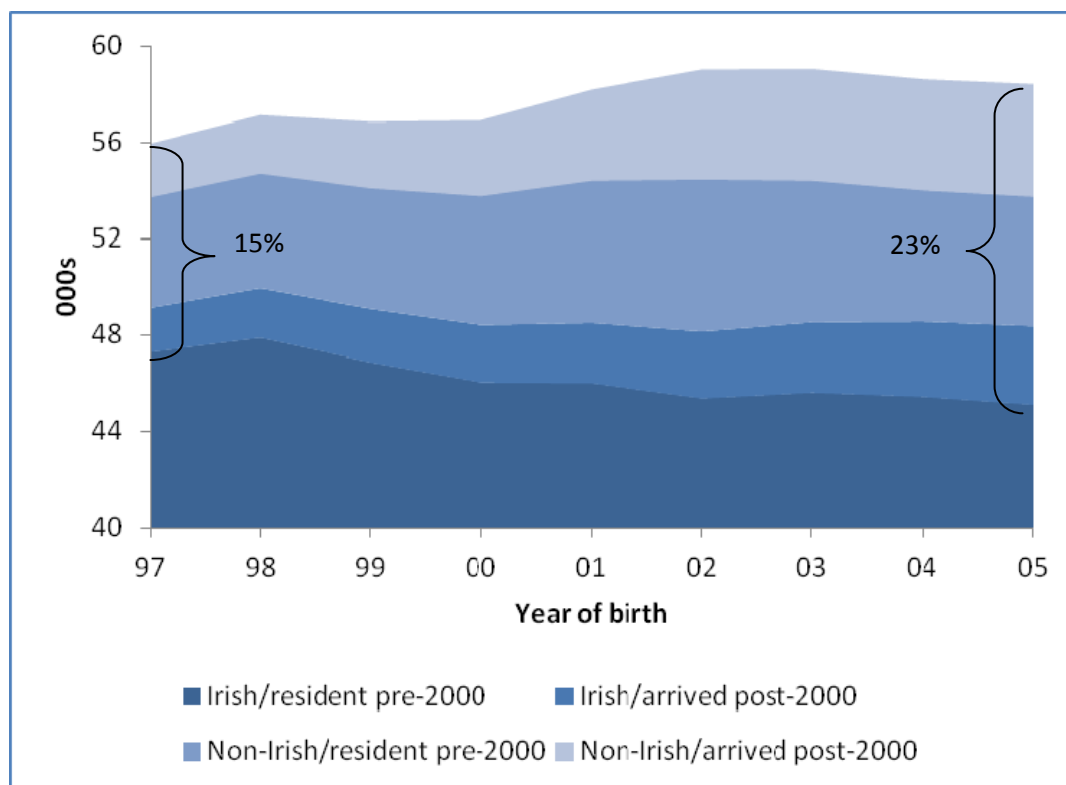
Given the influence of migration, it is instructive to use the CRMF 2006 to break down the numbers of resident children in 2006 by whether they have an Irish mother and whether she was resident in Ireland prior to 2000.<sup>11</sup> This breakdown is presented in Figure 5.2, which reveals that the increase in the number of resident children with year of birth was entirely due an increase in children of non-Irish nationals, who accounted for 23 per cent of children born in the year prior to *Census 2006* – in close accordance with the proportion recorded by the CSO since 2007 (see above). Figure 5.2 also reveals that returning Irish nationals accounted for an increasing proportion of children born more recently. Interestingly, however, longer-term Irish residents have been accounting for a declining number of children born since 1998, despite the overall increase in the number of births.<sup>12</sup> At first sight this might suggest further declines in the propensity of Irish people to have children, but to get more insight we need to examine the number of births per woman and changes in the ages at which women have been giving birth in greater detail.

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, we separate out what could be termed the more permanent resident population, individuals who have either never lived outside Ireland or were returning emigrants prior to or in the early phase of Ireland's boom. The analysis is limited to children living with a parent, but as Figure 5.2 showed, this is not significantly related to the trend. In the case of the small proportion of children living with lone fathers, the nationality and immigration history of the father is used.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Figure 5.3 is likely to underestimate the decrease in the number of births to Irish residents prior to 2000, since there is a higher probability that families with children born in 1998 than families with children born in 2005 will have since emigrated.

**Figure 5.2: Number of resident children enumerated in *Census 2006*, living with a parent, by year of birth, nationality and immigration history of the mother**



Source: 2006 CRMF.

#### 5.4 AGE AT CHILDBEARING AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

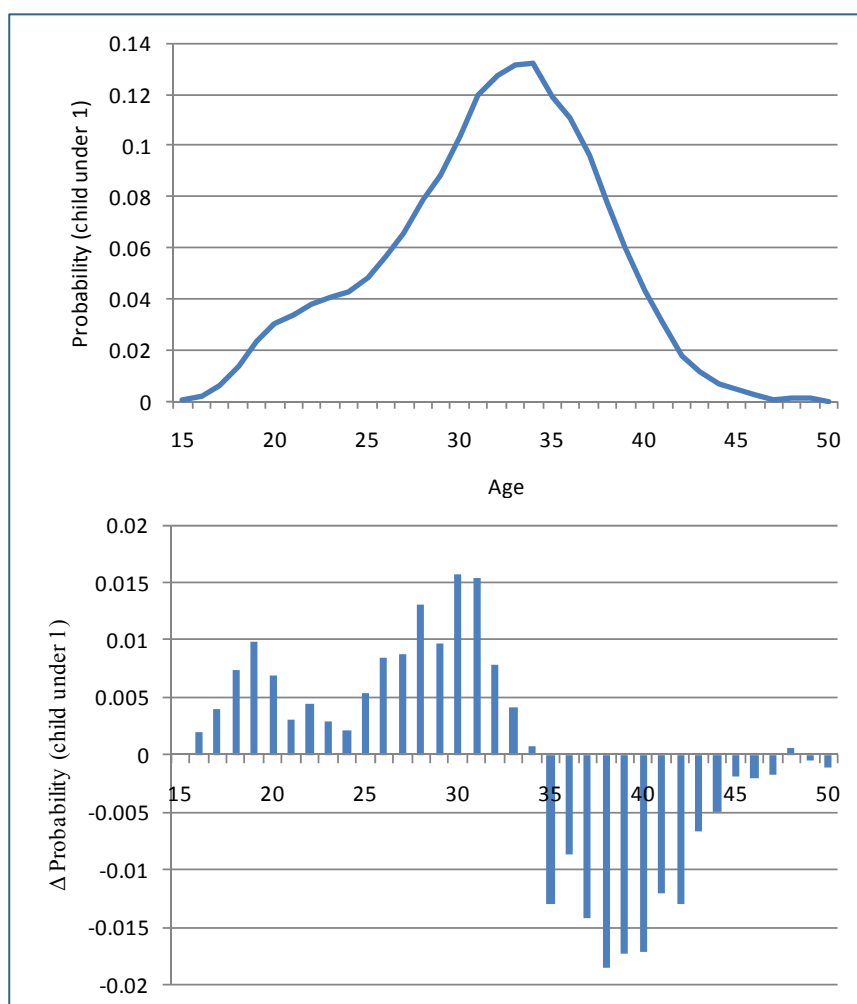
The detailed age-structure of families available in the CRMF permits a fine-grained analysis of the pattern of childbearing across the life course, which turns out to differ markedly by educational attainment. To aid subsequent analyses, Figure 5.3 (top) first plots the probability of having a child who was less than one year old in 2006 by the age of the mother, for the female population as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The probability rises steadily to a peak at 33-34 years, at which age more than one-in-eight women has an infant aged under one year, after which it falls fairly rapidly.

The most commonly used international measure of fertility, the Total Fertility rate (TFR) is easily understood from Figure 5.3 (top). The TFR for any given year is the number of children a hypothetical woman would have by the end of her childbearing years if she were subject to the prevailing fertility rates for each age during that year. In other words, it is the number of children a woman would have if she were to follow the life course depicted in the top panel of Figure 5.3. This equates to the

<sup>13</sup> For the very small number of infants with lone fathers we have no information on the mother's age. We, therefore, employ the father's age with two years subtracted to reflect the average age difference between men and women in couples.

total of the area under the distribution, which for this 2006 CRMF gives a TFR of 1.83 children per woman.<sup>14</sup> Before looking at how the distribution of age at childbearing and the TFR vary across categories of educational attainment, we note that there is an important (and partly unresolved) issue as to the extent to which the TFR accurately captures prevailing fertility rates. The issue, which surrounds so-called “tempo effects”, is highly technical and not of direct relevance for the subsequent analysis in this chapter. However, it raises the possibility that the TFR, which is used extensively for official statistics, population projections and international comparisons of fertility trends and policy, has underestimated underlying Irish fertility quite substantially in recent decades. We, therefore, present a separate analysis of this issue in the Appendix to this report, based on the 2006 CRMF.

**Figure 5.3: Probability of having a child under one year of age in April 2006 by age of mother (top) and change in the probability relative to being one year younger (bottom)**



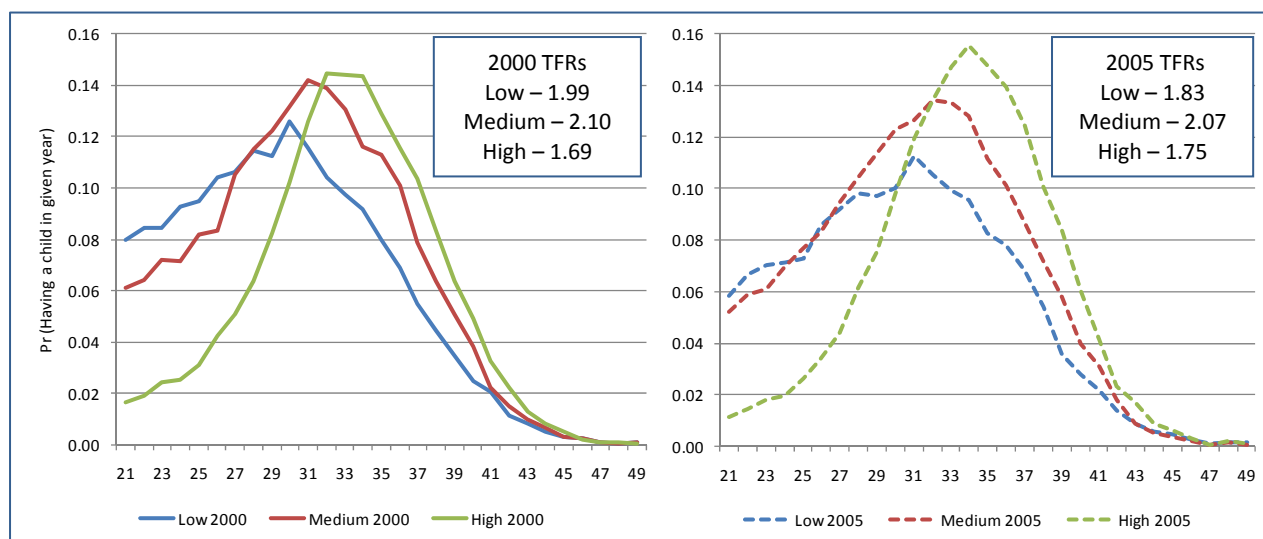
Source: CRMF 2006.

