

# MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN

## and FAMILY STRUCTURE

in Ireland A report based on Census 2011



## Overview: family breakdown or family diversity?

Census 2011 gives us another chance to examine how much the family in Ireland is changing. Several figures stand out. One is the sixfold increase in marital breakdown since 1986. On average, 5,000 married couples per annum are going their separate ways.

Another is the huge increase in cohabitation. This wasn't even recorded as recently as 1986 because the numbers were so small. By 2011, the number of cohabiting couples had reached 145,561.

As a percentage of all couples, this is very much in line with the average in other Western countries and it has happened almost overnight.

A third figure worth highlighting is the number of children now being raised outside marriage. In 1986 this was 12.8pc of all children. By 2011 it had increased to over 28.1 percent.

In the face of these figures, a key question is whether the family is 'breaking down' or merely becoming more 'diverse'? Is growing 'diversity' actually something to celebrate as a sign of growing freedom?

To answer these questions we must consider what increasing 'diversity'

means in practice. What it means in a great many cases is that children are growing up with semi-involved or uninvolved fathers. Sometimes the fathers are not allowed to be as involved in the lives of their children as they want to be, and sometimes they don't want to be as involved as the mother would want. (Other times it might be better that they are not involved).

The British Millennium Cohort Study has found that when children are born to lone, un-partnered mothers, those mothers have no contact with the father of their child in 40pc of cases at the time of the child's birth.

In other words, family 'diversity' is something to be celebrated only if we believe that it does not matter how actively involved fathers are in the lives of their children.

In addition, we must consider how family 'diversity' often comes about. Frequently it is the result of a relationship breakdown.

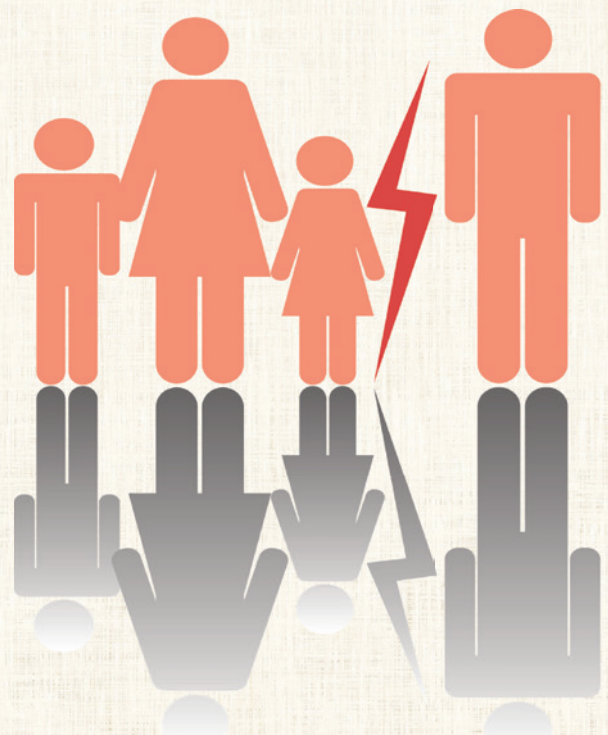
Often, and related to the above point, it is the result of fathers and mothers not committing to one another in the first place so that their children never have the benefit of both of their parents living under the same roof and sharing responsibility for them day by day in the same house.

Therefore, as family 'diversity' in Ireland increases, overwhelmingly it will be the result of marriage and relationship breakdown and will go hand-in-hand with a rise in families without active, present fathers.

It is very hard to see how this can be a matter of celebration and can be characterised as anything other than family breakdown.

