

4. THE SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LONE PARENTS

Introduction

So far we have explored the incidence, trends and routes into and out of lone parenthood. In this chapter we describe the social characteristics of lone parents. Previous research has provided some evidence that lone parents are more likely to come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, although that evidence is incomplete. Flanagan and Richardson's (1992) study of non-marital births in the National Maternity Hospital suggests that their "average social class" was skilled manual and McCashin's qualitative study of 53 lone mothers showed that 46 per cent had primary level education or less (1996). Hannan and Ó Riain's (1993) longitudinal study of school leavers found that 11 per cent of young women with no qualifications or Group/Junior Certificate became single mothers within five years of leaving school, compared to 1 per cent of those with Leaving Certificate or third level qualifications. McCashin (1993) presented data on the social characteristics of lone parents from the 1987 Household Budget Survey, while the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) (2000) reports results from the 1997 Labour Force Survey (LFS) which are also analysed here.

Much of the existing research on the relationship between lone parenthood and social disadvantage has focused on the young and unmarried. Less attention has been given to older lone parents who are separated, divorced or widowed, which in turn reflects a poor record of research on marriage breakdown or on patterns of entry into second relationships. In consequence, basic factual information about aspects of lone parenthood which are associated with marital breakdown is lacking. It is also difficult to trace the effects of rising educational levels and falling unemployment on the incidence of lone parenthood. It has been suggested in the past that poor employment prospects among early school leavers were a major contributor to lone parenthood among younger mothers (Hannan and Ó Riain, 1993). In those circumstances, one would have expected the boom in employment of recent years to have halted or reversed the rise in non-marital lone parenthood which occurred during the 1980s. But on the evidence of Chapter 3 above, that seems not to have come about, thus raising a question about the longer-term relationship between economic conditions and the incidence of lone parenthood.

It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to explore these complex issues in any depth, since they would require extended analysis and

complex data to illuminate. Here the objective is simply to build up a descriptive profile of lone parents from the most recently available data, drawing comparisons between lone parents in different marital status categories (single, separated/divorced and widowed) and between those and married parents.

Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for 1997 provide the most useful source for this purpose, since it contains a substantial sample of lone parents and collects information on the social class, education level, housing tenure, and labour market status of sampled households.¹⁹ Even in this source, however, the sample size for lone fathers is too small to allow detailed analysis, so we concentrate here on lone mothers. A further problem with the data is that because of their cross-sectional nature they do not always enable us to distinguish between that which precedes lone parenthood and that which follows from it. This limits the degree to which causal inferences can be drawn from descriptive characteristics. Poverty or unemployment, for example, might be causes of lone parenthood (for example, in that, lack of other opportunities may remove the incentive for young single women to defer childbearing). But they may also be consequences, in that, for example, lone parents might be less able to find suitable employment and may therefore become more reliant on state benefits. While both sets of factors are of interest because of what they tell us about the circumstances of lone parents, it would be desirable to be able to distinguish the antecedents from the outcomes of lone parenthood, something which is not possible with cross-sectional data.

The LFS contains a sufficient number of lone parents to allow us to build up a profile of their social characteristics and compare them with other categories of the population. The results should, however, be interpreted in light of the possible undercounting of younger lone parents living with their own parents discussed in the last chapter. The latest year for which LFS microdata are available is 1997.

Age

The age profile of lone mothers with children aged under 15 years differs markedly between the unmarried and the separated (Table 4.1). Unmarried mothers are generally young: over a third are aged under 25, and a further 27.7 per cent are aged 25-29. Separated mothers are a good deal older: only 1 per cent are aged under 25, almost half are in the age-range 35-44, and 20 per cent are aged over 44. Table 4.1 also shows that the age-profile of separated lone parents is quite similar to that of married

¹⁹ The 1997 Labour Force Survey includes a sample of 2,326 lone parents with children aged under 15 years. Of these, 91 per cent are lone mothers and 9 per cent are lone fathers. As noted earlier, some undercounting of lone parent families who live as sub-units in larger family households may occur in the data. In all tables weights are applied to correct for sample errors and gross up figures to population totals.

mothers (keeping in mind that we are talking here of mothers with at least one child aged under 15).

Table 4.1: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 by Family Status and Age (1997)

| Age | Married/ Cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|---------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| 15 - 19 | 0.1 | 4.2 | 0.1 | — | 0.4 |
| 20 - 24 | 2.2 | 30.6 | 1.0 | — | 3.7 |
| 25 - 29 | 9.8 | 27.7 | 8.5 | 1.8 | 10.6 |
| 30 - 34 | 21.2 | 21.5 | 20.8 | 4.3 | 21.0 |
| 35 - 39 | 25.3 | 7.8 | 24.7 | 11.8 | 24.1 |
| 40 - 44 | 21.6 | 5.1 | 24.5 | 22.5 | 20.9 |
| 45 - 49 | 13.1 | 2.5 | 14.2 | 28.7 | 12.8 |
| 50 - 55 | 5.9 | 0.6 | 5.6 | 23.8 | 5.8 |
| 56 - 59 | 0.8 | — | 0.7 | 7.0 | 0.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,931 | 23,636 | 24,593 | 4,794 | 416,954 |
| Row % | 87.3 | 5.7 | 5.9 | 1.1 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

This similarity in age between separated and married mothers is somewhat surprising, as the time-lag from marriage to separation would lead one to expect separated parents to be older on average than the married. Two factors could account for the similarity. One is that couples who marry young may be more likely to separate (Heaton, 1991; Berrington and Diamond, 1999), thus counterbalancing the effect of the time-lag between marriage and separation as far as the age-profile of the separated is concerned. The other is that separation may cause mothers to cease childbearing at a somewhat earlier age than those who remain married. This would have the consequence that separated mothers would reach the stage of having grown-up children only (and thus of having moved out of the category we are interested in here) at an earlier age than those who stayed married. We lack the data to test these possibilities but it seems plausible that they both affect the age-profile of separated mothers.