<sup>14</sup> This is close to the “official” figures for the same period issued by the CSO (c.1.88 for 2005, 1.96 for 2006), which are calculated from the number of recorded births and the estimated population profile. There are a number of potential reasons for the slight discrepancy, including the small number of people not enumerated in *Census 2006*, the migration pattern of young infants (see Section 5.3), international adoptions, and the use here of one-year (April to April) rather than five-year (calendar) age-bands. Migration probably accounts for the bulk of the disparity.

For present purposes, note that the distribution depicted in Figure 5.3 is far from smooth. The bottom panel shows the change in the probability of having a child under the age of one relative to being one year younger; that is, it graphs the slope of the curve in the top panel. This is instructive because it reveals when in a woman's life the likelihood of giving birth most changes, revealing that changes primarily occur in three distinct phases of the life course. First, the probability of having a child rises in early adulthood, mostly due to the increase in the likelihood of becoming a lone mother at around this age. Second, there is a stronger increase in the late twenties and early thirties, associated with reaching the peak years of family formation and childbearing. One notable aspect of this peak is that the greatest increases in the probability of giving birth occur very precisely at and just after 30 years. This may be coincidental, but it may also reflect psychological factors associated with the salience of turning 30. Third, there is a very rapid decline in the probability of giving birth from age 35 onwards. This phase largely reflects decisions to stop having children, but it also coincides with the age at which people who continue to try for children begin to face a reduced probability of conception. Thinking of the life-course as composed of these different phases is helpful in understanding how the likelihood of childbirth varies over time and across social groups.

To give insight into how the pattern of fertility in Ireland is changing, Figure 5.4 presents the same distribution of age at childbearing broken down by three categories of educational attainment, both for children born in 2005 and those born in 2000.<sup>15</sup> The "Low" attainment group is defined by having no qualifications above lower second level (Junior Certificate or equivalent). The "Medium" category is those with qualifications at higher second level (Leaving Certificate or equivalent), while the "High" attainment group are those with a third-level qualification (diploma or degree).<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 5.4: Derived probability of giving birth by age and educational attainment of mothers in 2000 and 2005**



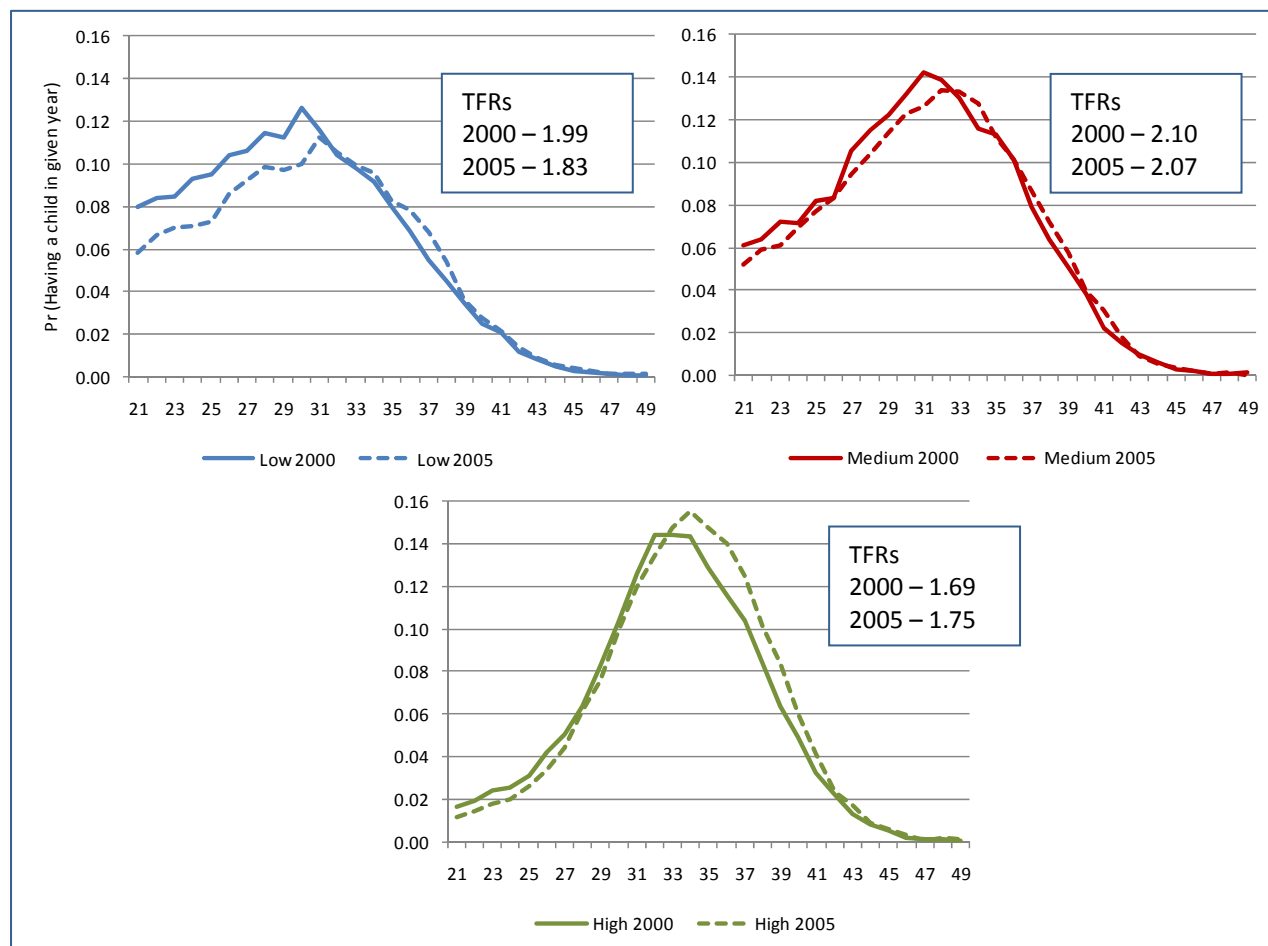
As reported in Lunn *et al.* (2009), at all ages there is a negative relationship between educational attainment and the number of children a woman had previously given birth to. Yet this previous analysis was based on responses to the census question on fertility, which takes no account of the age of the children concerned. By limiting the analysis to more recent births, Figure 5.4 reveals a different picture whereby the highest fertility is recorded among the medium attainment group. The TFRs derived for 2000 and 2005 (see boxes) confirm that for the years in question the medium attainment category has the highest TFR and that, over this five-year period, the TFR among the low attainment group was falling relatively rapidly. In 2000, women in the low attainment group had the highest probability of giving birth up to age 28, beyond which women with medium attainment had the higher probability. By 2005, the age of crossover had fallen to 24. Meanwhile, the likelihood of births to women of high attainment rose, especially at older ages, but also overall. This finding, although as yet modest in scale, echoes a recent increase in the fertility of educated women in the US (Shang and Weinberg, 2009).

To allow easier comparison of the change within groups over the period, Figure 5.5 replots the same data separately for each group. In all three categories, women were having children on average later in 2005 than in 2000. The low attainment group saw a large decrease in the likelihood of women having a child in their twenties, in many cases as lone mothers, counterbalanced by only a small increase among those in their thirties. The medium attainment group experienced a more uniform shift to older childbirth. Among the high attainment group, meanwhile, there was a large increase in the likelihood of women giving birth well into their thirties.

Some care is required in drawing strong conclusions from these charts, however. It is possible that the most recent cohort of women in the low attainment group, who undoubtedly have a lower likelihood of having children in their early twenties than the cohort five years older, will then go on to have more children in their thirties – an outcome that will only show up in future data. In other words, the low attainment group may simply have begun to undergo a transition to later childbirth that the high attainment group has already undergone. (This possibility is related to the “tempo effects” that we discuss in greater detail in the Appendix.) Nevertheless, the data do seem to show that the relationship between educational attainment and fertility has changed in recent times. The decline in earlier childbearing took place mostly among women with lower levels of education, while the increase in later childbearing was concentrated among those with higher attainment, leading to changes in the relative fertility of these groups overall. Note that one consequence of this change, especially when the increase in the number of women with third-level qualifications is taken into account, is that a higher proportion of children born in these years have more

educated mothers – a background characteristic that is strongly related to a range of positive outcomes for children.

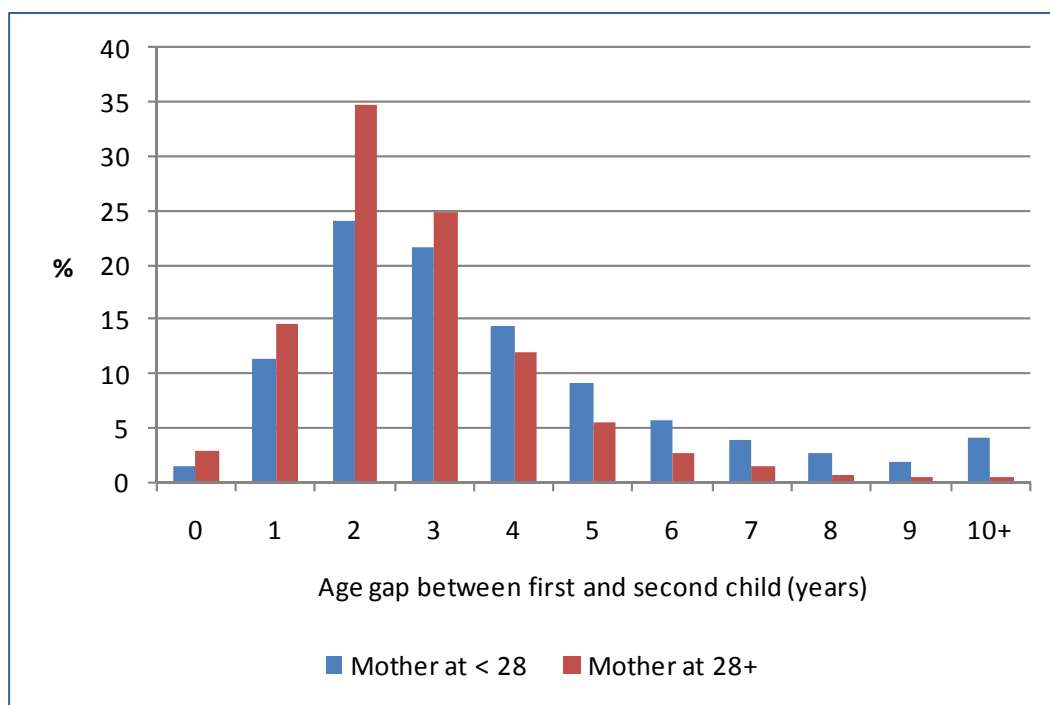
**Figure 5.5: Derived probability of giving birth in 2000 and 2005 by age and educational attainment**



