

First child can break rather than make marriage - study

CAROL COULTER Legal Affairs Editor

HAVING A child can break rather than make a marriage, new research into family life has found.

A married couple with one child was between 25 and 30 per cent more likely to experience marital breakdown than those with either no children, or two or more.

The finding was contained in a new report from the ESRI, which also revealed that Irish people were more likely to be single than most other Europeans.

When Irish people did marry, however, they were less likely to divorce, according to the report, *Family Figures: Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland, 1986-2006*.

It also said that women who left school early were almost 10 times more likely than graduates to be single mothers by the age of 25.

The report, carried out by researchers from the ESRI and UCD for the Family Support Agency, is the first study of the detailed data contained in the 2006 census returns. The authors examined information relating to 2.7 million people between the ages of 15 and 59 looking at patterns of family formation and break-up in Ireland, linked to social class, religion, ethnicity, region and gender.

On the marriage breakdown figures, one of the authors, Prof Tony Fahey, said that having one child put an additional strain on a marriage. However, couples with two or more children seemed to have weathered the strain.

However, Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Hanafin, wondered if couples whose marriages were already under strain attempted to rescue them by having a child, only to find that the problems remained.

The study also found a strong correlation between social class and marriage breakdown, with it twice as likely to occur among the skilled and semi-skilled as among the professional and managerial. But those from the higher social groups were more likely to formalise the end of a marriage through divorce, it found. If a marriage with children breaks down, one child in eight will end up living with his or her father.

Irish people were more reluctant to marry by European standards, the report found.

Among 25- to 29-year-olds, Ireland and Sweden had the highest levels of women remaining single (76 and 73 per cent respectively) while at the other end of the scale Slovakia and Lithuania had only 31 and 26 per cent respectively.

Even by their early 30s, only half of Irish women were married or cohabiting in 2006. But their marriage was less likely to break up than a marriage in most other European countries, with Ireland having the lowest divorce rate of 31 European states, jointly with Italy. Even when non-divorce separations are included, Ireland's marriage breakdown rate is one of the lowest in Europe.

The report also found "there was no significant upward shift in marital breakdown as a result of the divorce legislation", pointing out that divorce rates "had all but levelled off" by 2006.