Education

The variable that is most likely to capture information on individuals' social background prior to becoming lone parents is education level. For some young people education may have been disrupted by lone parenthood but the likelihood is that for the great majority education was completed before the onset of childbearing and so is unambiguously a prior condition.

Table 4.2 shows that lone mothers of all three types (unmarried, separated and widowed) have lower educational attainment than married/cohabiting mothers. For example, in all three groups of lone mothers, 28 per cent have primary education only, compared to 15.7 per cent of married mothers. Furthermore, unmarried mothers have slightly lower educational attainment than the separated, particularly in that fewer of the former have any third level education.

However, the educational profile of women in different family statuses needs some further elaboration because of the confounding effects of age (in general, younger adults have higher educational attainment than older adults). Widows are generally older than the other groups and so would be

expected to have lower education on that count alone, while unmarried mothers are younger and so would be expected to have higher education. The relatively low educational attainment of unmarried mothers revealed in Table 4.2 may thus understate their true level of disadvantage since it does not control for the effects of age.

Table 4.2: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| Education | Married/ cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
| | | | % | | |
| Primary / None | 15.7 | 28.3 | 28.9 | 30.3 | 17.1 |
| Intermediate/Group Certificate | 28.0 | 36.4 | 31.9 | 35.1 | 28.8 |
| Leaving Certificate | 35.8 | 26.2 | 25.2 | 22.7 | 34.4 |
| Third-Level Non-University | 12.7 | 6.3 | 8.4 | 7.6 | 12.0 |
| University | 7.9 | 2.8 | 5.6 | 4.2 | 7.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,931 | 23,636 | 24,593 | 4,794 | 416,954 |
| Row % | 87.3 | 5.7 | 5.9 | 1.1 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 examine this issue by presenting data on educational levels among women aged 20-24 and 35-44 separately. The age group 20-24 is of interest since it is the modal age group for unmarried mothers, while the age group 35-44 is the modal age group for the separated. These tables also extend the picture by presenting comparisons not just among mothers in different family circumstances but also with women who are not married and have no children. It thus gives some indication of how educational level affects the decision to remain outside of marriage and childbearing, as well as the routing of those with children into different parental circumstances.

For women aged 20-24, unmarried motherhood is strongly related to low educational attainment – just over 50 per cent have an Intermediate Certificate or less, compared to 17 per cent of the whole age group. In addition, being a *married* mother at this age is also linked to educational disadvantage, though not as strongly as in the case of unmarried mothers – 27 per cent of married mothers in this age group have Intermediate Certificate education or less. Those who are unmarried and without children, by contrast, have considerably higher educational attainment – only 10 per cent have Intermediate Certificate or less, while over one-third have at least some third level education.

Table 4.3: Women Aged 20-24 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| | Married/cohab with children | Unmarried with children | Unmarried, no children | Total |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------|
| | | | | |
| Primary /None | 7.8 | 17.2 | 2.5 | 4.7 |
| Intermediate/Group Certificate | 19.2 | 33.2 | 8.0 | 12.3 |
| Leaving Certificate | 52.7 | 38.3 | 54.8 | 53.1 |
| Third-Level Non-University | 13.6 | 8.7 | 20.0 | 17.8 |
| University | 6.5 | 2.5 | 14.7 | 12.1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 29,422 | 10,084 | 97,119 | 136,625 |
| Row % | 21.5 | 7.4 | 71.0 | 100 |

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Among those aged 35-44, the key comparisons are between the married, the separated and the unmarried childless (unmarried mothers and the widowed accounted for small proportions of this age group in 1997 and will not be referred to further here). The evidence from Table 4.4 reinforces the inference drawn earlier that lower education attainment may increase the risk of separation. Separated mothers in this age group are roughly twice as likely to have primary education only as either married mothers or those who are single and childless and they are little more than half as likely to have third level education. Those who are single and childless have somewhat higher levels of education than the rest: 16 per cent have a university education, compared to 9.3 per cent for the whole age group, while 16.8 per cent finished with an Intermediate or Group Certificate, compared to 26.8 per cent for the total age group.

Table 4.4: Women Aged 35-44 by Family Status and Education (1997)

| Education | Married/ cohab with children | Lone parent | | | Unmarried no children | Total |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------|---------|
| | | Unmarried* | Separated | Widowed* | | |
| Primary /None | 14.0 | 41.6 | 29.6 | 20.0 | 16.3 | 15.6 |
| Intermediate/ Group Certificate | 27.8 | 27.0 | 31.5 | 42.0 | 16.8 | 26.8 |
| Leaving Certificate | 36.2 | 19.0 | 26.6 | 25.8 | 35.5 | 35.2 |
| Third-Level Non- University | 13.3 | 7.4 | 7.3 | 8.3 | 15.2 | 13.0 |
| University | 8.7 | 5.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 16.0 | 9.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 170,509 | 3,082* | 12,099 | 4,794* | 26,315 | 213,629 |
| Row % | 79.8 | 1.4 | 5.7 | 0.8 | 12.3 | 100 |

* The numbers of sample cases on which these estimates are based are small and the estimates are therefore liable to error.

Source: LFS (1997) micro-data.