## 5.5 AGE STRUCTURE OF CHILDREN

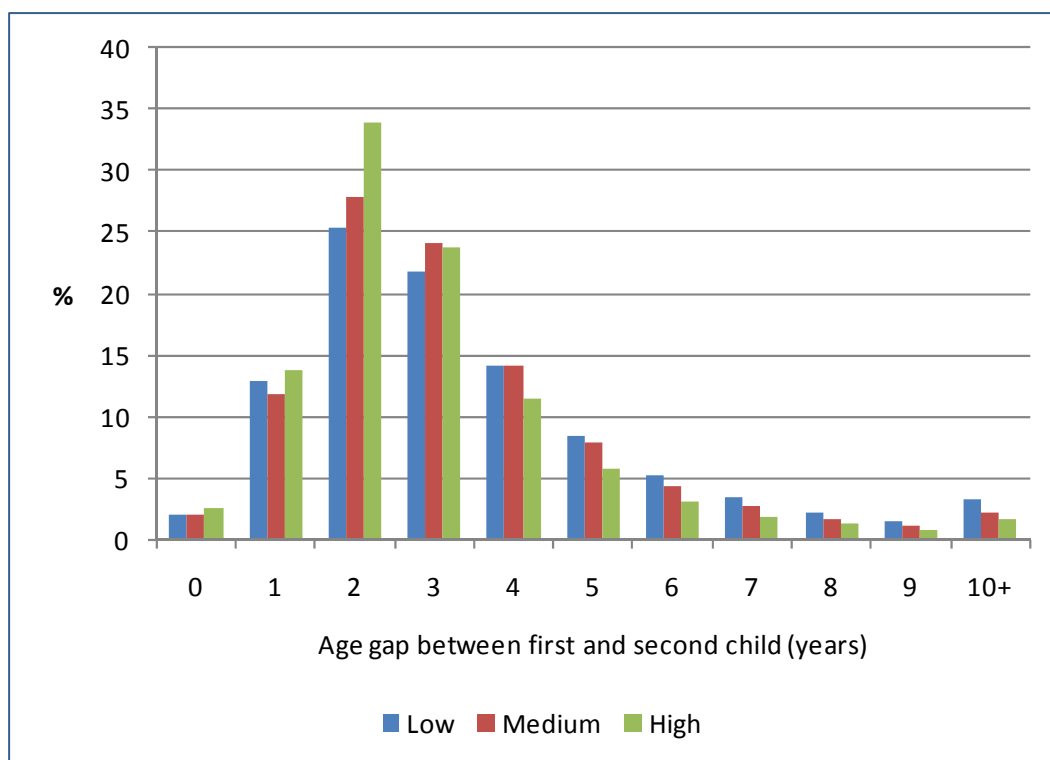
The general delay in childbearing is also likely to have an impact on the age structure of children within families. Women who delay childbearing until their thirties but nevertheless want to have two or three children have little choice other than to have their children over a shorter period. Figure 5.6 provides the distribution of the age gap between the first and second child in families, according to the age of the mother when the first child was born. For over half the women who were 28 years or older, the second child was born within three years of the first. The mean age gap for these older mothers is 2.7 years, while for younger mothers aged under 28 years it is 3.7 years, with a higher probability of much larger age gaps. The equivalent chart for the age gap between second and third children (not shown) is almost identical.

Figure 5.6: Age gap between first two children by mother’s age at first birth



Given that mothers who have children later are more likely to have higher educational attainment, this also suggests that children in families with different socio-economic profiles will typically have different age structures. Figure 5.7 confirms that this is indeed the case: the mean age gap between the first two children of families in which the mother has a third-level qualification is 2.95, while for those where the mother has only lower second-level qualifications it is 3.50.

Figure 5.7: Age gap between first two children by mother’s educational attainment





## 5.6 DETERMINANTS OF HAVING CHILDREN WITHIN COUPLES

The discussion in the previous two sections centres on how childbearing varies according to the characteristics of mothers, largely ignoring their partnership status. But the data provided by the CRMF allow for some analysis of the likelihood of having children at the level of the couple, taking account of the background characteristics of fathers and whether or not the couple are married. Obviously, the census contains no information about the fathers of children living with lone mothers (nor mothers of children living with lone fathers), so lone parents are excluded from what follows. Furthermore, the census does not record information regarding the history of relationships. We cannot, therefore, take into account when a cohabiting couple began living together, when a married couple were married, whether they previously cohabited, nor whether a relationship changed status between the birth of the first child and subsequent children. To limit distortions due to this lack of historical data, we concentrate only on links between the characteristics of couples and the likelihood of having had a first child in the 12-months prior to census night. It remains possible that a married couple may have in fact been cohabiting at the time of the birth, or that a married or cohabiting couple were not married or living together at the time of the birth. But by limiting the analysis to only the 12-months before the survey and by concentrating only on first births, these possibilities are minimised and, furthermore, even where they do occur, it is likely that the change to the current relationship status was already being planned at the time of the birth.

The analysis is based on a multivariate logistic regression model, which is estimated only for couples in which the woman was childless 12-months prior to census night. The model isolates the characteristics most strongly associated with having had a first child over the following 12-month period. The statistical model simultaneously controls for the age difference between the couple, whether they are cohabiting or married, their respective levels of educational attainment, their respective religions, nationalities and ethnicities, his occupation,<sup>17</sup> region of residence, and whether the couple live in an urban or rural area. Because the results change substantially with the age of the mother, separate models are estimated for couples where the woman is aged 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39. The numbers of couples where the woman was childless 12 months previously are approximately 52,000, 38,000 and 17,000 respectively.

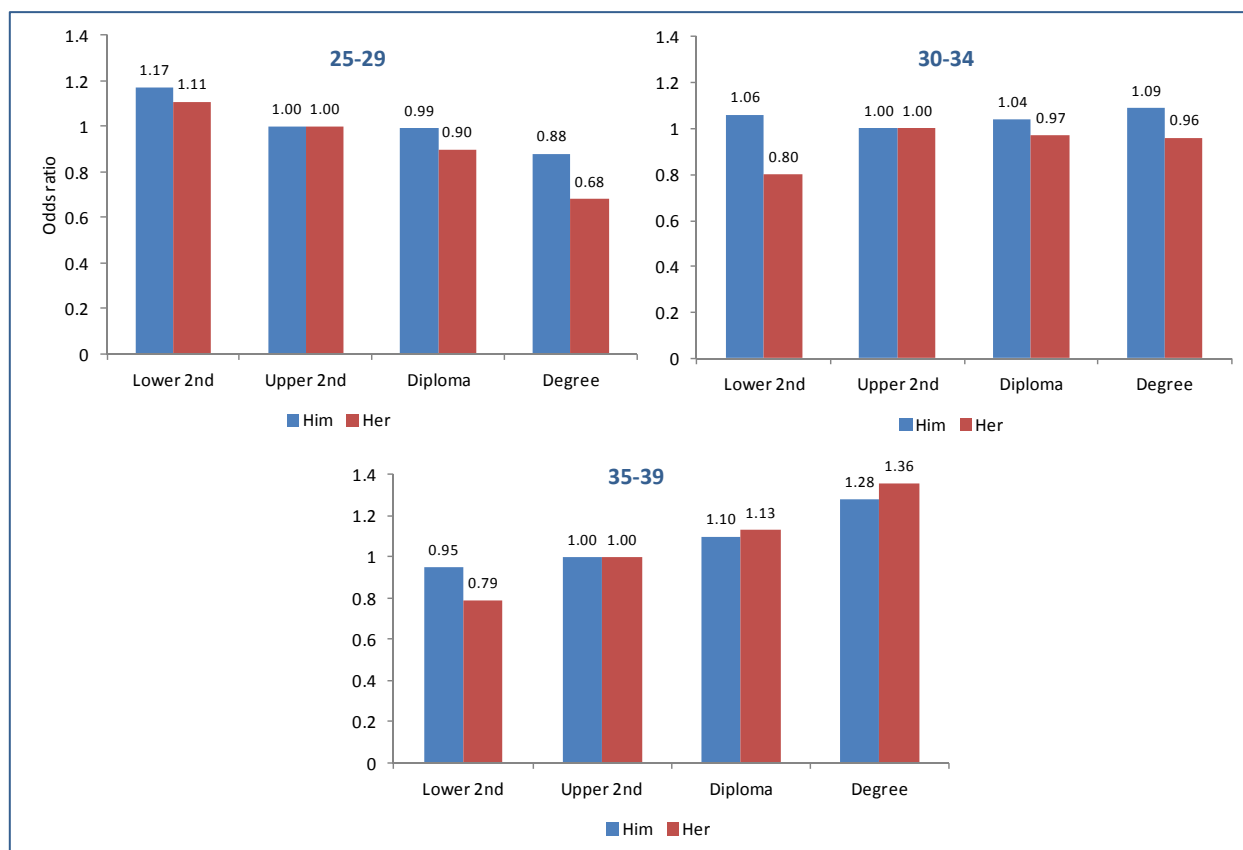
We focus first on the results for educational attainment. Figure 5.8 presents odds ratios for the likelihood of having had a child within the last 12-months by the

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<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to control for her occupation, because in a significant proportion of cases the woman states no occupation and, moreover, whether the woman does state an occupation is likely to be significantly linked to whether she has had a child.

educational attainment of the woman and the man. Those whose highest qualification is at upper second level are given the value 1.0 and the odds of having a child for each of the other attainment categories are provided relative to this reference category.

**Figure 5.8: Estimated odds ratios for likelihood that a couple has a first child under one year of age by educational attainment and gender, where the woman in the couple is aged 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 (reference category, 'upper 2nd' = 1.00)**



The results have a number of interesting features. Concentrating first on the woman’s educational attainment, after controlling for a range of other background characteristics, the relationship between educational attainment and fertility interacts strongly with age: women in lower attainment categories are more likely to have children in their twenties than women with higher attainment, while the reverse relationship emerges for women in their thirties. Note, however, that this finding tells us more than the analysis of the likelihood of having children at each age in Section 5.4, because only women in couples who are childless at the given age enter the present analysis. Thus, the higher odds ratios among the higher attainment groups at 35-39 years are not due to the likelihood that women in lower attainment groups have already had one or more children – the odds ratio is estimated relative to women in the lower attainment group who are also childless at this age. The

result may instead reflect the relative likelihood that childless couples where the woman is aged 35-39 have either taken a decision not to have children or to delay having children, with more of the higher attainment group having decided to delay. Similarly, the analysis for the younger age group excludes women who are not in a partnership. Thus, women with higher educational attainment who are in a partnership at this age are relatively less likely to have children than women of lower educational attainment who are in a partnership.

