1. INTRODUCTION

Context

The family is normally regarded as a key institution in Irish life and is accorded a privileged place in the Constitution. Convulsive public debate has taken place over the years on key aspects of family policy and related sexual morality, as for example during the referenda on divorce and abortion which took place in the 1980s and 1990s (Hug, 1999). Questions about the role of public policy in strengthening family life and supporting families of different types have been important in a number of policy arenas, especially social welfare, health, family law and education (see, e.g. Commission on the Family, 1998).

In spite of all this interest, the level of systematic knowledge about the family in Ireland is limited and the data sources which might be used to generate that knowledge are underdeveloped. Major studies on the family have been carried out over the years, but these have been few and widely interspersed and no comprehensive original studies are available for recent times.[1] Research reflecting particular policy concerns has come to the fore in recent years and has tended to focus on family patterns that are problematic from a policy perspective rather than on family life in general. This focus has produced valuable work, such as, e.g. McCashin's (1993, 1996) work on lone parent families and the pioneering study by Mahon and her colleagues (Mahon *et al.,* 1998) on crisis pregnancy, but many important areas remain unexplored. For example, there has been virtually no analysis of the sharp fall in fertility which has occurred in Ireland since the early 1980s nor of the changing role of marriage in family formation. Information on the situation of children in families is particularly poor, though the recent government announcement of a National Children's Strategy and a planned National Longitudinal Study of Children may point to improvements on this front in the future. Similarly, even though data on incomes indicate that the large two-parent family accounts for a large proportion of the children in poverty (Callan *et al.,* 1996, p. 92), the large family has virtually disappeared off the agenda for family research in Ireland, in contrast to the position of three decades ago when it was pointed to as a major concern (see, e.g. Walsh, 1968).

Objectives

It is in the context of the under-developed state of family research in Ireland that the present study was initiated. It is intended primarily as a

[1] The best-known studies deal with the family in rural Ireland and none of these are recent (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940/1968; McNabb, 1964; Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Hannan, 1979). No general study of the family in urban Ireland has been carried out since Humphreys' study of the late 1940s (Humphreys, 1966). For a recent general overview of the family in twentieth century Ireland, see Kennedy (2001).

scoping exercise focusing on the present information and knowledge base for policy analysis in areas connected with the family in Ireland. Its objectives are:

1. To identify and describe the major different paths to new family formation in Ireland over the period 1987-1997, based on existing data and focusing particularly on family types which are of major concern from a social welfare point of view (such as one-parent families and large two-parent families).
2. To explore existing data sets from a family studies point of view, draw out key family related and policy relevant findings which they can yield, and identify those data gaps which need to be filled through further data collection.
3. Draw out the implications of the findings for public policy, focusing both on substantive policy and on improvements in data collection needed to guide policy in the future.

Three key substantive topics are examined in the report – fertility decline, the rise in lone parenthood, and trends in household and family size, with special reference to the continued incidence of large family households. For each topic, the report aims to describe recent trends in Ireland and locate those trends in comparative international perspective, examine cross-sectional variations in Ireland (to the extent that available data will allow) and draw implications, particularly in regard to needs for future data collection and research.

2. DECLINE IN FERTILITY

Introduction

The decline in fertility is one of the most significant social changes to occur in Ireland in recent decades. This decline has implications for social policy at two fundamental levels. First, it has a strong bearing on the welfare of families. In the days of high birth rates (which lasted until the 1960s in Ireland), large family size was a cause of concern because of its links with poverty, poor health, overcrowding and other stresses (Walsh, 1968; Kent and Sexton, 1973). Today, the large family has become rare, and certain kinds of pressures on both children and parents have eased as a result (see Chapter 4 below). However, concern has shifted to newly problematic aspects of fertility patterns. The most common such concern is the partnership circumstances (and sometimes the ages) of parents. Though fewer children are born today, a much larger share of them are born outside of marriage, and many of the parents of those children are relatively young. As we shall see further below, at least some non-marital births occur to parents who are in quasi-martial unions or marry after the birth takes place, so that non-martial childbearing does not always lead to lone parenthood. Nevertheless, the concern is that rising non-marital childbearing has contributed to a major increase in lone parenthood and thus to the stresses on both parents and children which lone parenthood can often lead to, particularly in the case of those who are not well off or lack the backup needed to cope with raising children. This in turn poses questions about how public policy should respond to the welfare needs of families in such circumstances.