Social Class

The social class profile of parents in different family circumstances is of considerable interest but is difficult to establish. One problem is the lack of data on occupational position among women who are in full-time home duties. For married or co-habiting women in that position, it is common to ascribe social class on the basis of spouse's or partner's occupation (or, in the case of LFS data, on the basis of the occupation of the person with the highest class category in the household). For lone mothers – the category of particular interest here – spouses and partners (or other occupied persons in the household) are usually lacking and so social class cannot be ascribed. Even in the case of those lone mothers who have an occupation in their own right it is uncertain whether that occupation is a reliable guide to “true” social class position. Women's occupational positions are generally lower than those of men and lone mothers in

particular, by virtue of their family circumstances, may be constrained into accepting jobs which are below their underlying occupational potential. Thus, it is not always clear what current occupational position of such women should be taken to indicate.

Table 4.5: Mothers with Children Under 15 Years by Family Status and Social Class (1997)

| Social class | Married | Lone parent | | | Total |
|--|-----------|-------------|---------|--------|----------|
| | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | % | |
| Higher professional/ managerial | 11.4 | 3.0 | 5.0 | 5.4 | 10.8 |
| Lower professional/ managerial | 18.6 | 11.4 | 17.2 | 13.6 | 18.2 |
| Other non-manual | 19.7 | 21.1 | 25.2 | 22.0 | 20.0 |
| Skilled manual | 18.6 | 7.7 | 5.7 | 12.7 | 17.7 |
| Semi-skilled manual | 22.1 | 35.6 | 28.7 | 21.5 | 22.7 |
| Unskilled manual | 9.7 | 21.1 | 18.3 | 24.9 | 10.5 |
| Total | 100* | 100* | 100* | 100* | 100* |
| Number | 354,044* | 11,951* | 13,392* | 2,750* | 382,137* |
| "Unknowns" as per cent of each family status category | 2.7 | 49.4 | 45.5 | 42.6 | 8.4 |

* Excluding "unknowns".

Keeping these qualifications in mind, Table 4.5 shows the social class profile of mothers with children aged under 15 in the main family status categories. Among the three categories of lone mothers – unmarried, separated and widowed – between 40 and 50 per cent are of "unknown" social class for reasons just outlined, compared to 2.7 per cent of married mothers. Among the remainder, lone parents have a somewhat lower social class profile than married mothers: fewer are located in the higher professional/ managerial class and more are located in the semi-skilled and unskilled manual classes (particularly in the case of unmarried mothers). Due to the cross sectional nature of the data we are unable to establish whether these differences arise because lone parents tend to come from lower social class backgrounds or whether the experience of lone parenthood leads to downward social mobility.

Housing Tenure

A further social characteristic of lone parents to be considered is housing tenure. Table 4.6 shows that unmarried mothers are over-represented both in local authority rented housing (43.8 per cent) and the private rented sector (30.4 per cent). Taking these two tenure categories together, three out of four unmarried mothers are in rental accommodation (note that, in the Labour Force Survey, unmarried mothers living as sub-families in larger households – e.g. with their own parents – are coded according to the tenure of the household head). Separated mothers are also over-represented in local authority housing and to a lesser extent in the private rented sector, though neither tenure is as prominent for separated mothers as unmarried mothers. Again, causal connections are difficult to draw here, since it is impossible with the present data to distinguish tenure situations which are the *result* of lone parenthood from those which existed as a prior condition.

Table 4.6: Mothers with Children Under 15 Years by Family Status and Housing Tenure (1997)

| | Married | Lone parent | Total |
|--|---------|-------------|-------|
|--|---------|-------------|-------|

| Housing tenure | | Unmarried | Separated | Widowed | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | | | % | | |
| Local authority rented | 8.0 | 43.8 | 32.4 | 19.7 | 11.6 |
| Private rented | 4.6 | 30.4 | 11.6 | 2.2 | 6.5 |
| Owner occupier with mortgage | 64.4 | 15.8 | 39.1 | 22.4 | 59.7 |
| Owner occupier without mortgage | 22.5 | 9.4 | 16.0 | 55.3 | 21.7 |
| Other | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 360,458 | 23,284 | 24,378 | 4,723 | 412,843 |

Source: LFS (1997), microdata.

Labour Market Status

Combining solo parenting with employment in the absence of comprehensive state supported childcare is difficult and means that the participation of lone parents in the labour market is often contingent on informal sources of support (Russell and Corcoran, 2000). The low levels of educational attainment among lone parents compounds this problem as many are unable to command wages sufficient to cover private childcare costs. The emotional needs of children and the loss of secondary benefits such as rent allowance are also cited by lone parents as barriers to employment (ibid. pp. 19-20).

Table 4.7: Mothers with Children Aged Under 15 Years by Family Status and Usual Employment Status (1997)

| Usual employment status | Married/ Cohabiting | Lone parent | | | Total |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| | | Unmarried | Separated % | Widowed | |
| At work | 41.5 | 36.1 | 41.6 | 31.4 | 41.1 |
| Unemployed | 1.7 | 12.0 | 3.7 | 1.8 | 2.4 |
| Student | 0.2 | 1.6 | 0.8 | 0.5 | 0.3 |
| Home duties | 55.7 | 49.4 | 52.7 | 66.0 | 55.3 |
| Other | 0.8 | 0.9 | 1.1 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 363,882 | 23,636 | 24,594 | 4,794 | 416,906 |
| Activity rate | 43.2 | 48.1 | 45.3 | 33.2 | 43.5 |

* Source LFS (1997), based on principle economic status.

In the light of these difficulties it is perhaps surprising that the gap in the employment rates between married/cohabiting and lone mothers is narrow. The employment rate of all three groups of lone mothers together is 38.2 per cent compared to 41.5 per cent for married mothers. However, much of the increase in employment among lone mothers in the 1990s is due to the impact of the Community Employment (CE) programme, for which persons on Lone Parents Allowance became eligible in 1994. From a base of almost zero in 1994, the numbers of lone parents on CE schemes rose to 8,200 in 1997 (Deloitte and Touche, 1998). Assuming that most women on CE schemes define themselves "at work", and making some allowance for the numbers of lone fathers likely to be included in those numbers, this would mean that over one-third of the lone mothers who were at work in 1997 were employed on CE schemes.