A second aspect of Figure 5.8 is the significance of the man's level of education. Although the gradients across the attainment categories of the men are somewhat shallower, they nevertheless shadow the result for women.<sup>18</sup> This result is interesting, because it suggests that there is more to the relationship between educational attainment and fertility within couples than the potential trade-offs between having children and the impact on the woman's career. One potential explanation for more educated women delaying childbirth is that they wish to establish themselves in their careers before having children (e.g., Romeu Gordo, 2009). However, almost the same delays are found among better educated men, which is notable because it suggests that they too may perhaps be affected by career factors that are usually thought mainly to be a concern for women. Alternatively, those with higher educational attainment may have other opportunity costs or concerns about resource building that make extending the period of childless young adulthood a more attractive option.

Note that since the statistical model simultaneously takes account of both his and her educational attainment, the result is not due to the fact that more educated men tend to partner more educated women. Rather, men with higher educational attainment are more likely to have children later, after controlling for their partner's attainment. Furthermore, interactions between her level of education and his do not appear to be significant. Nevertheless, we should not overstate the implications of this finding, because there are potentially important variables missing from the statistical model. Perhaps most importantly, we have no information on the length of relationships, which is likely to be systematically related to the likelihood of having a child and perhaps also to educational attainment.

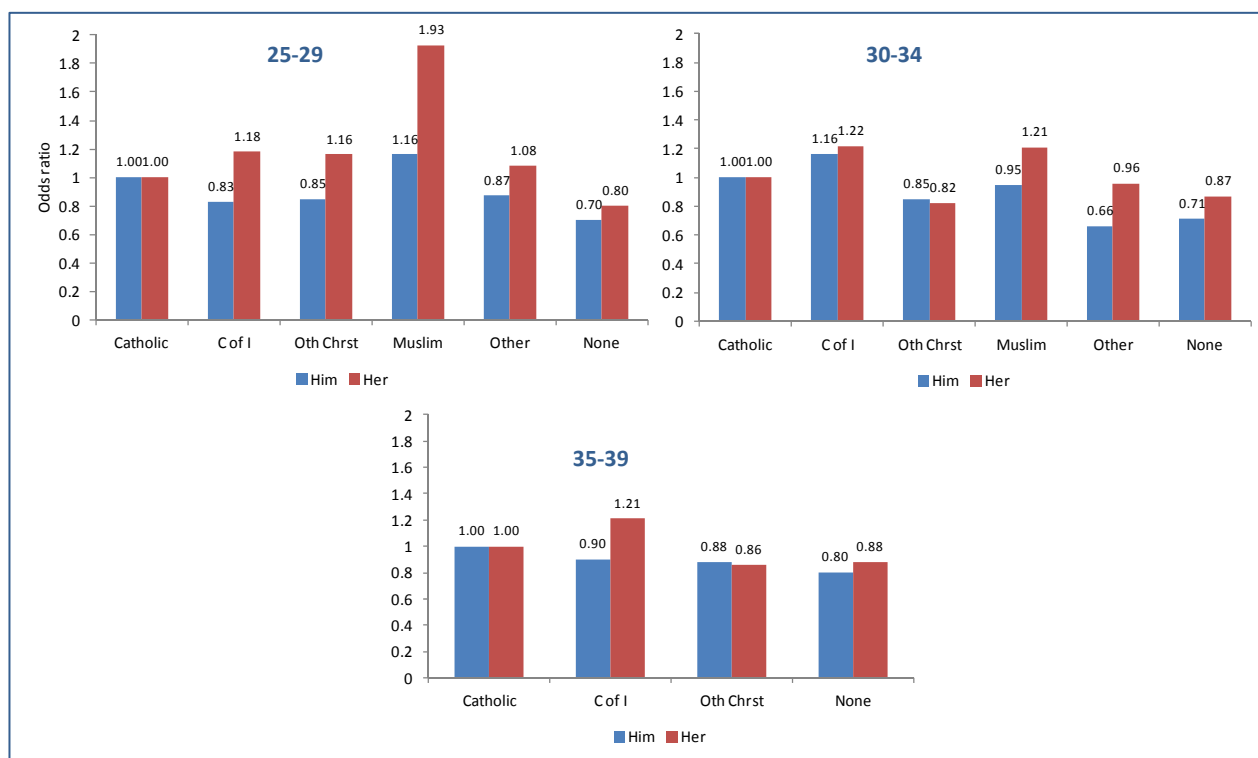
The same multivariate model provides insight also into other background characteristics. Lunn *et al.* (2009) found that ethnicity, nationality and religion were strongly linked to the stated number of children a woman had given birth to. The present statistical models, based on couples, find somewhat weaker but

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, because the man's occupation is included in the model but the woman's is not, and occupation is correlated with educational attainment, it is possible that the odds ratios somewhat underestimate the strength of the effect for men.

nevertheless significant effects of these other background characteristics.<sup>19</sup> The models confirm that couples in which either partner describes their ethnicity as ‘Black’ are more likely to have a child. Couples where at least one partner is from the EU-accession states are less likely to have had a child in the previous 12 months. In both cases, the characteristics of the man appear equally as important as those of the woman. The results for religious affiliation are somewhat stronger and are presented in Figure 5.9, in similar fashion to the previous results for educational attainment.

**Figure 5.9: Estimated odds ratios for likelihood that a couple has a first child under one year of age by religious affiliation and gender, where the woman in the couple is aged 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 (reference category, ‘Catholic’ = 1.00)**



With the exception of Muslim women, it is notable that the degree of variation in the likelihood of having had a child across religious affiliations is as great for the man as for the woman. This further confirms the importance of the male partner’s background. There is, however, an interesting gender difference. The reference category in this case is Catholics, who are given the value 1.0, and the odds of having a child for the other affiliations are given relative to this category. Among the two

<sup>19</sup> There are a number of potential reasons for this, including the different likelihoods of lone parenthood and the possibility that, given a degree of homogamy, the woman’s characteristics in the previous analysis were also acting as a proxy for the man’s, strengthening the estimated effect.

younger groups in particular, it is clear that the odds ratios for the non-Catholic groups are systematically lower for men. This consistent pattern implies that the likelihood of a couple having had a child is generally higher if the man states that he is a Catholic than if the woman does. The pattern across the religions is otherwise similar. Muslims tend to have children at a younger age (indeed, the sample of childless couples was too small for inclusion in the 35-39 year-old category). The likelihood of having a first child is higher among members of the Church of Ireland and lower among people who state that they have no religion, in line with the findings (only for women) of Lunn *et al.* (2009).

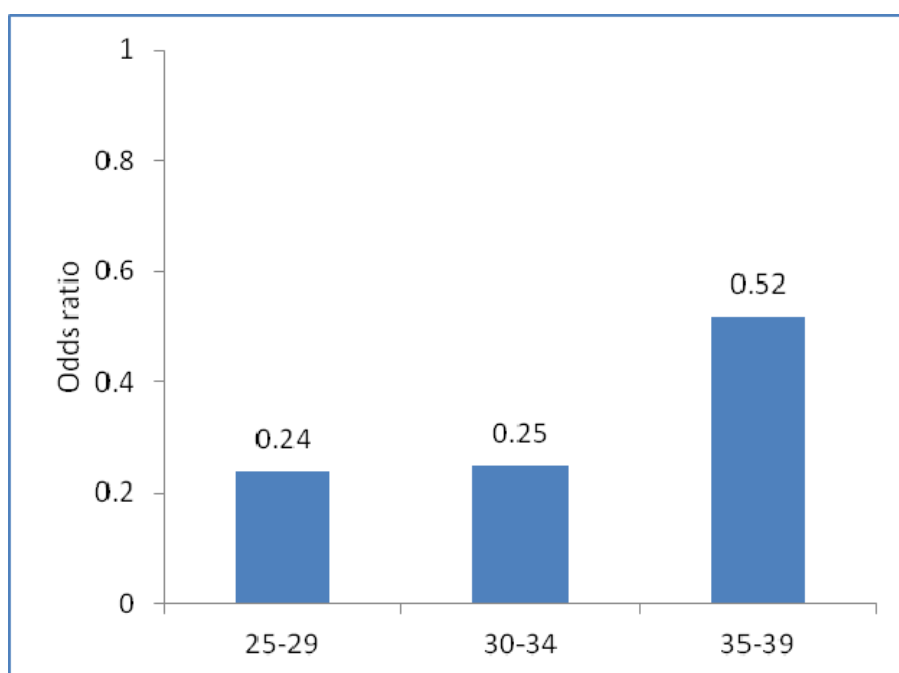
Another aspect of these statistical models is worthy of mention. There is a difference in the likelihood of having a child associated with the age of the man. The age categories employed are defined by the age of the woman in the couple. For women in the 30-34 and 35-39 categories, every additional year of age of the man reduces the odds ratio for having a first child by 0.02 and 0.05 respectively. One possible explanation for this revolves around how the sample for the models is defined, i.e. couples who until a year previously were childless. Among older childless couples, the older males may simply be by definition those men who have proved themselves to be less inclined to have children. Regardless of whether this explanation is correct, the finding is a further indication that, while most research has concentrated primarily on the characteristics of women, the characteristics of their male partners are also important determinants of whether a couple will have children.

## 5.7 MARRIAGE, COHABITATION AND CHILDBEARING

The multivariate models can also be used to examine the links between cohabitation, marriage and having children, although to some extent the analysis is hampered by missing information. As described above, we cannot determine for couples who recently had children whether the birth predated the marriage. But perhaps the bigger problem surrounds the longevity of the relationship. Ideally, we would like to compare cohabiting and married couples who are otherwise identical, to see which couples are more likely to have a child. While we can control in the models for a range of background characteristics of both males and females, we do not have the information to control for how long ago the relationship was formed. This is problematic, because it is quite likely that married couples at a given age will tend to have been together for longer than cohabiting couples, and also that couples who have been together longer will be more likely to have a child. If so, this will tend to exaggerate the positive effect of marriage versus cohabitation on the likelihood of having children. It is nevertheless instructive to consider the outcome of such an analysis, particularly because the length of the relationship may be less of a factor regarding how the association between marriage and having children varies across types of couple.

Figure 5.10 provides odds ratios for the likelihood that a cohabiting couple has a child, relative to a married couple (which as the reference category takes the value 1.0), controlling for the same background variables as previously. Cohabiting couples are much less likely to have children in all three age categories, although the effect is smaller for the oldest category. While it is possible that the length of the relationship is partly driving this effect, it is nevertheless clear that despite the rise of cohabitation and the increasing number of children born in cohabiting relationship, there remains a very strong link between marriage and the decision of a couple to have children. That said, one possible explanation of the variation across age categories is that cohabitation in the 35-39 group may be less strongly correlated with the length of the relationship, and more associated with the couple's approach to marriage, such that the link between marriage and having children is somewhat weakened for this group.

