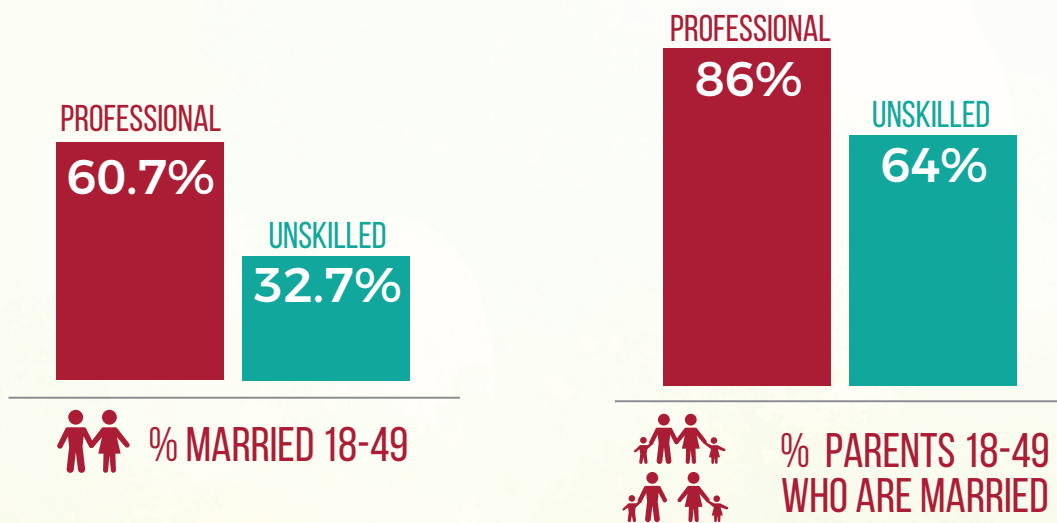


MIND THE GAP

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY BY SOCIAL CLASS IN NORTHERN IRELAND



THE MOST SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED ARE THE LEAST LIKELY TO MARRY.
THE MOST SOCIALLY ADVANTAGED ARE THE MOST LIKELY TO MARRY.



PART ONE: THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Introduction

Patterns of family life in Northern Ireland differ sharply by social class. There is a very big gap in the percentage of people who are married when we compare those in the upper professional class with unskilled workers. People in elementary occupations are about half as likely to be married as managers, directors and other senior officials.

This means there is also a strong correlation between social class and the likelihood that a child will be born and raised inside or outside of the marital family. The percentage of children who are raised within marriage is highest in the upper socio-economic groups and lowest in the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups.

This prompts the question, does this connection between marriage and social class matter? One reason it should matter to us is that children are more likely to grow up in poverty if raised outside the marital family than if raised within the marital family.

The purpose of this briefing note, however, isn't so much to say why or if it matters (although it will briefly address this) as to point out how patterns of family life do indeed differ by social class and hopefully to prompt some debate about this.



Marriage and the family in Northern Ireland: An overview

Patterns of family life in Northern Ireland increasingly resemble what we see in other Western countries. That is, rates of marriage have fallen, rates of cohabitation have gone up, and the number of births outside marriage has gone up. Rates of marital breakdown have also gone up.

The number of people getting married each year in Northern Ireland has declined sharply compared with several decades ago. Data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, about 12,000 couples per annum were marrying. Today, despite a big increase in the overall population in the intervening decades, the figure has dropped to about 8,000.



To put it another way, in 1970, the marriage rate in Northern Ireland was 8.1 marriages per thousand whereas in 2013, it was just 4.4. (The equivalent figure in the Republic of Ireland was slightly higher at 4.8 in 2014).

On the other hand, cohabitation is somewhat lower in Northern Ireland than in the Republic (5.5% of all households vs 7.7%).

Divorce is also commonplace. In 2015, 8,355 couples married and 2,380 couples divorced. This is somewhat higher, proportionately speaking, than the equivalent figure in the Republic.