Part-time hours and in some cases directly provided childcare make CE attractive to lone parents. The high take-up CE among lone parents

also reflects eligibility criteria,²⁰ and the greater financial benefits of CE for lone parents than for married parents. In 1997, it was estimated that a lone parent with two children on a CE scheme would receive a total income (combining CE income and one parent benefits) of £217.15, whereas a married parent with two children on CE would receive only £156.35 (Deloitte and Touche, 1998, p.13). While some positive employment effects of CE have been observed for women (Denny *et al.*, 2000), the existing evidence suggests that CE is not particularly effective in funnelling lone parents into mainstream employment, which is its avowed purpose (DFSCA, 2000). However, it may also need to be evaluated in welfare terms. In that context it is of clear benefit to lone parents, both as a boost to income and as a means to escape the confines of the home. On the other hand, it also discriminates in favour of lone parents as against married parents in ways that may not reflect differences in welfare need and that may amount to a disincentive to joint parenthood. It therefore needs to be evaluated carefully in welfare terms as well as labour market terms, particularly in regard to the distinctions it draws between lone parents and joint parents.

The *activity* rates of lone mothers (that is, the employment rate plus the unemployment rate) stands at 45 per cent, which is actually higher than the corresponding rate for married/cohabiting mothers (43 per cent). This is due in part to the higher rates of unemployment experienced by lone mothers, particularly never married lone mothers. Activity rates are lowest among widowed lone parents and highest among unmarried lone parents. However, these comparisons are complicated by the age and educational profile of these different groups of women.

To take account of these background differences we construct a regression model to identify the impact of marital status on mothers' employment net of age and education. The first regression model shows that even controlling for age, education and number of children under 15 years, unmarried lone mothers are more likely to be active in the labour market than married/cohabiting mothers. The figures in the "odds" column show that unmarried lone mothers are 52 per cent more likely to be in the labour market than married/cohabiting women of the same age, educational level and with the same number of children. Separated lone mothers are found to be 39 per cent more likely to participate than married mothers with similar characteristics. Widowed lone mothers are the only group for which lone parenthood depresses participation in the labour market.

Table 4.8: Logistic Regression of Labour Force Participation Among Mothers

| Variable | B | Odds | S.E. | Sig |
|----------|---|------|------|-----|
|----------|---|------|------|-----|

²⁰ Women eligible for CE include the long-term unemployed, those in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment and those who are qualified adult dependants of men who are long-term unemployed. Therefore, the majority of married women will not be eligible.

| | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-----|------|
| Age (ref age<25) | | | | |
| 25-34 | .41 | 1.50 | .02 | .000 |
| 35-44 | .42 | 1.51 | .02 | .000 |
| 45+ | -.20 | 0.82 | .02 | .000 |
| Education (ref=none/primary) | | | | |
| Intermediate Certificate | .51 | 1.67 | .01 | .000 |
| Leaving Certificate | 1.13 | 3.10 | .01 | .000 |
| Third Non-university | 2.00 | 7.39 | .01 | .000 |
| University | 2.48 | 11.88 | .02 | .000 |
| No. of children (ref=1 child<15) | | | | |
| 2 under 15 | -.29 | 0.75 | .01 | .000 |
| 3 under15 | -.64 | 0.53 | .01 | .000 |
| 4 or more under 15 | -1.11 | 0.33 | .02 | .000 |
| Marital status (ref=marr/cohab) | | | | |
| Never Married | .42 | 1.52 | .02 | .000 |
| Widowed | -.06 | 0.94 | .03 | .055 |
| Separated | .33 | 1.39 | .01 | .000 |
| Constant | -1.29 | | .02 | .000 |

Source: LFS (1997) (weighted data).

A similar model can be estimated to explore the probability of being employed (compared to not being employed i.e. inactive or unemployed). This shows that when age, educational level and number of children are controlled, unmarried lone mothers are just as likely to be employed as married/cohabiting mothers. Separated lone mothers are more likely to be employed than married mothers and widows are significantly less likely to be employed than the reference group. Therefore, although these three groups of lone mothers experience similar constraints they have rather different employment rates. The low employment rates of widows follows from their lower participation rates, however, unmarried mothers appear to experience greater difficulty *within* the labour market than separated mothers. One possibility is that unmarried lone parents have additional disadvantageous characteristics that are not measured in our model for example lack of work experience. A further possibility is that because of their lower average age, unmarried mothers are less likely to qualify for Community Employment schemes than separated lone mothers.

Table 4.9: Logistic Regression Model of Employment Among Mothers

| | B | Odds | S.E. | Sig |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Age (ref=under 25 years) | | | | |
| 25-34 | .52 | 1.68 | .02 | .000 |
| 35-44 | .58 | 1.78 | .02 | .000 |
| 45+ | -.01 | 0.99 | .02 | .610 |
| Education (ref= none/primary) | | | | |
| Intermediate Certificate | .56 | 1.75 | .01 | .000 |
| Leaving Certificate | 1.19 | 3.29 | .01 | .000 |
| Third Non-university | 2.06 | 7.86 | .01 | .000 |
| University | 2.46 | 11.70 | .02 | .000 |
| No of children (ref=1 child<15) | | | | |
| 2 under 15 | -.27 | 0.77 | .01 | .000 |
| 3 under15 | -.61 | 0.54 | .01 | .000 |
| 4 or more under 15 | -1.06 | 0.35 | .02 | .000 |
| Marital status (ref=marr/cohab) | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---------------|-------|------|-----|------|
| Never Married | .03 | 1.03 | .02 | .109 |
| Widowed | -.09 | 0.91 | .03 | .007 |
| Separated | .24 | 1.27 | .01 | .000 |
| Constant | -1.58 | | .02 | .000 |

* *Source* LFS (1997) (weighted data).