The second broad significance of present fertility rates arises at the population level. Here the concern is what falling fertility means for future population size and structure. Major regions of the world, particularly eastern and southern Europe and Japan, now have total fertility rates[2] (TFRs) which are so low (below 1.5) that those regions are already faced with rapid population ageing and may soon face the prospect of substantial population decline, even if one allows for some recovery in birth rates in coming years and substantial volumes of inward migration (UN, 2000). The worry is that these developments in turn could seriously threaten long-term economic growth and social provision (World Bank, 1994).

The importance of these issues, and the different ways they manifest themselves in different countries, suggest that it is useful to examine them in the Irish case and to try to locate Ireland in an international

[2] The total fertility rate is the average number of births a woman would have during her reproductive life if she were exposed to the fertility rates occurring across childbearing age-groups of women in a particular year.

comparative context. This is what the present chapter aims to do. It takes a range of aspects of fertility patterns – total fertility rates, family size and the propensity to form families, the proportion of births occurring outside marriage, and mothers' ages at birth – and examines how recent trends on these indicators in Ireland fit into the broad picture in developed countries. The overall objectives within which this aim is pursued are to outline what can be said on the topics in question on the basis of available data, to identify the main data gaps which need to be filled in the future, and to point to implications for policy which can be drawn on the basis of existing knowledge.

International Fertility Trends

By the early 1990s, replacement level fertility (that is, a TFR of approximately 2.1) had become the upper limit of fertility virtually throughout the developed world. It is now steadily emerging in the developing world also, having already arrived in many parts of Asia (China, Thailand, North and South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong). The United Nations estimates that in 1998, 45 per cent of the world's population lived in countries with TFRs at or below replacement level and its central projection is that that proportion will have risen to 75 per cent by 2018 (United Nations, 2000, p. 27).

However, despite the universal movement towards low fertility, significant cross-national differences remain. Among developed countries, total fertility rates in the mid-1990s ranged from a low of 1.22 in Italy to a high of 2.07 in the United States (most countries of eastern Europe, whether they could be counted as "developed" or not, also fell within that range, mainly clustered towards the lower end). The EU average was 1.45. The TFR in the US is boosted by the fertility of Hispanic women, which in 1999 stood at 2.89, but even among non-Hispanic white women the TFR in 1999 was 1.85, which was high by European standards.