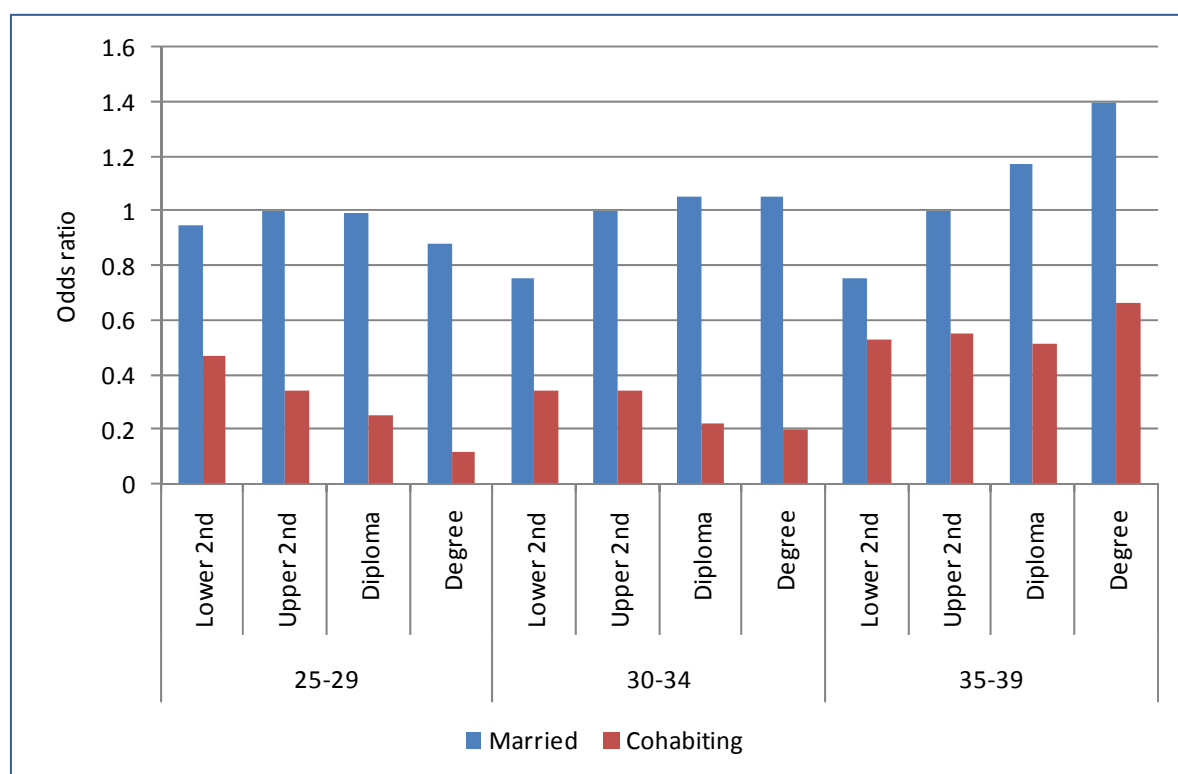
**Figure 5.10: Estimated odds ratios for likelihood that a couple has a first child under one year of age, cohabiting versus married, where the woman in the couple is aged 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 (reference category, 'Married' = 1.0)**



Further investigation using these models reveals a significant interaction between cohabitation and educational attainment, which is depicted in Figure 5.11. For simplicity we consider only the interaction with the woman's educational attainment. Odds ratios are provided as before for the likelihood that a couple has a child relative to a reference category, which in this case is a married couple where the woman has upper second-level qualifications. For all educational attainment categories, the likelihood of having a child is much greater if the couple is married. But the relative size of the marriage versus cohabitation effect increases with

educational attainment in each of the three age categories, such that the likelihood of having a child in a cohabiting as opposed to married relationship is much lower in the high attainment group. Again a degree of caution is warranted in interpreting this result. As previously stated, cohabitation will be more likely where the relationship is younger, so it remains possible that the observed interaction is really between educational attainment and length of relationship, such that couples in the higher attainment category tend to have a longer gap between relationship formation and having children. But whether it is partnership status or length of relationship that drives the result, there is a clear socio-economic difference in the likelihood of having children in a cohabiting as opposed to married relationship.

**Figure 5.11: Estimated odds ratios for likelihood that a couple has a first child under one year of age, by her educational attainment and the couple's partnership status, where the woman in the couple is aged 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 (reference category, 'married with upper 2nd' = 1.00)**



## 5.8 SUMMARY

Migration is important to an assessment of the extent to which the number of births in Ireland translates into longer-term changes in the resident population. Recent migrants accounted for an increasing proportion of births prior to 2006. Up to 2003, high immigration meant that the number of births was well below the number of resident young children a few years later, but between 2003 and 2005 this pattern reversed – the number of very young children who were born in Ireland and subsequently left was greater than the number who were born abroad and then

arrived. There remains uncertainty as to what proportion of the recent sharp increase in the number of births, primarily caused by a sharp increase in the number of women near peak childbearing age, will feed through into greater numbers of resident children. The detailed results of *Census 2011* will be needed to provide a better assessment.

There is some evidence that the negative relationship between fertility and educational attainment may have changed in recent years. In 2000 and 2005, women with upper second-level qualifications had a higher total fertility rate than women with lower second-level qualifications, among whom it was falling. For those with third-level qualifications, fertility was rising. Later childbirth in Ireland from 2000 onwards can be characterised by fewer women with low educational attainment having children in their twenties and more women with high educational attainment having children in their thirties. Whether younger women in low attainment groups will go on to have more children later is an open question, but recent years do mark some kind of change in behaviour. One consequence of delayed childbirth is that the age gaps between children are narrower, with older mothers (typically those with higher educational attainment) having children on average less than three years apart.

Analysis of the likelihood that couples have children at different ages reveals that the man's educational attainment is almost as big a factor in delayed childbearing as the woman's. This suggests that the primary factor driving the relationship between attainment and delayed childbirth may not be the extent of disruption to the woman's career. Instead, concerns connected to both careers, or perhaps some other factor associated with high attainment, drives people to extend the period of childless adulthood. Other background characteristics of male partners, such as ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation, also appear to be as influential as those of female partners, although one interesting gender difference is that the likelihood of having a child is higher where the man in a couple is a Catholic than where the woman is. Fertility is higher for men and women whose affiliation is Church of Ireland and lower for men and women who have no religion.

Married couples are more likely to have a child than cohabiting ones, at all ages, although to some extent this may reflect the fact that married couples tend to have been together longer, rather than the fact of being married. The strength of this marriage-versus-cohabitation effect varies by education: those with lower attainment appear to be more likely to have children in cohabiting relationships than those with higher attainment. Given the different legal rights and responsibilities surrounding cohabiting and married parents, this finding may have policy implications, which we discuss in the final chapter.





# Chapter 6

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## Conclusions

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This final chapter summarises our main findings and presents a non-exhaustive discussion of possible implications for policy and future research. These should be read in conjunction with the policy implications discussed in the previous report (Lunn, Fahey and Hannan, 2009), many of which are also supported by the present findings, but which are not repeated here.

### 6.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Unless otherwise stated, the findings below refer to results based on *Census 2006*.

#### Who Partners Whom?

On average, the man in Irish couples (married or cohabiting) is older than the woman by 2.3 years, although there is substantial variation around this. Age gaps have continued to decrease in more recent generations, following a marked reduction in the latter half of the twentieth century in the proportion of couples where the man was very much older. Nevertheless, the data suggest a continuing disinclination to form couples in which the woman is older than the man. This situation occurs in just over one quarter of all couples, but in more than half of these the age gap is less than two years.

With respect to educational attainment, there is a substantial and increasing gender imbalance within couples. In a growing proportion of cases, the woman has higher educational attainment than the man. This pattern partly reflects constraints faced by well educated women who do not have a similar number of well educated men with whom to form partnerships. The result of this imbalance is that Ireland does not conform to the trend of increased educational “homogamy” – a higher proportion of couples sharing the same level of education – but instead continues to have a substantial proportion of partnerships of mixed educational attainment, albeit perhaps for different reasons than in the past. This pattern is also evident in occupational classifications. Among couples with a mean age of 26-40 years, it is now more likely that the woman has the higher occupation classification – a notable turnaround relative to the cohort 30 years older. In households where the woman is

active in the labour market, this situation describes 42 per cent of couples, compared to 30 per cent with the same occupational level and 28 per cent where the man has the higher occupational classification.

The extent to which couples bridge cultural divides in Ireland is mixed. Inter-religious partnerships are now common, although most Catholics partner other Catholics for the simple reason that 85 per cent of the population is Catholic. The availability of partners may also dictate the fact that approaching half of those with Protestant affiliations partner outside of their religion, with the large majority of younger members of the Church of Ireland doing so. Muslims are less likely to form partnerships outside of their religious group, although the substantial excess of males over females among the Muslim community means that men are more likely to do so. Partnerships that cross national boundaries are also becoming more common, although 94 per cent of Irish people in couples have Irish partners. Irish-UK partnerships are the second most common combination, with more than half of UK nationals in partnerships having an Irish partner. By 2006, just 7 per cent of women and 2 per cent of men from the ten EU accession states had formed partnerships with Irish people. Partnerships are also less likely to bridge ethnic divides. Less than one quarter of non-white people in couples have white partners, irrespective of whether their stated ethnicity is Chinese, Asian or Black. Couples that do cross national or ethnic boundaries are highly concentrated among younger adults, such that for more than one quarter of all couples in Ireland with a mean age of 30 years or less, one or both partners has a nationality other than Irish or British, and/or is of non-white ethnicity.

### **Cohabitation**

The likelihood that a couple is married rather than cohabits is very strongly linked to whether the couple has children. Thus, while it can reasonably be stated that cohabitation prior to marriage has become a norm in Irish society, given that the substantial majority of couples with mean age of 30 years or less who live together are unmarried, the norm for couples with children, including those in their twenties, remains marriage. Although it is increasingly common for couples with young children to be cohabiting, we estimate that most marry within five years of the birth of a first child. That said, there is a small minority of couples at older ages who are not married, many of whom have children. For this minority, cohabitation appears to be a genuine alternative to marriage, while for most of Irish society it has instead become a prelude to it.

Almost one quarter of cohabiting couples contain at least one partner who has left a previous marriage. These cohabiting couples have an older age profile that peaks at

a mean age for the couples of over 40 years, implying that the recent dramatic increase in cohabitation is not confined to the present generation of younger adults – the acceptability of cohabitation has had broader consequences. Around half of these couples have children. A comparison of this group with couples where one partner has remarried reveals that the presence of children remains a spur to marriage even where one partner has experienced a marital breakdown, although where both partners have done so remarriage is less likely.

Once the background characteristics of both partners can be taken into account, as in the present analysis, a stronger relationship emerges between socio-economic indicators and the likelihood of cohabitation versus marriage. Specifically, couples with higher educational attainment are significantly more likely to marry, especially among couples with a mean age greater than 30 years. A couple in their thirties with third-level qualifications are more than twice as likely to be married as an equivalent couple with lower second-level qualifications, controlling for a range of other characteristics, including the presence and age of children.