Conclusions

While there is reason to believe that the link between non-marital childbearing and low education and poor employment prospects may be less pronounced than in the past, the association between lone parenthood and social disadvantage remained strong at least until 1997. The lack of more recent data makes it difficult to trace the impact of improved economic conditions on lone parenthood in more recent years, though there is no indication that it has caused the upward trend in lone parenthood to halt or reverse.

Both non-married and separated lone mothers are found to have significantly lower levels of education than married mothers. Low qualifications are likely to frame the opportunity structures for young women and may make parenthood a more attractive option, even in the absence of a stable long term relationship.

For the separated low education may indicate a lack of resources within the family which can put a strain on marriage relationships. Our analysis could not explore the decision making processes that led to births outside stable relationships or marriage dissolution. Nevertheless, it does highlight one of the social structural conditions in which these decisions are made.

Lone parents were also found to be disproportionately located in the lower social classes and in local authority housing. However, because we have information only for one point in time the direction of causality implied by this pattern is not clear. For example, we cannot tell whether lone parents are drawn from working class families or whether lone parenthood leads to downward social mobility. An additional problem is that many lone parents are not in employment (and by definition do not have a partner in employment) and therefore are not categorised by social class in the data.

Lone mothers now have a higher level of labour market participation than other mothers of the same age and educational background, partly because they are more likely to report themselves as unemployed and partly because of their high rate of participation in Community Employment (CE) schemes. There has been a very rapid increase in the participation of lone mothers since 1995 but that too is largely a product of CE, as 1994 was the first year in which lone parents became eligible for participation in CE (the terms of their participation allowed them to retain portion of their Lone Parent allowance so as to help cover the cost of childcare). Only in the high unemployment rates of lone mothers do we get a sense of the disadvantage experienced by this group in the labour market.

While government policies appear to have been effective in increasing the labour supply of lone mothers it seems these policies or the change in labour market status has done little to change family formation behaviour. For lone parents dependent on social welfare there is an incentive to remain without a partner, primarily because benefits for the mother

(including the additional payments for the child) will be reduced pound for pound for any earnings the partner has, or if the partner is unemployed their joint benefit income will be less than if they both claimed separately. The favourable terms available to lone parents who work in CE schemes may also act as a disincentive to partnership. The incentives change for those in mainstream employment who have earnings above income threshold, since the income tax incentives encourage marriage.

It is difficult to say how far these incentives influence family formation behaviour. Qualitative research suggests that welfare and tax incentives play only a minor role in decisions about relationships and family (McCashin, 1996; Russell & Corcoran, 2000). Nevertheless, the incentive structure outlined above may have some influence on partnership behaviour, if not fertility behaviour. The recent review of benefits for lone parents concluded that it was not possible to design benefits for this group without giving an incentive towards lone parenthood unless there was a radical change towards an individualised welfare system. Such a system would focus “on income support rather than contingency, possibly allied to a system of universal child support” (DSFCA, 2000, p. 138).

An additional way of removing these disincentives is to assist lone parents to earn a living wage. The evidence outlined here suggest that increased employment among lone parents has not reduced claims for one parent benefits. Instead lone parents appear to supplement their benefits with low paid employment. This pattern is likely to be influenced by the earnings disregard and the need to work part-time. Policies such as the National Minimum Wage and the Directive on Part time Work, which gives part-time workers the right to pro-rata benefits, together with actions to improve the skills and educational deficits of lone parents and to provide affordable childcare, are crucial to increasing working lone parents’ chances of becoming fully independent of social welfare.

5. HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY SIZE

Introduction

Chapter 2 above examined trends in family size by reference to the number of births to mothers. Here we turn to the family as a co-residential unit and to the related matter of household size. The present chapter provides a brief overview of trends in these areas. The primary focus is on a topic that has been largely neglected in recent years – the continuing significance of households containing large family units.

In the formative years of social policy provision in Ireland, much of the concern about what were seen as problematic family types focused on the large family. The Commission on Emigration discussed this issue in 1954, acknowledging the “virtually world-wide ... awareness of certain material disadvantages which accompany large families” (Commission on Emigration, 1954, p. 99). However, the Commission was unwilling to question Catholic teaching on the desirability of large families and rejected the view that “the relatively large family pattern in this country makes for a general condition of poverty”. Walsh (1968) offered a different perspective on this question in the 1960s. His analysis of census data on completed fertility in 1961 showed that, among mothers who had married at age 20-24, over half of their children were in families of seven children or more, while among those who had married at age 25-29, over a third of their children were in families of seven children or more (Walsh, 1968, p. 7). His concern was not only that so many children were in large families but that the “cost of family formation was greatest among those who can least afford to pay”. This was indicated in the Irish case by concentration of large families among the rural and poorer urban classes (*ibid.* p.8). Kent and Sexton (1973) corroborated Walsh’s concern with findings showing that large family size had a strong negative effect on the physical development of a sample of Dublin children.

Though family size declined steeply from the 1960s onwards, the body of poverty research which commenced on the basis of the 1973 Household Budget Survey and was carried forward with the 1987 Poverty Survey and the Living in Ireland Surveys of the 1990s showed that family size continued to have a strong bearing on poverty. In fact, as the large families became less prevalent, the risk of poverty among those which remained grew sharply. In 1973, according to data from the Household Budget Survey, families comprised of two parents and four or more children had more or less the same poverty risk (16 per cent) at the 50 per cent relative income line as the population as a whole. By 1987, however, poverty risk among such families had risen to 35 per cent and by 1994 to

38 per cent, which was double the risk of the population as a whole (Callan *et al.*, 1996, p. 89).