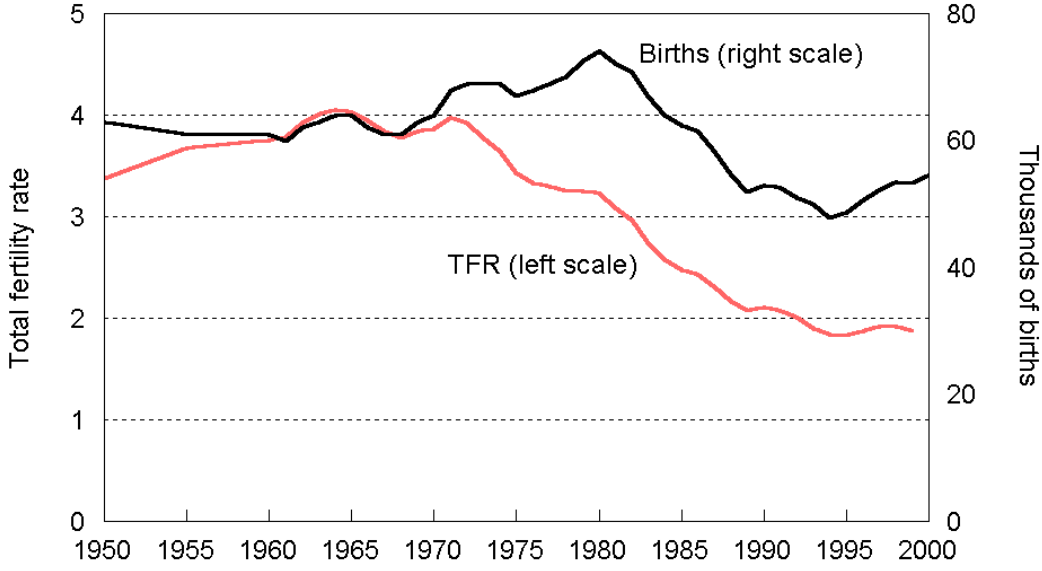
From an historical perspective, this cross-national range in fertility seems small, amounting to a fertility differential of less than one child per woman between the highest and lowest fertility rates across developed countries. However, in relative terms, it means that the TFR in the US today is 70 per cent higher than that of Italy and 43 per cent higher than that of the EU. California, the most populous state in the United States (32 million people) had a TFR in 1998 of 2.2 (80 per cent higher than Italy), and Texas, with a population of 19 million people, has a TFR of 2.4 (double that of Italy) (National Centre for Health Statistics, 2000). Taking major regional differences in the US into account, therefore, the highest TFR in the developed world is now double that of the lowest.

This present-day *relative* differential among developed countries is as wide as it has been at any time over the past half-century and has major significance for the broad evolution of population in the countries concerned. Low fertility countries such as Italy and Japan are at present on a course towards rapid population ageing and sharp population decline by the middle of the present century, while the US population is on course for continuing population growth and more restrained ageing of the population (UN, 2000). If these diverging trends persist, they are likely to have major implications for social and economic differentiation across countries in the present developed world over coming decades.

Fertility Trends in Ireland

Figure 2.1 presents trends in Ireland in two indicators of fertility – the number of births and the TFR – for the period 1960-2000. These two indicators moved in different directions and at different tempos over the period, reflecting shifts in the balance between the number of births and the number of women of childbearing years. During the 1950s, the number of births in Ireland fell slightly but because of decline in the population of women in childbearing years, the TFR rose. From the late 1960s to 1980, the opposite happened – births increased, but because the female population increased faster, the TFR turned downwards and fell from 3.87 in 1970 to 2.08 in 1989. By the early 1990s, the decline in the TFR had begun to bottom out. Despite a further dip in 1993-95, the overall trend for the 1990s has been reasonably flat, even though the number of births increased by 14 per cent between 1994 and 2000.

Figure 2.1: Number of Births and Total Fertility Rate in Ireland, 1960-2000



Sources: CSO Annual and Quarterly Vital Statistics Reports, Council of Europe (2000).

Since the 1950s, the level of fertility in Ireland has consistently been high by European standards, in keeping with the image of the Irish demographic regime as an outlier in Europe (Coleman, 1992). However, if the comparative range is extended to include other regions of the developed world, Irish exceptionalism becomes less clearcut. At certain points – particularly the start and end of the period between 1950 and 2000 – fertility rates in the United States, New Zealand and (at the start of the period only) in Canada and Australia have also been high by European standards and have fallen more or less in the same range as those in Ireland.

Figure 2.2 illustrates these comparisons. In 1960, as Figure 2.2a shows, when the Irish TFR was just below 4, few countries in Europe (the Netherlands and Portugal being the main instances) had TFRs even barely above 3.0 and the average for the later EU region was 2.69 (UN, 2000b; New Cronos 2001). The Irish TFR was thus over 40 per cent higher than

