

Breakdown rate slowed after divorce:

ANALYSIS:

The ESRI analysis of census data on families shatters many myths while confirming the influence of religious and cultural factors, writes **CAROL COULTER**, Legal Affairs Editor

THE INTRODUCTION of divorce in 1997 was accompanied by the slowing down and eventual levelling off of the rate of marital breakdown.

This is one of the surprising findings of a major report on family structures published yesterday by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).

A major study of the family carried out for the Family Support Agency (FSA), it shows that the fears expressed during the divorce referendums that divorce would lead to a deluge of marriage breakdown has turned out to be groundless.

The study, by Pete Lunn, Tony Fahey and Carmel Hannan, examined the anonymised census data from 2006, as well as the tables in the census returns since 1986 for comparative purposes.

The examination of the 2006 census data looked at the details registered for those between the ages of 15 and 59, a total population of 2.7 million people. The study also includes some international comparisons with other EU states.

It found that religious, ethnic and cultural factors were a major influence on some aspects of family formation, though not all, as the increase in cohabitation was general across all groups.

It also found our rate of marriage breakdown is one of the lowest in Europe. The rate of cohabitation has increased sharply over the past 20 years leading to the fact that at the age of 25, twice as many people cohabit as are married, though this changes after 30.

Another finding is that people from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to be lone parents, have children younger and have more children than those from higher groups.

When the rate of marriage breakdown was examined by comparing previous census returns, the biggest increase was between 1986 and 1996, the decade before divorce was introduced, with a rate of increase of 65.2 per cent.

This increase slowed to 24 per cent over the next six years, and slowed again to only 3.3 per cent between 2002 and 2006.

The age at which people marry is linked to the likelihood of marriage breakdown, and it appears that the surge in marriages, especially young marriages, which took place in the 1970s and which has been documented elsewhere, fed into the growth in marriage breakdown in the 1990s.

The fall in the marriage rate, and later marriages since the 1970s, may be factors in the stabilising of the breakdown rate. This rate is low by international standards, with a divorce rate joint bottom with Italy of a 31-state European league. Even if the non-divorced but separated are included, Ireland is in the lower end of the marriage breakdown table.

The study also found a strong correlation between poverty, lone parenthood and marriage breakdown. By the age of 50 more than twice as many women who are semi-skilled or unskilled are likely to experience marriage breakdown compared to those from a professional or managerial background.

The authors found significant differences between Irish people and immigrants, who made up 10 per

cent of the surveyed population in 2006, with regard to marriage, cohabitation, lone parenthood and marital breakdown. Immigrants from eastern Europe, for example, were more likely to marry young and to experience marriage breakdown than Irish people.

It found that Muslims, while also likely to be married younger, were less likely to experience marriage breakdown and had larger families than Irish people, indicating the influence of religious and cultural factors on family structure and stability. The authors said they found little to support the idea that decisions on cohabitation and marriage were influenced by economic factors.

The study shows the emergence of same-sex couple households, representing 0.15 per cent of the cohort examined, and also found these to be concentrated among people with third-level education and in the Dublin area.