Here we will first set the context by outlining general trends in household size in Ireland in recent decades. Then we will turn to a social profile of large households, and more particularly of large families (that is, family units comprised of parents and children).

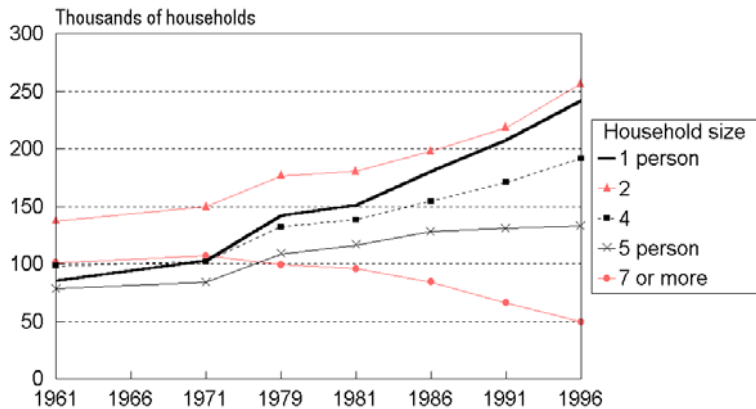
Trends in Household Size

The average size of household declined by one person – from 4.1 to 3.1 persons – over the twenty-five years from 1971 to 1996. Much of this decline was driven by a sharp reduction in the number of very large households (7 persons or more) and a sharp increase in the number of one-person households. As Figure 5.1a shows, the number of households with seven or more persons halved between 1971 and 1996 (falling from 101,000 to just under 50,000 over the period), while the number of one-person households rose two and a half times (going from 102,000 to over 241,000 over the same period). However, along with one-person households, all other household sizes with less than seven persons (particularly those with two and four persons) increased in number over the period.

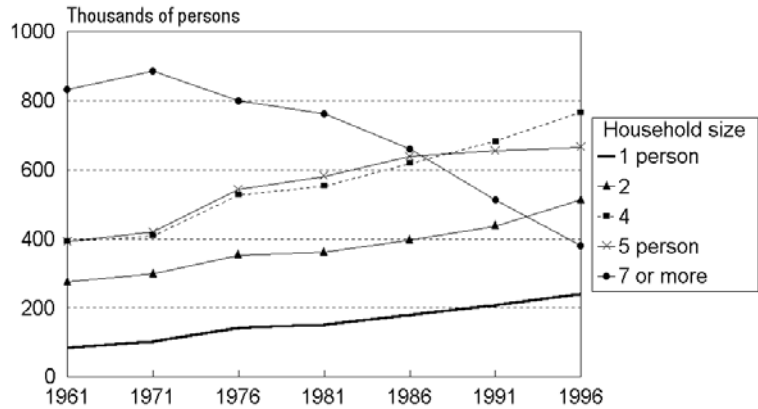
When we take account of the numbers of people involved, the decline in the large household is even more marked. In 1971, over 880,00 people (31 per cent of the total population) lived in households of seven persons or more, compared with 380,000 in 1996 (11 per cent of the population). Viewed in these terms, the significance of the growth in one-person households is somewhat reduced: though such households accounted for 21 per cent of all households in 1996, they contained only 6.9 per cent of the population (241,800 people).

Figure 5.1. Trends in Household Size, 1961-1996

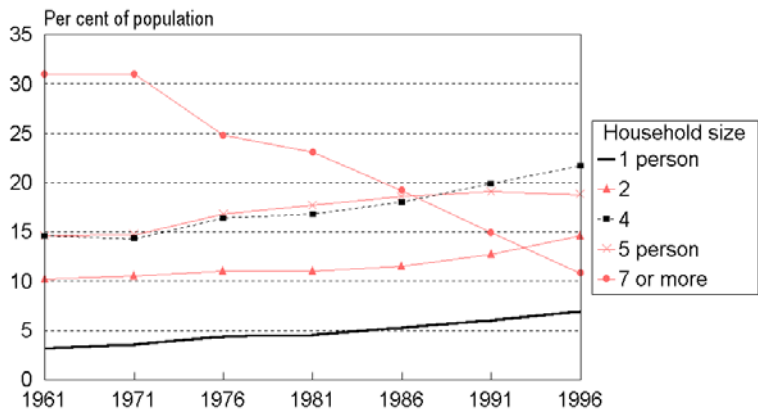
5.1a Number of Households by Household Size