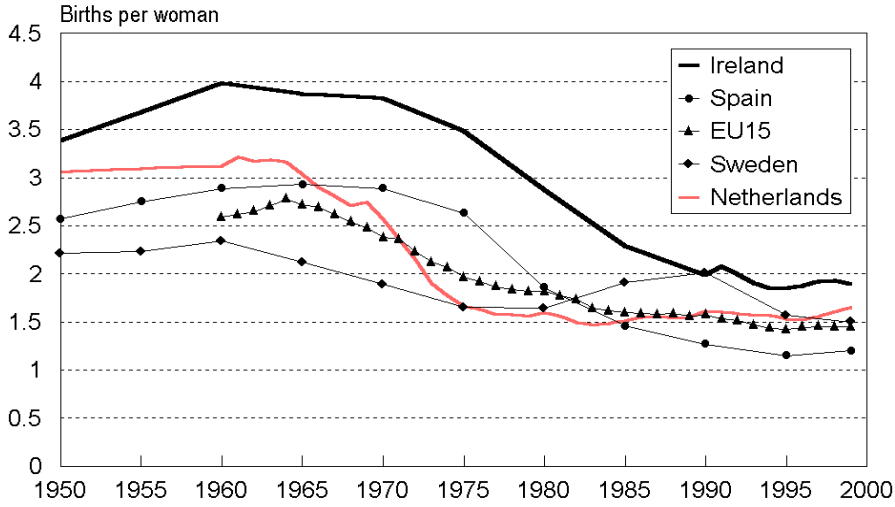
the average for the later EU and 66 per cent higher than that of Sweden, which then represented the lower limit TFR in western Europe. After 1960, fertility decline proceeded sooner and faster in the rest of Europe than in Ireland, so that Ireland's outlier position first became more pronounced. Then decline in the Irish TFR set in during the 1970s and 1980s, placing it on a course of convergence toward the European average. However, convergence halted with the bottoming out of the decline in the Irish TFR in the 1990s, so that at its lowest point (1.84 in 1995), the Irish TFR was still 30 per cent higher than the EU average and 60 per cent higher than the TFR in Spain, which by then represented the lower limit in Europe (and indeed in the world).

Figure 2.2b shows that in the late 1950s, the "new world" countries – the US, Canada, New Zealand and (to a slightly lesser extent) Australia – were clustered around the TFR levels found in Ireland. Fertility in those countries declined sharply in the 1960s but by the 1980s that decline had levelled off and, in the US and New Zealand particularly, had turned into modest recovery. By the 1990s, the TFRs in the US and New Zealand had stabilised at levels slightly above those in Ireland, where they remain today. The TFR in Australia had fallen somewhat lower (to 1.75 in 1998), while Canada (1.6 in 1998) had dropped to well within the range common in Europe.

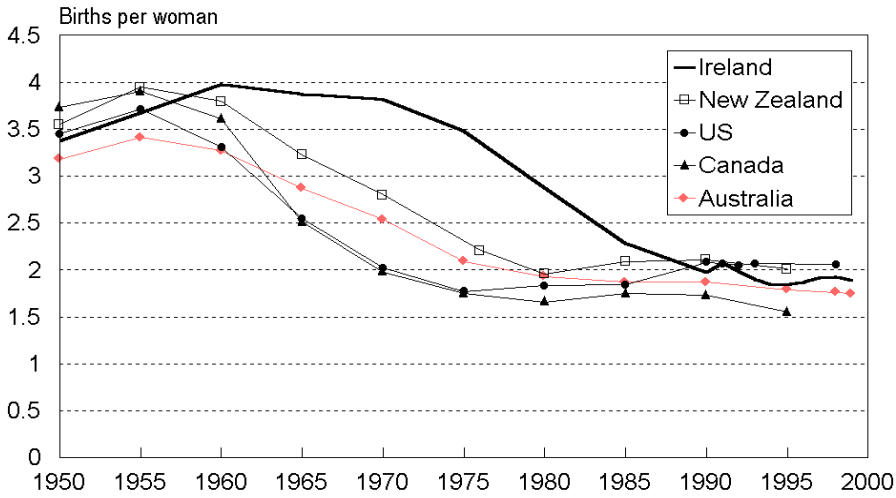
Looking at total fertility rates, therefore, the common image of Ireland as an outlier case characterised by uniquely high fertility levels is only partially borne out by the record over the second half of the twentieth century. Irish TFRs have consistently been high by *European* standards over this period but at certain points have been quite similar to the fertility levels of the "new world" countries of North America and Australia/New Zealand (the closest similarities being with the United States and New Zealand both at the beginning and end of this period). As in those latter countries, the TFR in Ireland has fallen by a half or more since the early 1960s but that decline has bottomed out in recent years. The