**What 'diversity' means in a great many cases is that children are growing up with semi-involved or uninvolved fathers.**

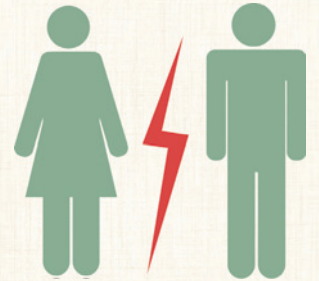
**In the face of these figures, a key question is whether the family is 'breaking down' or merely becoming more 'diverse'?**



# KEY figures:-

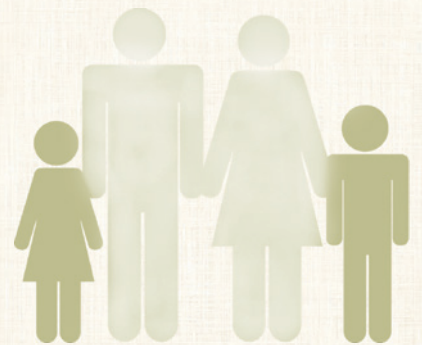
---

**500** percent increase  
in the number of broken marriages  
between 1986 and 2011



**360** percent increase  
in the number of cohabiting couples  
between 1996 and 2011

**119** percent increase  
in the number of children being  
raised outside marriage  
between 1986 and 2011

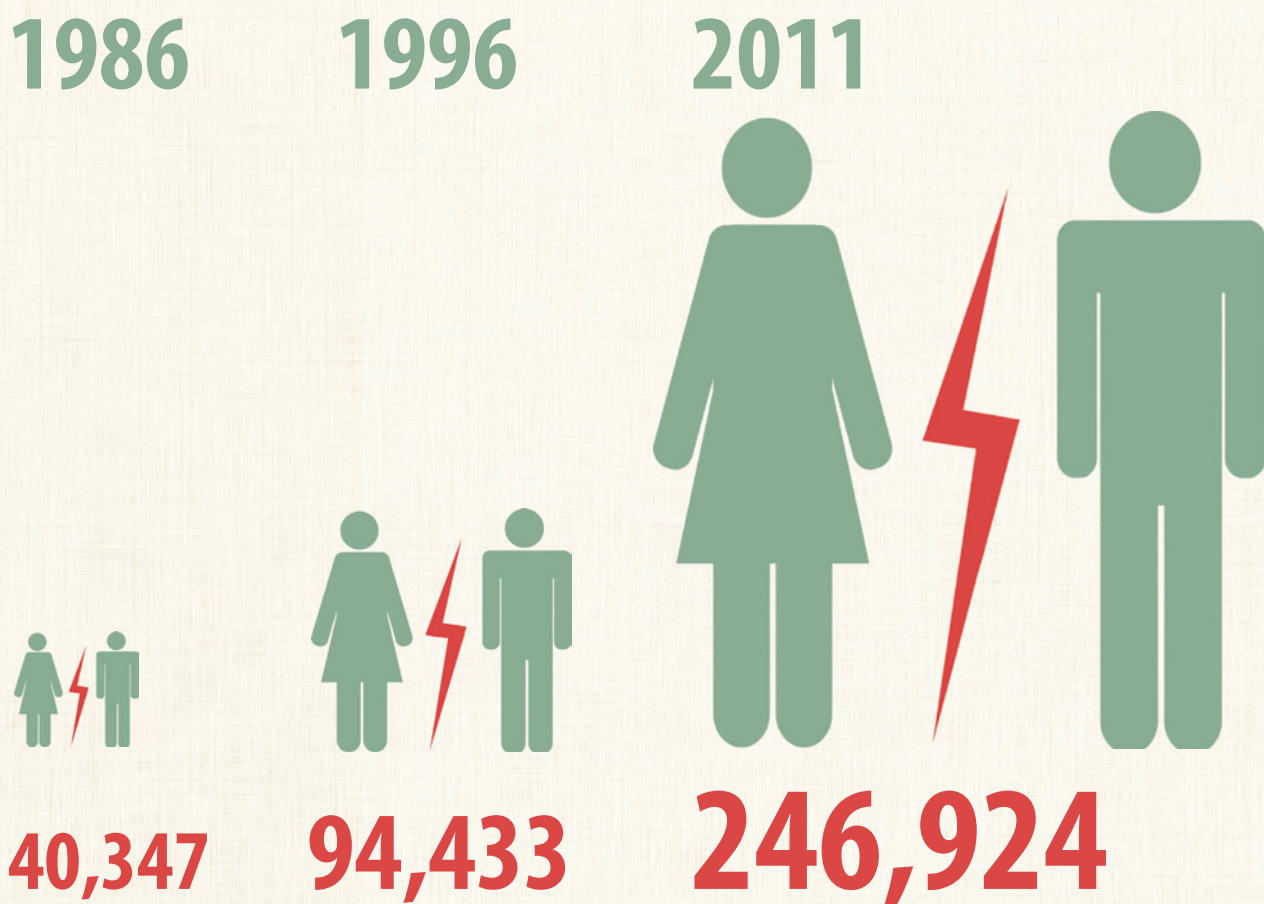


**106** percent increase  
in the number of single parent families  
between 1986 and 2011

**29** percent increase  
in the number of marriages  
between 1986 and 2011



## Number of people who have undergone divorce or separation



The number of people in Ireland who have undergone **divorce or separation** has shown massive growth since 1986. It has **increased sixfold** in that time. It has increased by **47,332** since Census 2006 alone.