5.1b Number of Persons by Household Size



5.1c Per cent of persons by household size



Source: Censuses of Population, 1961-1996

Children and Family Size

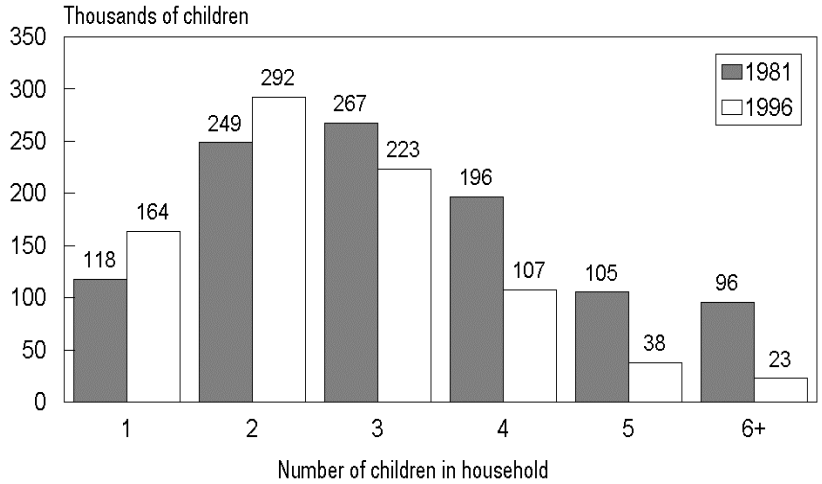
From a policy point of view, it is particularly important to know of the distribution of children by family size, since the poverty risks associated with large household size arise particularly in connection with family households containing large numbers of children. In 1996, there were almost 170,000 children aged under 15 in families of four or more children of that age (that is, leaving out of consideration those families of four or more children where some of the children were aged 15 or over). Of these, 107,000 were in four-child households, 38,000 in five-child households and 23,000 in six-child households (Figure 5.2). These numbers represented a sharp decline in the extent of large families, as they amounted to less than half the numbers of children in families of four children or more which had been present in Ireland in 1981 (in that year, 397,000 children lived in families with four children or more, representing 38 per cent of all children).

Nevertheless, even in 1996 children in large families still accounted for a substantial share of all children. Almost 20 per cent of children aged under 15 in 1996 lived in families of four or more children, while 7.2 per cent lived in families of five or more children. These proportions can be compared with the proportion of children in another family category which is now more to the forefront in policy concern – those living in

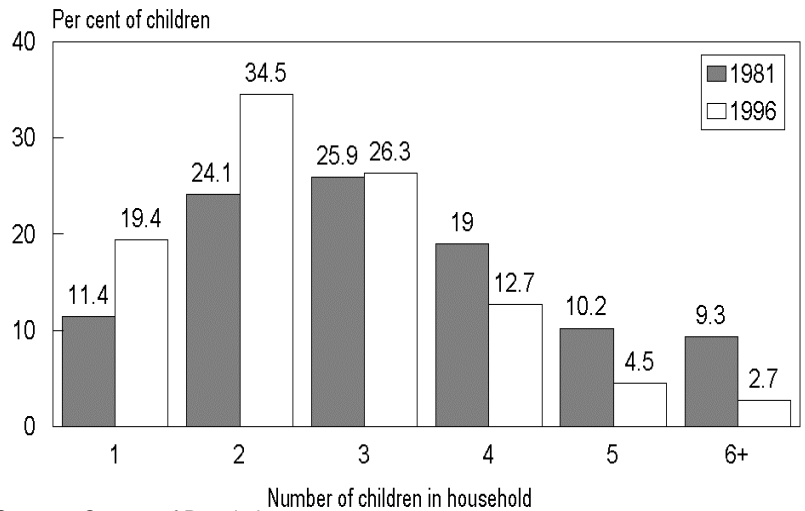
lone parent families, who in 1997 amounted to approximately 12 per cent of children aged under 15.

Figure 5.2: Distribution of Children Aged 0-14 by Number of Children in Household

5.2a. Numbers



5.2b. Per Cent



Sources: Census of Population 1981, 1996

These figures suggest that while the large family occupies a much less prominent place in the family landscape in Ireland than it did in the past, it has by no means disappeared. Given that large families are a relatively

high-risk category as far as social disadvantage is concerned, they therefore continue to merit attention on that account.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The data in Table 5.1 suggest that larger families are more likely to experience labour market and social disadvantage than other families with children, and that these problems are most pronounced in families with five or more children. Because the data are cross-sectional it is not possible to establish with certainty which factors precede family size and which followed from it. For example, those from the lower manual social classes with poor labour market prospects may have more children either because of socio-cultural factors or because having a large family may increase labour market difficulties (e.g. large families may be associated with longer durations of unemployment because of the higher wages needed to support dependants and the higher social welfare benefits they would receive if the main wage-earner were unemployed). Previous research suggests that both processes are likely to operate.

The educational achievement of parents comes closest to a measure of social background, as in most cases education will be completed prior to family formation. The analysis shows that the mother's of large families are more likely to have no qualifications than other mothers. This is especially true of women with more than five children under the age of 15, over a quarter of whom have only primary level education.

The social class of heads of households with four children does not differ significantly from other families. However, those with five or more children are distinctive, having a high proportion located in the unskilled manual class. A similar pattern is noticeable for the employment status of the head of household, the main divergence occurs when we consider families with five or more children: heads of households in this group are more than twice as likely to be out of work than heads of households with children in general.

The association between large families and labour market characteristics is most pronounced when we consider the proportion of workless households. Unlike the activity status of head of household this measure is likely to tap into the barriers to employment facing mothers of large families (alongside the possible selection effects). Large families create a very high demand for unpaid labour in the home which is usually performed by women while the costs of childcare are similarly multiplied.

Table 5.1: Characteristics of Large Families, 1997

| | Large families | | All families with children under 15 |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | With 4 children under 15 | With 5 or more children under 15 | |
| Number of families (% of all families) | 25,400 (5.9) | 11,200 (2.6) | 433,633 (100) |
| Number of children (% of all children) | 101,800 (11.8) | 60,900 (7.1) | 859,900 (100) |

| | | | |
|---|------|------|------|
| Mothers – per cent who have primary education only | 16.6 | 26.0 | 13.3 |
| Household heads – per cent in unskilled manual class | 5.8 | 11.1 | 5.1 |
| Household heads – per cent with no stated occupation | 10.2 | 18.4 | 9.2 |
| Families – per cent with no one in the family at work | 20.9 | 34.3 | 16.4 |
| Per cent in local authority housing | 18.5 | 28.9 | 12.8 |

Source: 1997 LFS micro-data.