Figure 2.2: Ireland's TFR in Comparative Perspective, 1950-2000

2.2a. Ireland and Europe



2.2b. Ireland and the "New World" Countries



Source: UN (2000a), New Cronos (2001).

present TFR in Ireland is low by Irish historical standards and is marginally lower than in the present-day United States or New Zealand. But it is reasonably high in comparison to the very low rates that have emerged in Europe.

Just as Ireland is now closer to the United States than to Europe in regard to total fertility rates, the long-term population prospects arising from those fertility rates are also closer to those of the United States. The UN's latest "medium-variant" projections of world population (UN, 2000a) assume that Ireland's edge in fertility rates over the rest of Europe will continue for the foreseeable future and, as in the case of the United States, will be enough (in combination with modest inward migration) to sustain continuing population growth. According to those projections, Ireland will be the only European country to have a larger population in 2050 than it has today, with an increase of the order of 25 per cent, compared to an EU decline in excess of 10 per cent – and a decline in Italy of over 25 per cent (UN, 2000b, p. 8).

Childbearing Patterns

Although Irish fertility *levels* (as measured by TFRs) closely matched those of the United States and New Zealand both around 1960 and again in the 1990s, the patterns of family formation and childbearing which gave rise to those fertility levels were distinctively different in the earlier part of the period. They have lost much of that distinctiveness since then.

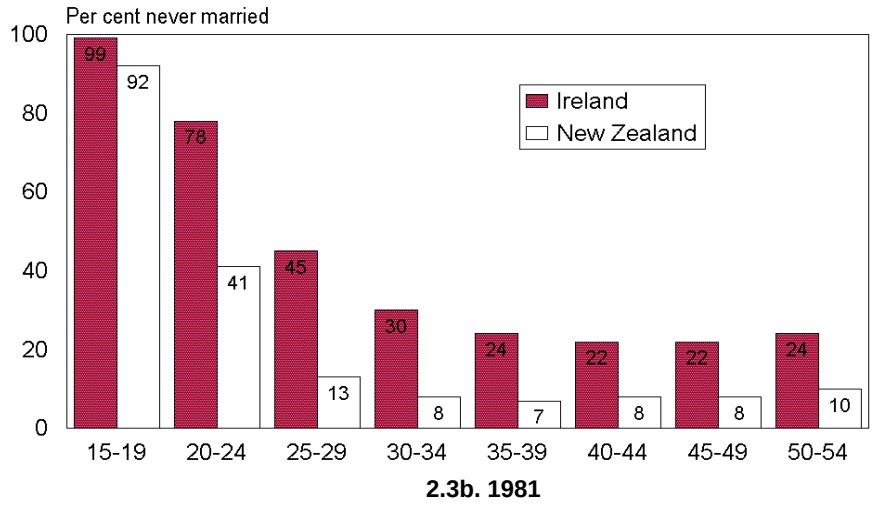
In Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, family formation and childbearing patterns were unique in that marriages were few (i.e. many adults remained single) but families were large, a combination which had been a feature of Irish reproductive patterns since the late nineteenth century (Guinnane, 1997; United Nations, 1990). Since then the distinctive Irish pattern of a low incidence of marriage and high marital fertility has evolved towards a more standard pattern for developed countries in which union-formation is generally higher than it was in Ireland in the past but family size is lower. This evolution is a major part of the story of Irish