Marriage breakdown remains lower in Ireland than in most EU countries but as we can see, it is rising rapidly and in absolute terms the number of people who have suffered a broken marriage is large and is something Irish policy-makers should be more aware of.

## Number of single parent families

1986



104,713

1996



129,116

2011



215,315

The number of single parent families in Ireland has grown far faster than the number of married families. The number **has more than doubled** between 1986 and 2011.

This should also be of more concern to policy-makers than it is.

In their book, '**Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps**', Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur say:

"If I were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal... The fact that both parents have a biological connection to the child would increase the likelihood that the parents would identify with the child and be willing to sacrifice for that child, and it would reduce the likelihood that either parent would abuse the child."



## Number of cohabiting couples

1986

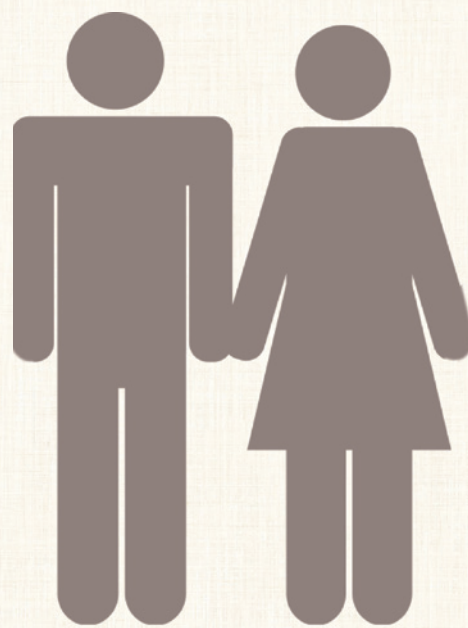
1996

2011

Not recorded



31,296



143,600

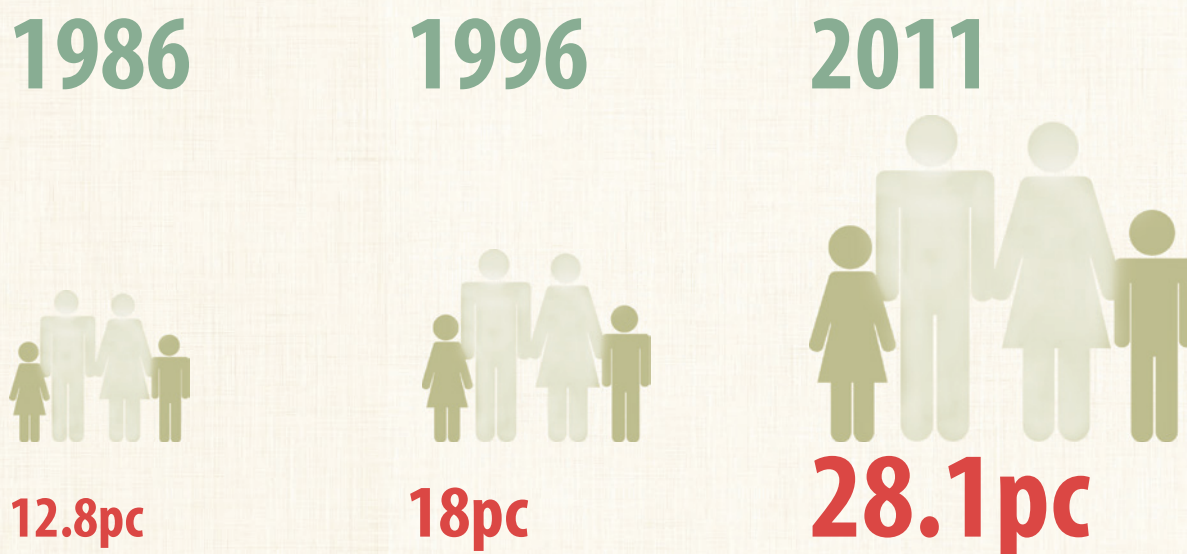
**Cohabitation** has gone from being almost unheard of in Ireland to being commonplace for young couples. As a percentage of all couples, 15.1pc cohabit.