The number of births taking place outside marriage was 44pc in 2015. This compares with a rate of about 34pc in the Republic.

All of these figures show that marriage has sharply declined as a social institution in Northern Ireland but as we shall now see, the decline is not evenly spread. There is a very big 'marriage gap' by social class.

(Note: This is a companion briefing note to one on the same topic covering the situation in the Republic of Ireland).

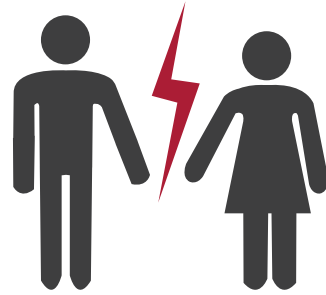
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN NORTHERN IRELAND



8,355

MARRIAGES

(2015 figure)



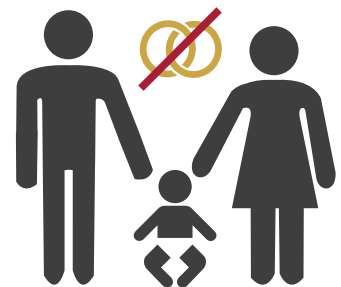
2,360

DIVORCES

(2015 figure)

44% OF BIRTHS
OUTSIDE MARRIAGE

(2015 figure)



38,599 COHABITING
COUPLES

(census 2011 figure)

MARRIAGE BY SOCIAL CLASS

In the tables below we look at the age group 18-49 and examine the percentage in this age group who are married or cohabiting or lone parenting by social class. Then we narrow it down to look at parents only and we look at the percentage of parents in the 18-49 age group who are married, cohabiting or lone parenting.

The reason we examine the age group 18-49 is because these are the child-bearing years, and also the main child-rearing years. A decline in marriage among this age group most sharply affects children.

See the panel on the right for what the occupational categories A to J in Tables 1 and 2 refer to, but broadly speaking as we go from A to J we move from upper professionals to the low skilled and the unemployed.

Occupational classifications

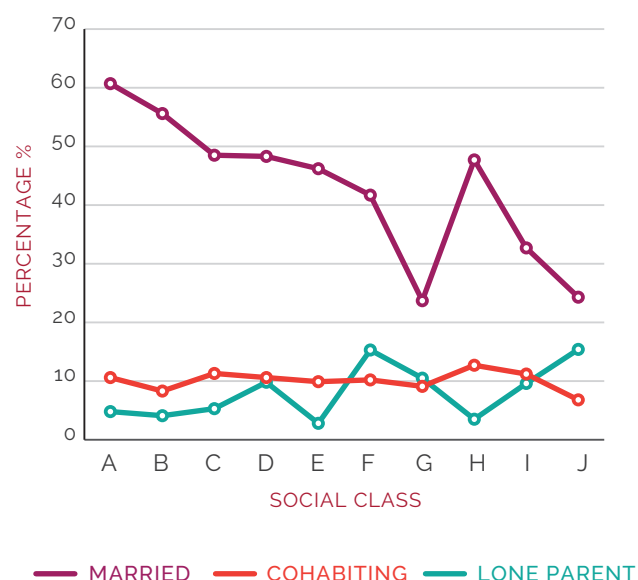
- A – Managers, directors and senior officials
- B – Professional occupations
- C – Associate professional and technical occupations
- D – Associate professional and technical occupations
- E – Skilled trades occupations
- F – Caring, leisure and other service occupations
- G – Sales and customer service occupations
- H – Process, plant and machine operatives
- I – Elementary occupations
- J – Not in employment and currently working

Social Class Others - This includes others gainfully employed in generally menial tasks, welfare recipients and those who refused to answer question. For the latter the CSO have always included them in this Social Class.