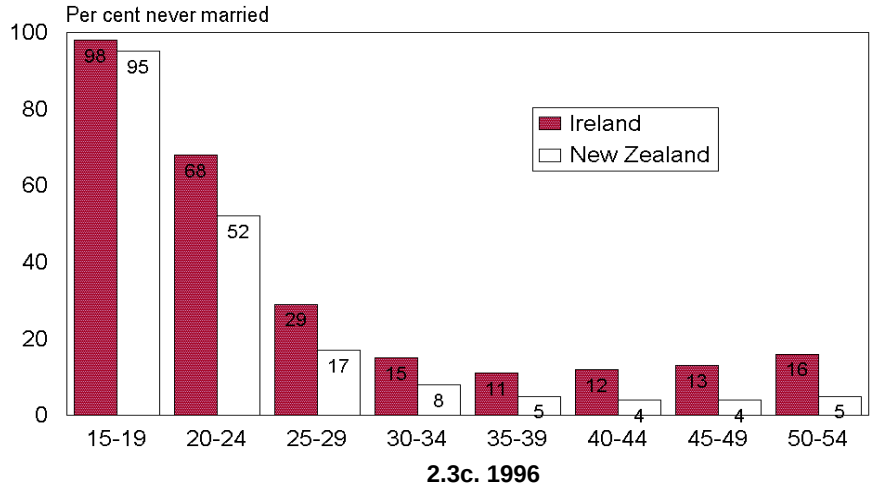
fertility trends over the past half century. The new patterns which have emerged in recent years are not easy to track, since one of their features is a growth in the number of non-marital unions, a type of family formation which is poorly tracked in the available demographic data. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace the general outlines of what has happened and to gain some indirect indications of the more clouded developments.

MARRIAGE

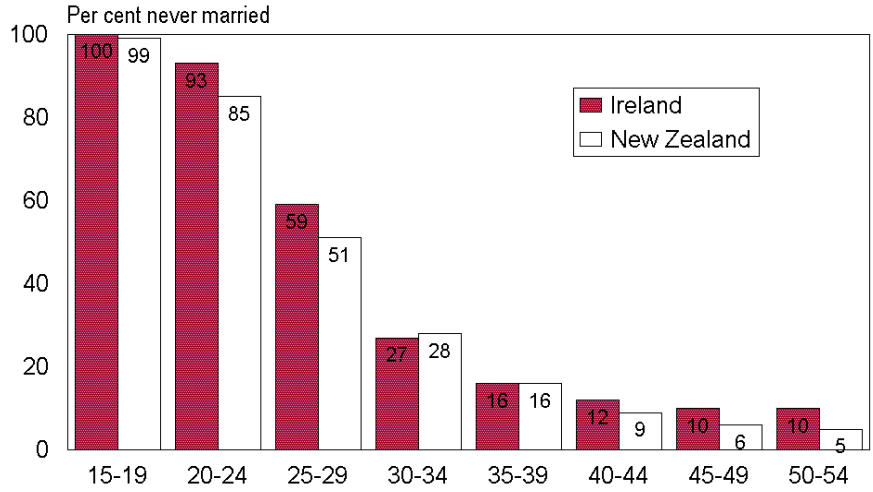
The role of shifting marriage patterns in Irish fertility trends since the 1960s can be illustrated through a comparison with New Zealand. New Zealand in the 1960s was one of those countries which had fertility rates which were quite close to those of Ireland but which had sharply contrasting marriage patterns. In 1961, New Zealand's level of marriage (like that of the United States) was exceptionally high by the standards of the developed world while Ireland's was exceptionally low. At age 30-34, for example, only 8.1 per cent of women in New Zealand in 1961 were still single, compared to 29.6 per cent in Ireland (Figure 2.3a). Over the following two decades, Ireland had something of a marriage boom, in contrast to the rest of the developed world where the post-war marriage boom was by then played out and a decline in marriage was setting in (UN, 1990). By 1981, the proportions of women remaining single had fallen in Ireland while, in New Zealand, singlehood had risen among women aged between 20 and 30. In general, though, the proportions remaining single were still larger in Ireland (Figure 2.3b).

