

Low education and income linked to lone motherhood:

Report Shows first child being put off to 29.

CAROL COULTER.

WOMEN IN lower-income households are almost 10 times more likely than graduates to become lone mothers by their mid-20s, according to an ESRI study of family structures.

It also showed that Irish women generally were having children later, most commonly starting their families after the age of 29.

Lone parents are far from a homogenous group, and include those who are separated or widowed. More than a third of lone parents had experienced a broken marriage, while 8 per cent were widowed, leaving 57 per cent never married.

There were just under 114,000 lone parents in 2006, of whom almost 10,200, or 9 per cent, were male. However, very few lone fathers were under 30, and they were much more likely to become a lone parent as a result of marriage breakdown. One in eight children from a broken marriage was likely to be cared for by a father.

The study, Family Figures: Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland, 1986-2006, was carried out by researchers from the ESRI and UCD, Pete Lunn, Tony Fahey and Carmel Hannan.

Launching the report, Minister for Social and Family Affairs Mary Hanafin said only 1,800 of the 90,000 claimants of the lone parents' allowance were men.

She said it was much more socially acceptable to be a lone mother living on social welfare than a lone father.

She added there were policy implications in the report for a number of Government departments as well as her own, stressing the importance of the implementation of good quality relationship and sex education programmes in all schools. Boys' schools were particularly bad at implementing them, she said.

The study showed a sharp rise in cohabitation in the past 10 years, with twice as many 25-year olds cohabiting as were married in 2006.

However, cohabitation appears to be a prelude to marriage, with the number of married people overtaking cohabitees by the age of 28. An increasing number of cohabiting couples have children and the majority of children born outside marriage are born into relationships.

While the majority of Irish people (more than 85 per cent) do marry at some stage, they tend to marry quite late, with less than a third of women married by the age of 29 in 2006. These were overwhelmingly from the lower socio-economic groups.

The size of the Irish family has also dropped, with one in five women with children having families of four or more at the age of 45 in 2006, compared with two in five at the age of 59. Nonetheless, the fertility rate in Ireland remains one of the highest in Europe, with 2.1 children per woman of child-bearing age.