TABLE 1 (Figures from Census 2011)
Percentage of 18-49 year olds who are married/cohabiting/lone parenting by occupational classification

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J (*)
MARRIED	60.7	55.6	48.5	48.3	46.2	41.7	23.7	47.7	32.7	24.3
COHABITING	10.6	8.3	11.3	10.6	9.9	10.2	9.1	12.7	11.2	6.8
LONE PARENT	4.8	4.1	5.3	9.8	2.8	15.3	10.5	3.5	9.6	15.4

*See above panel for key to occupational classifications



As we can see from Table 1, the higher up the occupational ladder someone is, the more likely they are to be married. In terms of the likelihood of being married, the difference between A (managers, directors and senior officials) and J (those not in employment) is more than two to one. The difference between A and I (elementary or unskilled occupations) is almost two to one.

These are very large and stark differences. They represent a yawning inequality that is rarely if ever highlighted. Who should it be that an upper professional is twice as likely to be married (60.7pc vs 32.7pc) as someone who is in an elementary occupation? Is that fair?

TABLE 2 (Figures from Census 2011)
Percentage of 18-49 year olds with children who are married/cohabiting/lone parenting by occupational classification

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J (*)
MARRIED	86.0	87.0	84.4	79.8	83.0	62.2	62.2	72.5	63.6	52
COHABITING	8.1	7.1	9.7	8.3	14.0	12.9	19.3	13.7	15.5	11
LONE PARENT	5.9	5.9	5.9	11.9	3.0	24.8	18.5	13.8	20.9	37

*See above panel for key to occupational classifications

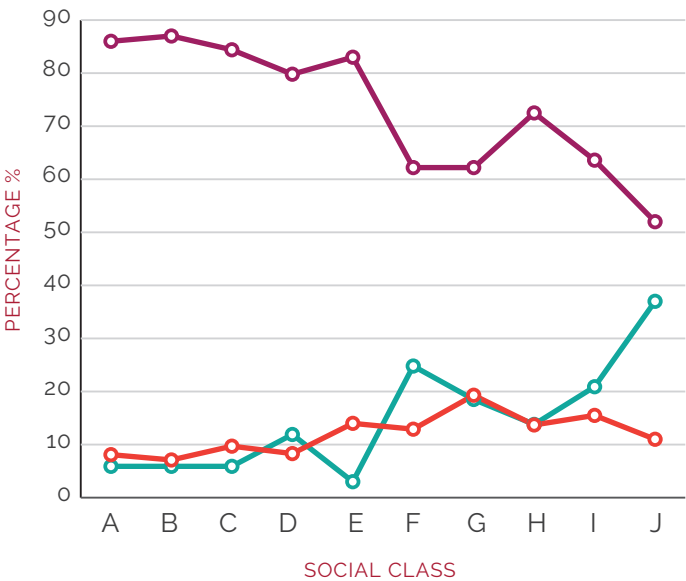


Table 2 cross-correlates by social class the odds that a child will be raised by married parents, cohabiting parents or a lone parent. As we see, when a child's parents are at the top of the occupational ladder, there is an 86pc chance that the child's parents are married, compared with only 52pc if they are not in employment.

Conversely, just 5.9 percent of children of upper professionals are being raised in a single parent family versus 37pc for those whose parent(s) are out of work.



DO THE DIFFERENCES MATTER?

We have seen the differences. It is unarguable that they are very striking. Do they matter? At a minimum they should prompt us to ask why it is that those in the highest socio-economic groups are much more likely to be married, and to raise their children within marriage, than people from the lowest socio-economic groups?

Do people in professional occupations see more value in getting married than people in unskilled jobs? Are there impediments to people in lower skilled jobs getting married and if so, what are they? How can they be removed? Should they be removed?

There is a strong connection between family type and poverty. Being poor lowers the odds of a person being married, but conversely, being married lowers the odds of being poor.

Open, the lone parent family support group, points out the following on its website (the figures are from the Republic of Ireland):

“Well over a quarter of adults and children in one-parent households are at risk of poverty (28.4%), almost twice as many as those living in two-parent households (14.6%).”