Religion also influences the likelihood of cohabitation versus marriage. Couples who share a non-Catholic religion are more likely to be married than Catholic couples. Mixed religion couples are generally more likely to cohabit, while non-religious couples are the couples most likely to remain unmarried.

### **Children's Family Circumstances**

While the range of possible family circumstances of children in Ireland has expanded to include a variety of alternative family arrangements, it is perhaps surprising the extent to which the large majority of children still reside within a traditional family structure. We estimate that around one-in-forty children live in a step-family, of which half are step-children. While this is more likely to be a slight underestimate than overestimate, it is nevertheless the case that children's family circumstances are dominated by two family forms: living with both of their biological parents and living with a lone parent. Second attempts at family formation remain relatively rare. The likelihood of living in one or other of these two dominant family types is strongly linked to socio-economics. Children whose mothers have only lower second-level qualifications are very much more likely to live with a never-married lone parent and also more likely to live with a lone parent who has experienced marital breakdown.

Most step-families consist of a single step-child. The average age gap between the step-child and the oldest step-sibling is eight years. Comparing this gap to the average three-year gap between oldest siblings in non-step-families gives an indication of the extent of interruption to fertility patterns associated with

relationship breakdown and repartnering. Step-families differ very little in socio-economic profile from non-step-families.

International comparisons with other developed nations show that Ireland has a relatively low rate of repartnering. A high proportion of children live with both biological parents and second relationships following marital breakdown, whether they involve cohabitation or remarriage, are comparatively rare. Lone parenthood, on the other hand, is more common in Ireland, comparatively speaking. These two findings may be linked. Irish people form first ongoing partnerships relatively late in life. This fact may increase the success rate of first partnerships, limit the scope for repartnering, but also increase the risk of never-married lone parenthood, for the simple statistical reason that women who remain single for longer face a higher cumulative chance of becoming lone parents.

## FERTILITY

A comparison of resident children by individual year of age in *Census 2006* and the number of births in preceding years reveals a trend in the net migration of very young infants. The number of resident children born prior to 2003 outstripped the number of births recorded in Ireland during those years, implying net immigration of families with very young children. But for 2003-2006 onwards this pattern reversed: the number of very young children who were born in Ireland and subsequently left was greater than the number who were born abroad and then arrived. During the latter period, the proportion of births accounted for by non-Irish mothers and returning Irish emigrants increased, while births to longer-term Irish residents declined somewhat, despite the overall increase in births.

The usual relationship between fertility and educational attainment, whereby those of lower attainment have more children, appears to have changed in recent years. Estimates of fertility rates derived from *Census 2006* data for a five-year period prior to the census suggest that between 2000 and 2005, the number of children born per woman with third-level qualifications increased, while the number of children born per woman with lower second-level qualifications decreased. The middle group with higher second-level qualifications had the highest fertility throughout this period. All groups continue to delay having children further into adulthood, with the consequence that the number of children per woman among those currently of childbearing age may ultimately prove to be higher than is generally anticipated (see Appendix).

By taking into account the characteristics of partners, the present analysis also shows that male educational attainment influences fertility patterns almost as

strongly as female attainment. While open to a number of interpretations, this finding calls into question the idea that delayed childbirth among educated women is primarily the result of concerns about career interruption, unless the same argument is deemed to apply to men. Cultural characteristics of male partners, such as religion, nationality and ethnicity, also appear to be as influential as equivalent female characteristics, generally speaking. One interesting exception to this is that the chances of a couple having a child are actually higher where the man is a Catholic than where the woman is.

Controlling for age and a range of other characteristics, cohabiting couples are less likely to decide to have a child than married couples (although it is not possible to control for the length of the relationship). This relationship between marriage and having children is stronger among couples with higher educational attainment.

### **6.3 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

#### **How Many and Who?**

One straightforward aspect of the present analysis is that it offers improved estimates of the prevalence of particular family structures and how they are associated with socio-economic and cultural groups. From a policy perspective, the implications of such analysis are simple: the findings should give greater insight into the numbers of people affected by different family-related policies and an idea of their characteristics. From this perspective, one notable aspect of the findings is that while the increased diversity of family structures in Ireland is frequently emphasised, it is easy to exaggerate the numbers of people concerned. Second relationships and step-families, while they exist in a range of different forms, nevertheless remain relatively rare.

#### **Homogamy and Inequality**

Concerns have been expressed that in an economy where both members of couples generally work, changing patterns of partnership might increase inequality. There is evidence of increasing “educational homogamy” in some countries, whereby people are more likely to form partnerships with others of similar educational attainment, thus concentrating higher earners within the same household. Such developments might lead to a reassessment of the distributive consequences of tax and welfare policies. Our findings, however, suggest that this concern is less of an issue for Ireland. Comparing couples now at the end of their careers and those now in young adulthood, we find no evidence for increased educational or occupational homogamy. The changes in pattern of partnership we found instead consisted of an

increasing gender imbalance, whereby the woman in the couple increasingly tends to be better educated and have a higher occupational classification than the man.

### Working Women

The above finding may be of interest to policymakers for other reasons, however. We do not wish here to adopt a position on the long and often heated debate on how families balance work and family life, especially in relation to women's careers – this report is not designed to express opinions but to inform them. Our findings are nevertheless part of the evidence that should be taken into account by anyone who considers the issue seriously. Notwithstanding the significant gender pay gap observed both internationally (Gregory, 2010) and in Ireland (McGuinness *et al.*, 2011), whereby women tend to be paid less for equivalent work, the size of the educational and occupational gender imbalance among couples that has been exposed by the present analysis indicates that for an increasing proportion of young couples it is the woman who is likely to be the higher earner and/or to have higher long-term earning power. This finding has a number of consequences for policies on labour market participation and children.

Firstly, the most straightforward and obvious implication is that any negative impact of childbearing on women's careers comes at a greater proportionate cost for families where the woman is the higher earner. This raises the opportunity cost of having children and thus may act to some extent as a disincentive to start a family. Furthermore, it is likely to mean that any policies designed to reduce the disruption to women's careers from having children, or to make it easier to combine work and motherhood, may have a greater impact on a generation that has become more dependent on women's earning power.

Secondly, a parallel argument clearly applies to fatherhood. The working arrangements of one half of a couple can of course have a strong effect on the flexibility afforded to the other half. Given the strong gender imbalance, when couples decide to reduce working hours in order to rebalance work and family life, it may increasingly make financial sense for that rebalancing to involve the father's working hours as well as or instead of the mother's. The findings, therefore, add to the weight of evidence to be considered with respect to the workplace rights of fathers as well as mothers. At present, there is no statutory right to paternity leave. In the UK, the *2006 Work and Families Act* introduced a statutory right to request flexible working and improved the flexibility of leave arrangements for parents. An evaluation of the costs and benefits of this piece of legislation and similar laws introduced elsewhere might be of benefit. Furthermore, additional research is clearly needed to examine how intra-household decisions on working hours are

reached in Ireland and whether the balance between partners' reductions in working hours when they have children is changing.

Lastly, regardless of the implications for individual families, there is a broader rationale for increasing workplace flexibility. The growing educational and occupational gender imbalance within couples is likely to have wider economic effects, unless it is accompanied by changes in the ways couples are able to balance work and family life. Historically, the impact of having children on careers has clearly tended to be very much greater for women. But faced with a generation in which women are more successful in the workplace, a continuation of this outcome is clearly inefficient, in terms of lost skills and under-utilised human capital. This is not to suggest that policymakers should consider ways to keep mothers in the workplace, or to hurry them back there following childbirth. Rather, it suggests that giving families greater flexibility to adjust work-life balance across the couple as a whole may not only be better for the family finances in instances where the woman is the higher earner, but also better for the economy as a whole. One of the standard arguments cited in opposition to laws that enhance workplace flexibility is the potential trade-off with higher business costs, but there are also costs to policies that ultimately result in resources being underemployed.

### **Rights and Obligations of Partners**

The *Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Responsibilities of Cohabitants Act 2010* came into force in January 2011. While the implications of this legislation for same-sex couples have attracted most attention, the act is also important for cohabiting couples. Formerly, cohabiting partners had little in the way of rights or responsibilities towards each other. Now, provided neither partner was previously married, cohabitants who have been with their partner for five years (two years where the couple has children) have acquired both legal rights and responsibilities in respect of their fellow cohabitant. These primarily centre on a redress scheme that either party can access in the event that the relationship breaks down, under which a court can decide to make maintenance orders, pension adjustment orders, property adjustment orders and more. These provisions are almost as extensive as those applying to married couples and can be avoided only where couples have signed a "cohabitants agreement", although a court still has the power to override such agreements if it determines that a serious injustice is taking place. The situation is considerably more complicated where one or both partners have previously been married. Then, the rights and responsibilities apply only if any previously married party has lived apart from their spouse for at least four years.



Following the introduction of the new legislation, significant numbers of cohabiting couples who break up may now find themselves going to court to decide the division not only of their property but also of their future income. Crucially, unlike where couples take an active decision to get married, presumably with some degree of understanding of the contract that they are entering into, cohabiting couples will now enter a similar contract by default, potentially without any active decision and perhaps entirely unwittingly.

Lunn *et al.* (2009) asked whether the over 240,000 people in cohabiting relationships (in 2006, now probably more) would be sufficiently aware of the rights and obligations that they would acquire simply by allowing their present circumstances to continue for long enough. The clear danger here is that individuals or couples may enter into a contract by default that they would not agree to if they were fully apprised of their legal situation. This concern is heightened by two aspects of the present findings. First, socio-economic differences in the likelihood of cohabitation are stronger than previously thought. Those with lower educational attainment are more likely to cohabit rather than marry and more likely to have children within a cohabiting relationship. There is thus a relatively strong socio-economic dimension regarding who is most likely to acquire new rights and obligations under the Act. Second, roughly one quarter of cohabiting couples, or approximately 30,000, include one or two formerly married partners. (Under-reporting of previous marriages and the increasing trend towards cohabitation mean that the current figure is now likely to be substantially on the low side.) Around half of these couples have children, mostly from the second relationship. The additional complexities of the new Act for the contractual status of these relationships gives additional reasons to doubt whether the couples involved understand their own legal position.

In the past, it may have been the case that many cohabitants overestimated the degree to which they were protected by the law in the event that the relationship broke down. Now, at an abrupt point in their relationship and without any notification, they will automatically enter something akin to a marriage contract.<sup>20</sup> Intuitively, it seems reasonable to assume that couples in this situation will be considerably better off if they are aware of exactly when this will happen and what options are available to them, and may feel a sense of injustice if they discover their contractual situation only after the fact. There is, therefore, a strong argument for conducting research to guide policy that aims to assess the level of awareness of the new rights and responsibilities, among the public at large and especially among

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<sup>20</sup> Legal opinion appears somewhat divided on the extent to which courts will treat qualifying cohabitants like married couples and thus on the extent of likely redress following relationship breakdown and an application to the court. It may take a body of case law to build before the situation becomes clearer.

those most likely to be affected. This might reveal a need to raise awareness of the new legal situation, which may prove crucial to the effectiveness of the Act itself.