Figure 2.3: Proportions Never Married, Ireland and New Zealand, 1961, 1981, 1996





2.3c. 1996

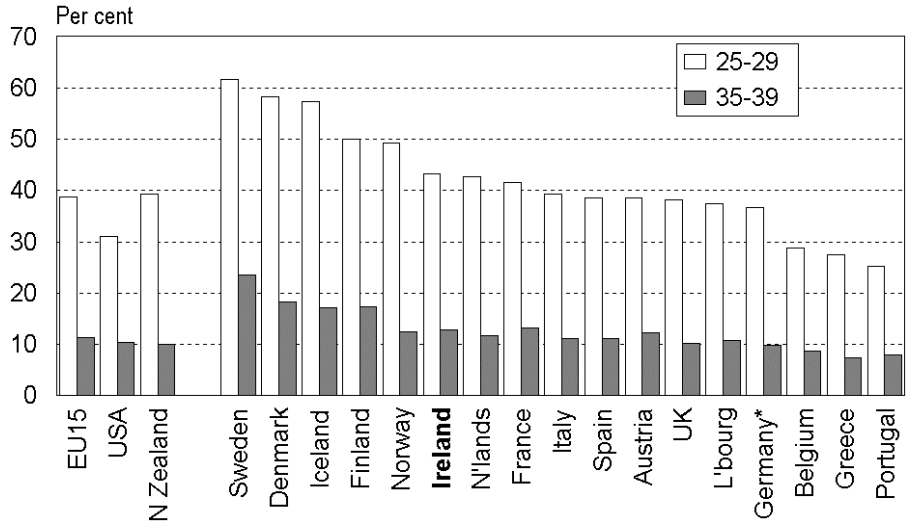


Sources: Census 1996 (Ireland); Statistics New Zealand.

By 1996, the marriage boom in Ireland was well past and the incidence of non-marriage had risen sharply again (Figure 2.3c). Up to age 30-34, the proportions never married were higher in 1996 than they had been in 1961. A similar trend had continued in New Zealand, with the result that the former divergence in proportions remaining single between New Zealand and Ireland had all but disappeared by 1996.

A broader international picture is summarised in Figure 2.4 for 1990/91, referring to women in the age-groups 25-29 and 35-39. This shows that, by the 1990s, the only real outliers as far as non-marriage was concerned were the Scandinavians – Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland. Ireland's level of non-marriage by that time was unexceptional. Non-marriage in the US was somewhat less common than in Europe, though more recent data suggest that the gap may be closing (US *Statistical Abstract*, 1998).

Figure 2.4: Proportions Never Married Among Women Aged 25-29 and 35-39, Selected Countries, 1990/1991



* excl. former GDR.
Source: New Cronos (2001).

The implications of the recent rise in non-marriage for the level of family formation has to be interpreted in the light of the declining importance of marriage in this area. In the past, in Ireland as in other countries, marriage was the dominant gateway to family formation – couples did not live together or have children before they married. Today, that is no longer the case, a point which will emerge clearly below in connection with the rise and normalisation of non-marital childbearing. Thus, while it is clear that marriage has become less popular in recent years across a wide range of countries, it is more difficult to establish whether and to what extent other types of family formation – e.g. through non-marital unions and through solo parenthood – have provided compensating alternatives. As we will suggest further below, a knowledge of the extent and nature of these possible alternatives is a pressing requirement for the understanding of present trends in family formation in Ireland. It is here that some of the main gaps in the Irish data pointed to by the present report arise.

Birth Order

As a counter-balance to the low incidence of marriage in Ireland in the 1960s, family sizes were extremely large by the standards of virtually all other western countries. This aspect of Irish fertility receded from that point on, but it did so quite slowly and it was only in the 1990s that family sizes in Ireland ceased to be significantly larger than the international norm. Comprehensive direct data on the numbers of children born to women are lacking in Ireland, and so we have to rely on data on birth orders from birth registration sources in order to track family size.[3] Using

[3] Up to 1981, the Census of Population provided the closest approximation to a comprehensive measure of family size by means of periodic enquiries on numbers of children born to married women. However, as these enquiries did not extend to single women and widows, the resulting measures were not in fact fully comprehensive. Such enquiries have not