

Changing face of the Irish family

IF FAMILY is the bedrock of our society, then inevitably a survey of its evolution tells us as much about the nature of our wider society as it does the world inside the home. Yesterday's fascinating, wide-ranging ESRI study *Family Figures: Family dynamics and family types in Ireland 1986-2006* does precisely that.

In the 20-year span of the study Ireland has seen a qualitative transformation of the role of women at work, the breaking of the hold of traditional church teaching on young people, the breaking of bonds between generations, attitudes to sex and sexuality transformed, and the growth of a substantial non-indigenous population. Such trends are reflected, for example, in the fourfold increase in cohabitation – at 25 times as many people are cohabiting as are married – in the doubling of lone-parenting, and in the massive growth of what we would regard as “non-standard” families. The commitment of women to work means children are being born later, into smaller families.

Continuity is also reflected in the report. Marriage remains a vitally important institution, and, strikingly, the rate of breakdown appears to have stabilised despite the legalisation of divorce. Social class continues to determine to a huge extent not only economic welfare, but key elements of family structure and behaviour. The stark reality is that a woman who has the lowest level of educational attainment is eight times more likely as a graduate to become a lone parent.

Poorer couples are likely to marry younger, to have larger families, and to suffer higher rates of marital breakdown. It is a tale of two Irelands with the poorer stuck in a time warp. And the report warns of the need to take account of this reality at this time of cutbacks: “Whatever cuts may or may not be imposed it is important that the redistributive weighting of those supports in favour of the less well-off is at least preserved and, preferably, enhanced”.

Many of such trends are well documented but the report, mining more deeply into census data, provides important new insights into the process of family formation and dissolution and suggests policy implications.

One finding, for example, associating the birth of a couple's first child with a 25-30 per cent increase in the likelihood of marital breakdown, with the chance of breakdown declining with subsequent children, is counterintuitive but could be important in framing policy responses. The report suggests that the arrival of the first child increases strains in relationships, while a second is a sign that strains have been overcome. It recommends targeting increased paternity leave entitlements and financial support at first-time parents.

The report's authors also draw important attention to the close correlation between teenage pregnancies and educational attainment and the need to improve sex education in schools. Minister for Social and Family Affairs Mary Hanafin welcoming the study yesterday, noted with regret that many schools still do not teach the Relationships and Sexuality Education. Rectifying that reality must become a priority.