Finally, more large families are concentrated in social housing than other families with children. This may follow from the high level of worklessness in these households outlined above. However, entitlement to social housing is in part based on family size therefore this result may be partially an artefact of the eligibility system.

Conclusion

As was pointed out in Chapter 2, higher-order births remained more common in Ireland than in other developed countries until the 1990s. As the consequences of these higher-order births are still working their way through the family system, Ireland still has significant numbers of households comprised of large families. This is of some interest from a policy point of view, since, as already mentioned, the risk of poverty among large families appears to have grown as their numbers have become fewer in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, about 20 per cent of children aged under 15 lived in families of four or more children, which compares with about 12 per cent of children living in the other major poverty-prone family type, the lone parent family. Compared to the average of all families, large families are considerably more likely to have a mother with primary education only and a household with a weak labour market position. While the situation of many large families is likely to be unproblematic, substantial proportions are likely to be at risk of various forms of disadvantage.

Given the continuing decline in higher order births in the 1990s, the incidence of large families will decline steadily with time. However, they will remain a significant feature of the Irish family system for some time to come and so should not be forgotten in future debates about social provision for families in this country.

Appendix Table 5A: Number of Households by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total households |
|------|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|------------|------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| | Number of households | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1961 | 85,388 | 137,287 | 116,876 | 98,233 | 78,432 | 59,213 | 40,903 | 26,207 | 15,620 | 9,571 | 4,370 | 4,302 | 676,402 |
| 1971 | 102,787 | 149,467 | 115,781 | 102,195 | 84,035 | 64,971 | 43,714 | 27,022 | 16,118 | 10,346 | 4,401 | 5,526 | 726,363 |
| 1979 | 142,193 | 176,664 | 131,093 | 132,063 | 108,596 | 77,318 | 45,871 | 25,515 | 13,411 | 7,488 | 3,225 | 3,589 | 867,026 |
| 1981 | 151,328 | 180,610 | 133,313 | 138,417 | 116,385 | 80,320 | 46,351 | 27,200 | 10,575 | 5,681 | 2,933 | 2,941 | 896,054 |
| 1986 | 180,793 | 198,048 | 144,835 | 154,675 | 127,844 | 83,941 | 44,322 | 23,219 | 8,517 | 4,167 | 2,048 | 1,895 | 974,304 |
| 1991 | 207,564 | 218,524 | 157,840 | 170,896 | 130,886 | 77,188 | 36,763 | 18,423 | 5,765 | 2,766 | 1,256 | 1,213 | 1,029,084 |
| 1996 | 241,838 | 256,795 | 179,819 | 191,812 | 133,011 | 70,246 | 31,939 | 10,065 | 4,362 | 3,351 | – | – | 1,123,238 |

Appendix Table 5B: Number of Persons by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total persons |
|------|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|------------|---------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| 1961 | 85,388 | 274,574 | 350,628 | 392,932 | 392,160 | 355,278 | 286,321 | 209,656 | 140,580 | 95,710 | 48,070 | 51,624 | 2,682,921 |
| 1971 | 102,787 | 298,934 | 347,343 | 408,780 | 420,175 | 389,826 | 305,998 | 216,176 | 145,062 | 103,460 | 48,411 | 66,312 | 2,853,264 |
| 1979 | 142,193 | 353,328 | 393,279 | 528,252 | 542,980 | 463,908 | 321,097 | 204,120 | 120,699 | 74,880 | 35,475 | 43,068 | 3,223,279 |
| 1981 | 151,328 | 361,220 | 399,939 | 553,668 | 581,925 | 481,920 | 324,457 | 217,600 | 95,175 | 56,810 | 32,263 | 35,292 | 3,291,597 |
| 1986 | 180,793 | 396,096 | 434,505 | 618,700 | 639,220 | 503,646 | 310,254 | 185,752 | 76,653 | 41,670 | 22,528 | 22,740 | 3,432,557 |
| 1991 | 207,564 | 437,048 | 473,520 | 683,584 | 654,430 | 463,128 | 257,341 | 147,384 | 51,885 | 27,660 | 13,816 | 14,556 | 3,431,916 |
| 1996 | 241,838 | 513,590 | 539,457 | 767,248 | 665,055 | 421,476 | 223,573 | 80,520 | 39,258 | 36,861 | – | – | 3,528,876 |

Appendix Table 5C: Percentage Distribution of Persons by Size of Household, 1961-1996

| Year | Size of household (persons) | | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 or more | |
| % of population | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1961 | 3.2 | 10.2 | 13.1 | 14.6 | 14.6 | 13.2 | 10.7 | 7.8 | 5.2 | 3.6 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 100.0 |
| 1971 | 3.6 | 10.5 | 12.2 | 14.3 | 14.7 | 13.7 | 10.7 | 7.6 | 5.1 | 3.6 | 1.7 | 2.3 | 100.0 |
| 1979 | 4.4 | 11.0 | 12.2 | 16.4 | 16.8 | 14.4 | 10.0 | 6.3 | 3.7 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.3 | 100.0 |
| 1981 | 4.6 | 11.0 | 12.2 | 16.8 | 17.7 | 14.6 | 9.9 | 6.6 | 2.9 | 1.7 | 1.0 | 1.1 | 100.0 |
| 1986 | 5.3 | 11.5 | 12.7 | 18.0 | 18.6 | 14.7 | 9.0 | 5.4 | 2.2 | 1.2 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 100.0 |
| 1991 | 6.0 | 12.7 | 13.8 | 19.9 | 19.1 | 13.5 | 7.5 | 4.3 | 1.5 | 0.8 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 100.0 |
| 1996 | 6.9 | 14.6 | 15.3 | 21.7 | 18.8 | 11.9 | 6.3 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 1.0 | – | – | 100.0 |

