

# Viewpoint

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## Marriage statistics and the poverty gap

**N**orthern Ireland is a statistician's delight. The compact nature of the province and its diverse population has always made it the perfect place for social surveys.

Most of those have concentrated on the community divide and reactions to political developments, but the one published today by the Iona Institute, a religious lobby group, throws up a very surprising and hitherto unrecognised finding.

Using figures sourced from the NI Statistics and Research Agency, it revealed that the likelihood of someone getting married depends on their socio-economic class.

Just over 60% of upper professional workers are married compared to less than a third of unskilled workers. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that some people are literally too poor to marry or, at least, feel they cannot afford the type of ceremony and lavish honeymoon they would like.

This finding is most surprising because there is a perception that Northern Ireland is a conservative society and that the inclination is towards marriage rather than co-habiting.

However, the figures do not bear that out. During the 1960s and early 1970s some 12,000 couples a year married

compared to only 8,000 a year now, when the population is significantly larger.

As well as poverty another disincentive to marriage identified by the study is the welfare system where greater benefits can be obtained by those who are single. That would obviously affect those in the lower socio-economic classes rather than those in professional occupations.

As the Iona Institute says, the figures should spark a debate on inequality in Northern Ireland society and how the gap between the haves and the have nots can be closed. That is obviously a debate which would be best held among the local political parties if devolved government is restored, although some of the comments emanating from the main players yesterday dampened the optimism that a breakthrough is imminent.

It is ironic that this survey should be published on Valentine's Day, when thoughts of many turn toward the idea of love. But it seems the price of love is too much for some.

Perhaps they should realise that money cannot buy happiness, but that marriage, statistically at least, can help mitigate disadvantage in life. That was a lesson learned by previous generations, and perhaps today's couples should pay heed.



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# Cash worries putting NI couples off tying knot, survey reveals

BY CLAIRE McNEILLY

MARRIAGE rates in Northern Ireland have declined sharply in recent decades, a report reveals today.

Meanwhile, cohabitation, the number of births outside marriage and instances of marital breakdown have all increased.

Research from the Iona Institute, a religious lobby group, also found there is a huge gap in social classes when it comes to marriage across Northern Ireland, with many couples too poor to tie the knot.

Figures sourced from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that just over 60% of upper professional workers are married, compared to less than a third of unskilled workers.

Entitled 'Mind the Gap: Mar-

riage and Family by Social Class in Northern Ireland', the report indicates that for many of the more socially disadvantaged here the dream of walking down the aisle will never become a reality.

Indeed, workers in professional occupations are almost twice as likely as unskilled workers to be married.

Statistics from NISRA show that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, around 12,000 couples in Northern Ireland married each year compared to 8,000 today.

In other words, the marriage rate here in 1970 was 8.1 marriages per thousand whereas in 2013 it had fallen to 4.4.

Tracy Harkin from the Iona Institute said the results should be deeply concerning for anyone who believes in the importance of marriage.

"Social disadvantage clearly diminishes a person's chances

of marrying and not marrying in turn increases the odds of remaining socially disadvantaged," she said.

"It is a vicious circle and it is one that obviously affects children as well."

She referred to a US study by one of that country's most esteemed social scientists which has shown that if Americans married at the same rate as in 1970, rates of poverty in that country would diminish by between 20% and 30%.

Ms Harkin added: "People are less likely to marry if they feel financially insecure. There are also disincentives to marry built into the social welfare system."

"This is an issue of justice and of equality and cries out for public debate that will, hopefully, help us all to work to close the marriage gap between the poor and the better off locally."



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# Professional couples 'twice as likely to be married'

**Marie Louise McConville**  
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**P**EOPLE in professional occupations are almost twice as likely as unskilled workers to be married in Northern Ireland, a pressure group has claimed.

A report by The Iona Institute suggests that many couples in the north are too poor to tie the knot.

Mind the Gap: Marriage and Family by Social Class in Northern Ireland draws from figures from the NI Statistics and Research Agency.

They show that almost 61 per cent of 'upper professional workers' aged 18 to 49 are married, compared with just a third of 'unskilled or elementary workers'.

**6** People are less likely to marry if they feel financially insecure – Tracy Harkin

Tracy Harkin from the Iona Institute said a "key factor driving down the odds of marrying for those who are most socially disadvantaged is poorly paid insecure jobs".

"People are less likely to marry if they feel financially insecure," she said.

"There are also disincentives to marry built into the social welfare system. It can be more financially

advantageous for two people on social welfare to remain single than to marry.

"We ought to be able to agree that the big marriage divide which exists between the social classes is a matter of grave concern, something that must be tackled by our politicians, other policy-makers and opinion-formers".

"This is an issue of justice and of equality and cries out for public debate that will, hopefully, help us all to work to close the marriage gap between the poor and the better off in Northern Ireland".

The Iona Institute lobbies on issues around marriage and religion and is headed up by commentator David Quinn.