### Fertility and Population

On the face of it, declining fertility in Ireland is not an urgent policy issue. Ireland still has high fertility by the standards of developed nations. Furthermore, there is little international evidence to suggest that attempts to increase fertility through policy interventions, even if deemed desirable, are particularly effective. Lunn *et al.* (2009) argued that debate was needed in Ireland on whether maintaining high fertility should be a policy goal. The additional evidence provided in the present analysis suggests that fertility may be even higher than previously thought and thus arguably weakens the case for adopting such a goal. Nevertheless, the level of fertility remains an important component of national demography, not least because of its relevance for long-term planning. The findings of this report may add to rather than reduce the sense of uncertainty about the future of Irish fertility and its implications for population growth. The sources of this uncertainty include the migration effects we report in Chapter 5 and the questions we raise regarding the ability of the total fertility rate to mislead (which, due to their more technical nature, are presented in the Appendix). To these might be added the severity of the recession and the long-term unemployment that it has caused. International evidence points to economic insecurity, particularly in respect of unemployment, as a potential reason for low fertility in a number of Southern and Eastern European nations. Given the extent of uncertainty, the situation requires careful monitoring and, as soon as the data are available, an analysis of *Census 2011* may prove beneficial.

### 6.4 FUTURE DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

The final point just raised at the end of the preceding section speaks to a broader need for more and better demographic research in Ireland. Pressures that built up in Irish schools, hospitals and within other public services during the economic boom were arguably partly predictable, had greater attention been paid to prevailing patterns of migration, family formation and fertility. In Chapter 5 we gave the example of how *Census 2006* recorded a blip in the female age profile that was about to reach peak childbearing years, implying inevitable consequences for the number of births after 2006 and a predictable challenge for maternity hospitals – had the effect been spotted in time. Thus, data from the census and other sources have the potential to inform and improve decisions relating to planning and resources. *Census 2011* should give answers as to whether some specific and important demographic trends have continued, including those relating to family structure, such as increases in the incidences of cohabitation, lone parenthood, same-sex couples and second relationships. Given the depth of the recession in Ireland, *Census 2011* is particularly timely. It has the capacity to reveal a great deal

about the impact of the economic crisis on patterns of migration (both international and domestic), household and family formation, labour market participation, and much more. Ireland is unusual in having a full census every five years and part of the rationale for doing so is its history of relatively rapid demographic change, especially through migration. The benefits of this policy of investing in the collection of regular, comprehensive demographic data should hopefully become apparent over the next year or so, provided sufficient resources are directed to analysing the data and distilling the messages contained therein.

# Appendix

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## The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and “Tempo Effects”

The most common measure of fertility is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR, sometimes also called the ‘Total Period Fertility Rate’), which provides a contemporaneous measure of the number of children being born per woman over a given period of time, usually a year. The TFR is a useful measure but it is not uncontroversial and it has shortcomings, which may be important for understanding recent developments in Ireland and their likely future direction. International experience of trends in the TFR suggests that it is at least possible that the TFR has underestimated underlying Irish fertility in recent times, because of what is called a “tempo effect”. This is an important issue, since anticipated trends in the TFR are a key component of long-term population projections, which inform policymaking in areas as diverse as pensions and public infrastructure. This Appendix attempts to quantify the potential extent of distortion associated with employing the TFR to measure fertility in Ireland. Note that it is not intended as a criticism of the use of the TFR, which is the most widely used and accepted international measure of contemporaneous fertility. Rather, the aim is to raise a question as to how the TFR might best be interpreted in Ireland.

The TFR for any given year is the number of children a hypothetical woman would have by the end of her childbearing years if she were subject to the prevailing probability of having a child at each age during that year. For example, in 2005 there was a probability of 0.030 of a 20 year-old woman giving birth; 0.034 for a 21 year-old; 0.038 for a 22 year-old, and so on. The TFR is obtained by adding these 2005 probabilities up, all the way from age 15 to 50, to obtain the expected number of children for a hypothetical woman who lives her life according to these 2005 probabilities. For 2005, calculated from the CRMF data, the expected number of children the hypothetical woman would have is 1.83.

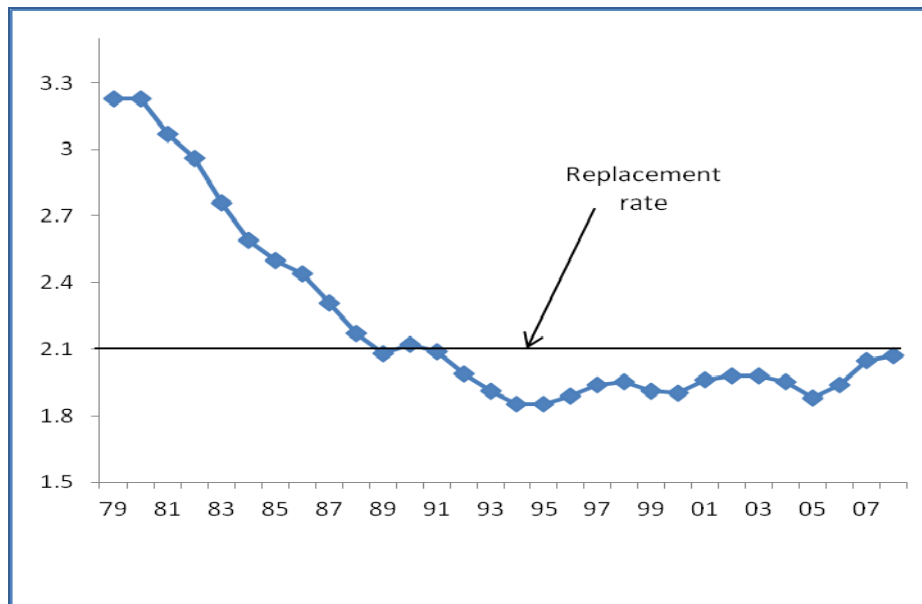
Why might this be an underestimate? Tempo effects are caused by systematic trends in the timing of childbirth. For instance, consider the hypothetical scenario that, for whatever reason, a reduction in unplanned lone parenthood occurs among young women. The result will be a fall in the probability of giving birth in the late teens and early twenties, resulting in an immediate fall in the TFR. Yet women who avoid becoming young lone mothers may generally go on to have a greater number of children in their total lifetime. In such circumstances, the TFR gives a misleading

indication of the ultimate impact of the change on fertility: the small initial drop will be outweighed by a larger rise a decade or so later *caused by the same phenomenon*. Similarly, consider the possibility that the cohort of women currently in their twenties decides to have the same number of children as the cohort currently in their thirties, but to have their children somewhat later. The lower probability of giving birth under the age of thirty causes an immediate drop in the TFR. Yet this cohort of women will go on eventually to have the same number of children as the preceding cohort. The counterbalancing increase in the probability of giving birth over the age of thirty will not be reflected by the TFR until the women who have delayed childbearing reach that age, when the TFR will bounce back up.

Tempo effects can be complex and, unsurprisingly therefore, their influence is controversial, but they can certainly cause the TFR to be misleading (Bongaarts, 2002; Sobotka and Lutz, 2009). Increasingly, scholars looking at international fertility trends are concluding that, while fertility undoubtedly fell to low levels in many developed countries in the late twentieth century, estimates of very low fertility were probably exaggerated by a tempo effect similar to the second scenario described above (Goldstein, Sobotka and Jasilioniene, 2009). Women chose to delay having children causing a temporary exaggerated dip in the TFR, which was then followed by an increase in the decade following the year 2000, as women who had delayed childbirth began to have children.

Has the TFR in Ireland been affected by tempo effects? Figure A1 shows the trend in the TFR since 1979, which conforms to the well-documented decline until the mid-1990s and slight recovery in recent years. Some uncertainty surrounds the extent of the increase post-2006, which may need some revision, since preliminary results of *Census 2011* imply that the number of women of childbearing age in Ireland may have been somewhat underestimated between 2006 and 2011.

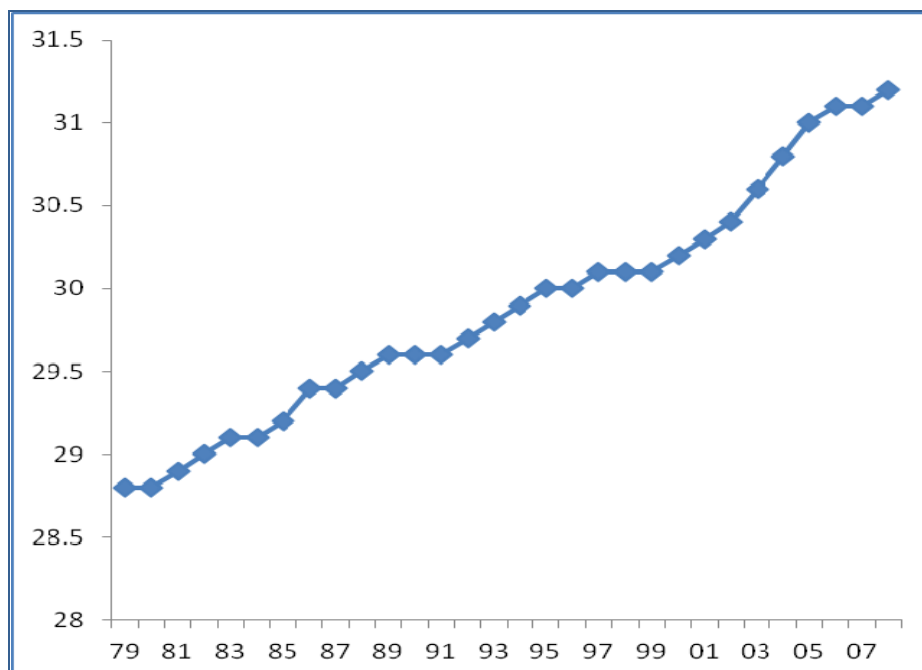
**Figure A1: Ireland's Total Fertility Rate (TFR), 1979-2010**



Source: CSO Vital Statistics.

Figure A2 plots the mean age at childbearing (MAC) for the same period. At the start of this period, 1979, the MAC was 28.8; by 2008 it had increased fairly steadily yet very substantially to 31.2. In addition, there was an increase in the rate of change of the MAC between 1999 and 2005. Given these two patterns – a strong dip in the TFR and consistent rise in MAC – there is at least a case to answer that a tempo effect caused the TFR to exaggerate the extent of Ireland's fertility dip. The 2006 CRMF can offer some further insights.

