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What Determines the Diffusion of ICT at Firm Level?

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A Statistical Analysis of Households and Families in Ireland

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One third of all families in Ireland do not fit the traditional model of a married couple both in their first marriage. This and other new insights into Ireland's families come from an analysis of Census 2006 micro-data, access to which was granted through a formal agreement with the Central Statistics Office. The second in a series of studies based on these data^{†, ‡}, was able to address research questions that were previously beyond quantitative investigation, producing new findings relating to couples, cohabitation, the family circumstances of children, and fertility patterns in Ireland.

WHO PARTNERS WHOM?

Couples (cohabiting and married) are considerably more likely to form if the man is older, even if by only a small amount. The average age difference is 2.3 years, but among younger couples has narrowed somewhat. Younger couples are also more likely to bridge social boundaries, including between religious affiliations and, to a lesser extent, different nationalities and ethnicities. This might reflect changed attitudes, but opportunities have changed too. Couples still mostly form among people with similar levels of education and similar occupations, but there has been a striking shift in the gender balance in this regard. Among couples with a mean age of 26-40, the woman has a higher level of educational attainment in 34% of couples, versus 16% where the man has. In 42% of cases she has the higher occupational classification, as against 28% where he has. This represents a radical change from previous generations: among couples with a mean age of 56-70, the gap in educational attainment is much narrower (26% versus 21%) and the man is more likely to have the higher occupation (31% versus 36%).

COHABITATION

Following a four-fold increase in cohabitation in ten years, childless couples under 45 are now more likely to cohabit than be married. But those with children are much more likely to be married and the likelihood that a cohabiting couple gets married increases sharply after the birth of a first child.

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One quarter of cohabiting couples contain at least one partner who is separated or divorced following a previous marriage. The mean age of this subset is over 40 and includes couples in their 50s and 60s, showing that older people in Ireland also took advantage of the growing acceptability of cohabitation. While cohabitation now occurs across all social groups, it is significantly more common among lower socio-economic groups and people who are not religious.

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES OF CHILDREN

Of children aged under 21, 75% live with two married parents, 10% with a never-married lone parent, 9% with a divorced or separated lone parent, and 6% with a cohabiting couple. The chance of living with two married parents is much higher where parents have a high level of education. At least 2.5% of children live in step-families and 1.3% are step-children. Although the numbers may under-record somewhat, because some step-families may not identify themselves via the Census form, international comparisons reveal that Ireland has a low overall level of second relationships and remarriage. Most step-families consist of a single step-child with younger half siblings, the oldest of which is an average of 8 years younger.

FERTILITY

There were significantly more live births in Ireland in the three years prior to Census 2006 than children under 3 living here at the time of Census 2006. This discrepancy is due to net emigration of families with very young children from 2003 onwards. The increase in the number of births beginning in the late 1990s occurred mostly among immigrants, including returning Irish emigrants. Births to long-term residents fell marginally, but this largely reflected the ongoing tendency to delay having children. The prevalence of delayed childbirth has probably led the most common measure of fertility (the Total Fertility Rate) to underestimate the average number of children being born to each woman, which may never have fallen below two. Those with higher levels of education have children later, but the relationship between educational attainment and fertility has also changed: historically, those with lower attainment had the most children, now those in the middle of the educational range (i.e. Leaving Certificate) do. The likelihood and timing of a first birth to a couple is almost as strongly related to the father's educational level as to the mother's. This finding suggests that delayed childbearing is not the result only of concern about the potential impact on the woman's career, because the man's human capital matters to the decision almost as much.

SELECTED POLICY IMPLICATIONS

By providing a more accurate picture of the incidence of different family types, this research lets policymakers know who is affected by policies that differentiate between family structures. It also raises two specific issues. First, since the woman is now likely to be the higher earner in many young couples, the economic consequences of decisions to balance work and family have changed. Greater workplace flexibility may not only be welcomed by families but may also be good for the economy, allowing more people with higher human capital to stay in the labour market. Second, the rapid and widespread incidence of cohabitation may not be matched by widespread knowledge of the new rights and responsibilities of cohabitants, which came into force in 2011. Cohabitants now enter marriage-like contracts by default after five years (two where they have children), and may be surprised to discover this. Lastly, earlier and more complete demographic analyses of Census 2006 would have offered policymakers insights that could, in principle, have substantially improved various planning and other decisions. Rapid and comprehensive analysis of Census 2011 could similarly be beneficial.

[†] Lunn, P. and Fahey, T. (2011). *Households and Family Structures in Ireland: A Detailed Statistical Analysis of Census 2006*. Dublin: Family Support Agency/ESRI. Available at <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/SUB002/BKMNEXT202.pdf>

[‡] Lunn, P., Fahey, T. and Hannan, C. (2010). *Family Figures: Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland 1986-2006*. Dublin: Family Support Agency/ESRI. Available at <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/SUB002/bkmnext206.pdf>