Very little research has been conducted into patterns of cohabitation in Ireland. One piece of research shows that only one in four cohabiting relationships last seven years or more. The rest end in marriage or breakup. (Halpin and O'Donoghue 'Cohabitation in Ireland').

The British Millennium Cohort Study highlights the instability of cohabitation compared with marriage. For example, it shows that whereas 27pc **of cohabiting couples** have split up by the time their child is just five years of age, the comparative figure for **married couples** is a third of that, or 9pc.

In Ireland in 2011, 6.5pc of children were being raised by cohabiting couples, compared with 1.5pc in 1996.

# Percentage of children raised outside marriage



**Number of children being raised outside marriage in 2011: 456,661**

Arguably a more important indicator of the relative health of the family in a given country than the rate of marital breakdown is the number of children being raised outside of marriage.

If we believe it is best, in general, for children to be raised by a married mother and father who love them, then it should be of concern that so many Irish children are no longer being raised in this type of family unit and are commonly being raised without a father who is present on a daily basis in their lives.

As the above figures show, in absolute terms, 456,661 children were being raised outside marriage in 2011, which was 28.1pc of all the children in the same year.

A total of 305,867 children under 18 were being raised outside marriage in 2011, which is 27.2 percent of all children under 18. (Note: the Census itself does not classify 'children' solely as people under 18).

Compared with average in other OECD countries, more Irish children are being raised in single parent families and fewer are being raised by cohabiting couples.

## Marital breakdown as a percentage of first marriages in 2011 by region (2011):

|               |             |                |                 |               |
|---------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| LIMERICK CITY | DUBLIN CITY | WATERFORD CITY | LIMERICK COUNTY | GALWAY COUNTY |
| 20.9pc        | 19.6pc      | 19.6pc         | 11.9pc          | 11.5pc        |

As we can see from the above figures, marital breakdown varies by region. As expected, marriage breakdown is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Marriage breakdown is highest in the **age group 50-54**. In this age group, over one in five marriages has ended in divorce or separation. The rate is almost 10 points higher than in the **age group 65-69**. Is this due to a difference in attitude towards divorce and separation?

## Number of marriages in Ireland

1986



634,767

1996



646,986

2011

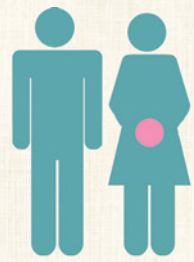


820,334

While the number of marriages in Ireland has increased, as a percentage of all family types the number has declined sharply as the figures below show.

## Married couples as a % of all family units

1986



85.5

1996



80.1

2011



69.5

## Final words

Understandably, a great deal of Irish public debate is devoted to how to reduce poverty. However, nothing like the same amount of energy is devoted to addressing the issue of family breakdown despite the human misery that often lies behind the figures.

If we wish to ensure that as many children as possible are raised throughout their childhoods by their own mothers and fathers (assuming they are fit parents), then we can no longer be indifferent to what Census 2011, and other similar research reveals.

Indeed, encouraging mothers and fathers to raise their children together is a key way to reduce poverty.

In their paper, *For Richer or for Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy* (2002) Adam Thomas and Isabel V. Sawhill point out that if the marriage rate in 2001 in the United States had been the same as it was in 1970, the poverty rate would have been 20 to 30 percent lower than its actual 1998 value.

It is likely a similar situation would obtain in Ireland. This makes it all the more mysterious that we do not do much more as a society to promote marriage.

Perhaps we tend to be complacent about the institution of marriage and believe that it is in better condition than is actually the case. The figures presented in this short document ought to show that there is far less room for complacency than we think.