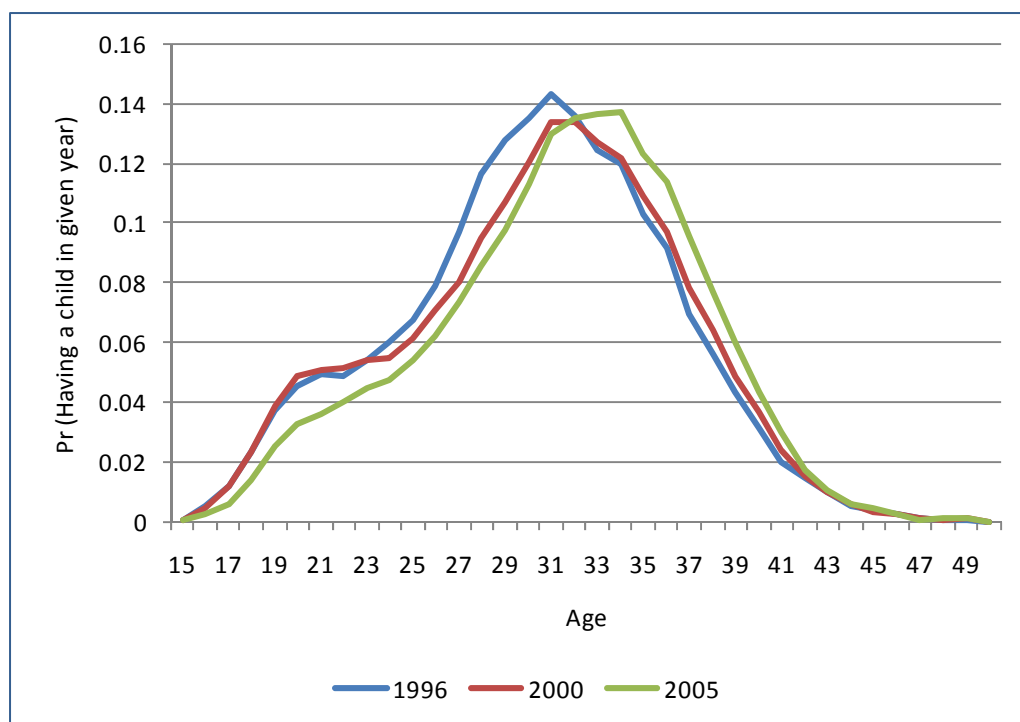
**Figure A2: Mean Age at Childbearing (MAC), 1979-2010**



Source: CSO Vital Statistics.

It is possible to get some idea of how the distribution of mother's age at childbearing has evolved in recent years, by deriving the ages of mothers of children born in different years prior to 2006 from the age of their children in 2006. To limit the influence of migration, which may mask longer-term underlying trends, the analysis is confined to women who are Irish and were resident in Ireland in the 1990s. Figure A3 plots the probability of giving birth by individual year of age in 1996, 2000 and 2005, for these longer-term Irish residents only. Summing these probabilities across the whole life-course (or, equivalently, calculating the area below the curves) gives the TFR, which has remained fairly stable. Yet the chart reveals a fall in the likelihood that women gave birth in their teens and twenties, coupled with a rise in the likelihood of giving birth in their thirties. The progression of this distribution over time illuminates the logic of tempo effects. When the process of delaying childbirth finally ceases, as eventually it must, a cohort of women will come through that shows no further increase in age at childbearing. When this happens, the left-hand side of the curve will stop falling before the right-hand side stops rising. The result will be a substantial rise in the area under the curve and hence in the TFR. Most importantly, the new higher level of the TFR that emerges is likely to be sustained. Tempo effects of this kind, which can take three to four decades to work through, help to explain the recent rise in fertility in many low-fertility countries since 2000 (Goldstein *et al.*, 2009; see also Chapter 5, Section 5.1).

**Figure A3: Derived probability of giving birth in 1996, 2000 and 2005 at individual years of age (Irish women resident since the 1990s only)**



Source: 2006 CRMF.

How large is the effect likely to be? Bongaarts (2002; based on Bongaarts and Feeney, 1998) shows how, under certain assumptions regarding the shape of the distribution of mother's age at birth, an increase in MAC of 0.1 years per year is likely to reduce the TFR by 10 per cent. This relationship provides a good fit to international data relating movements in the TFR to adjustments in the MAC. This means that it is possible to assess the potential scale of a tempo effect in Ireland, using the Bongaarts rule of thumb. The MAC has averaged an increase of 0.08 years per year since 1979. This implies that the TFR would need to be adjusted upwards by an average of around 8 per cent – slightly more in those years when the MAC was rising fastest. The result would be an adjusted fertility rate during the 1990s of generally above 2.0 children per woman and which at no stage dropped below 1.95. The most recent TFR would be well above replacement level. Note, therefore, that this is not to say that the large drop in fertility from more than three children per woman in the 1970s to around two in the 1990s is not an accurate reflection of what has occurred, only that the depth of the low-point reached in the 1990s may have been exaggerated and that the TFR might be liable to bounce back up somewhat in coming years.

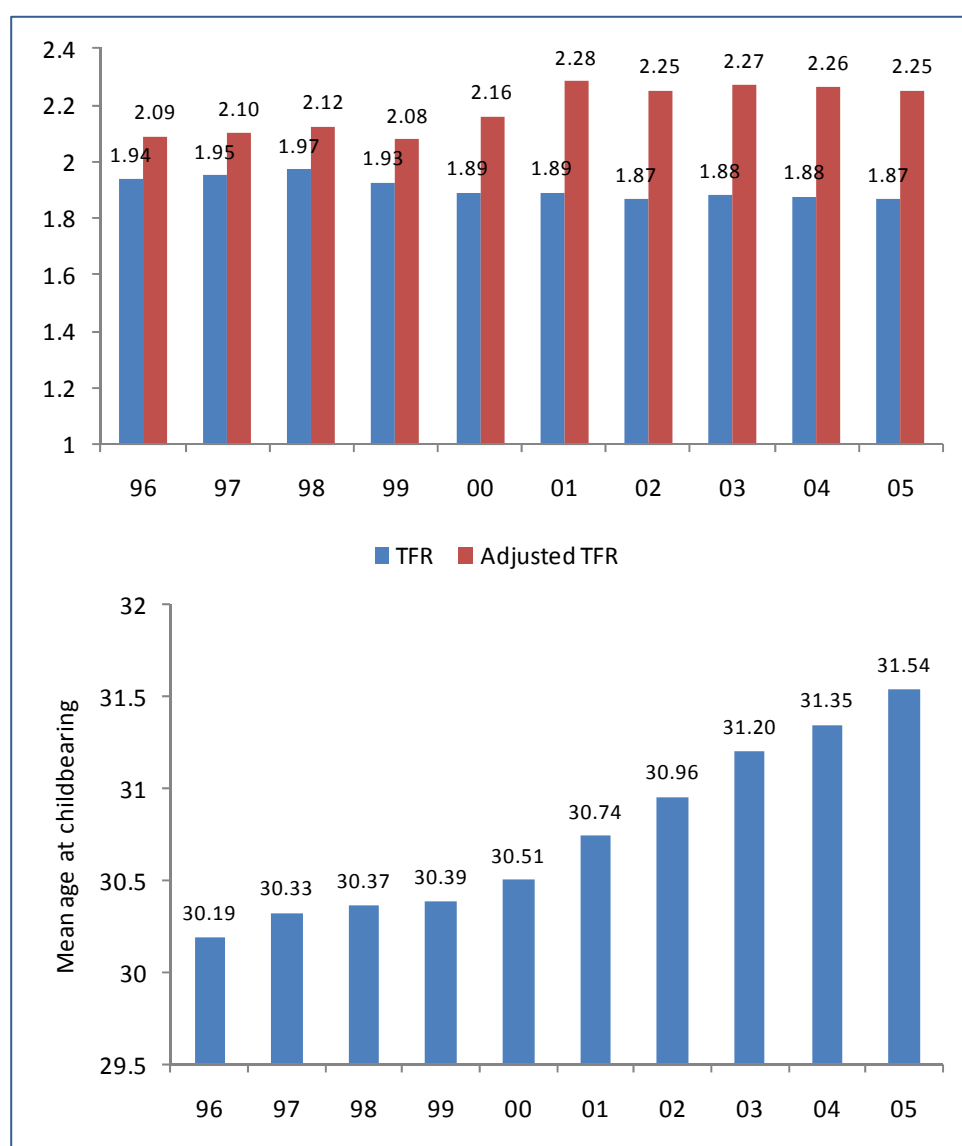
The 2006 CRMF can be used to provide an estimate of how large any adjustment could be, again limiting the analysis to Irish women resident since the 1990s. Figure A4 (top) presents retrospectively calculated TFRs among this group for the ten-year period 1997-2006, and adjusts them using the Bongaarts (2002) rule of thumb to account for changes in the MAC (bottom). This analysis reveals that delayed childbearing was particularly pronounced among the more permanent population – the acceleration in the MAC between 1999 and 2005 was driven by the native population. Once this increase is taken into account, the slight decline in the unadjusted TFR for this group evident in Figure A4 (which matches the fall in the number of births to more permanent Irish residents recorded in Figure 5.2 of Chapter 5), may merely reflect further delays in childbearing. The adjusted TFR instead suggests that the fertility of this recent cohort of long-term resident Irish women is likely to exceed the replacement rate by the time they complete their childbearing years. This would represent a considerable adjustment in estimates of Irish fertility trends. For instance, the CSO's 2008 population projections (CSO, 2008) assumed two scenarios for Irish fertility over coming decades: a low scenario of 1.6 children per woman and a high scenario of 1.9. If the size of the tempo effect caused by delayed fertility turns out to be substantial, as the present adjustments imply, both scenarios may result in significant underestimates of the future population.

How likely is it that Ireland's fertility is subject to this kind of large tempo effect? It is important to note that the adjusted TFR is an approximation based on a theory, albeit one that has been tested with some success against experience in other



countries. It is possible that the assumptions, which have thus far proved relatively sound elsewhere, will turn out to be unsound in Ireland. A cohort of women could come through that appears at first sight to be further delaying having children, but in fact plans ultimately to have less than two children each. A decline can initially look like a further delay. The very deep recession could yet bring such a drop in completed fertility about, although there are as of yet no signs that it is doing so. Nevertheless, the experience of other countries and the calculations presented here at least raise the possibility that Irish fertility has been higher than is generally realised in recent years, perhaps substantially so.

**Figure A4: Retrospective unadjusted and adjusted TFRs for Irish women resident since the 1990s, calculated from children's age in April 2006 (top) and trend in mean age at childbearing (bottom) used to adjust the TFR**



Source: 2006 CRMF.

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## Family Support Agency

### Households and Family Structures in Ireland: A Detailed Statistical Analysis of Census 2006

Pete Lunn and Tony Fahey

This report is the second of two reports that present a more detailed statistical account of family structures in Ireland than has previously been attempted. The first report (Family Figures), examined the likely family circumstances of individuals, based on micro-data from Census 2006. Households and Family Structures in Ireland goes one step further, analysing a more complete range of relationships within the household.

The main topics covered include: the extent to which partners have similar backgrounds, versus the extent to which couples cross social boundaries; the rapid growth in and consequent role of cohabitation; the family circumstances of children; and patterns of fertility. In each case the analysis offers new findings that shed light on the driving forces behind recent trends in family structures.



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