“One-parent families are more than twice as likely to live in consistent poverty than two-parent families.”

“A household with two parents is likely to have a higher income than a household with one parent”

We have to be careful not to jump to conclusions here because correlation is not necessarily causation. Given that lone parents are more likely to be from more deprived backgrounds in any case, then we would expect to find that the risk of poverty is higher for lone parent families for that reason.

However, it stands to reason that a household with two parents is less likely to be poor than a household with one parent because the household with two parents is more likely to have a higher household income.

Dr Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institute in the United States, along with Dr Adam Thomas, have looked at the relationship between marriage and poverty in the United States in their paper, 'For Richer or for Poorer: Marriage as an Antipoverty Strategy'.

They conclude that if the marriage rate in America in 2001 had been the same as it was in 1970, the poverty rate would have been 20% to 30% lower than its actual 1998 value.

This would make marriage one of the most successful anti-poverty programmes in history.



A report issued in 2014 by Teoir, a support group for unmarried parents in the Republic, highlighted the desirability of maintaining contact between children and their fathers.

This is not exactly the same as promoting marriage, but it does point to the value of active involvement by fathers in the lives of their children, and marriage is by far the best way of promoting this involvement.

The report is called 'Watch them Grow: Unmarried-cohabitant and Solo parenthood in Ireland'. It is an analysis of the 'Growing Up in Ireland' study.

'Growing Up in Ireland' is a major longitudinal study of children in the Republic at different stages in their lives.

'Watch them Grow', among other things looks at involvement by non-resident fathers (NRF) in the lives of their children.

It finds that by the time children in the study were three years of age (called 'Wave 2' in the study), a third of solo parents had no contact with the non-resident father.

It also found that 54% of non-resident fathers made no financial contribution to the upkeep of their children by wave two. This would help to explain the elevated poverty levels among lone parent families.

One of the findings of 'Watch them Grow' is that "increased father-child contact and improved quality of parents' relationship may be beneficial to both child development and maternal health".

According to the report, this "underscores the relevance of facilitating the involvement of NRFs in their family's lives where practicable and removing barriers to shared parenting wherever they might be found."

This is an aim the Iona Institute wholeheartedly supports. We simply reiterate that marriage ought to be especially promoted and encouraged because married fathers are far more likely to be in regular contact with their children, and to be supporting them financially, than non-resident fathers.



He went on to say, "To reduce a father to an absence or just a sum of money is to ignore the potential he has as a benign stabilising influence in his child's life, and the potential his more active inclusion in childrearing has for better, healthier, less resentful, family relationships all round. There are no grand claims that this work of father inclusion is likely to be easily or quickly delivered but there is clear evidence that properly structured and guided it is wanted, welcomed, helpful and beneficial to all the players. It simply enriches all their lives, enriching fatherhood, childhood, parenthood."



“A father is more likely to be actively involved in the lives of his children if he is married. If we ignore this fact, that is a ‘dangerous blind spot’.”

Again, we simply point out that a father is more likely to be actively involved in the lives of his children if he is married. If we ignore this fact, that is also a “dangerous blind spot”.

Quite apart from this, however, we ought to be able to agree that it is simply a good in itself to encourage the involvement of fathers with their children as a general principle. Indeed, the 'Da Project', an initiative of Barnardos, emphasises the importance of fathers.

The foreword of an evaluation report on the 'Da Project' in 2006 starts with the words, "Children need their fathers."

Commenting on the 'Da Project' in 2008, Dr Martin McAleese spoke about the "dangerous blind spot" of ignoring the role of fathers in the lives of their children.

As we have seen, it is in the most disadvantaged social classes that marriage is in steepest decline and in those same groups rates of solo parenting are highest, and therefore the lack of father-involvement is also highest.

We hope that this briefing note will go some small way towards highlighting the fact that patterns of family life in Ireland differ sharply by social class. We hope it will help prompt a closer look at this issue and its consequences, especially in the lives of children.

About the Iona Institute

The Iona Institute promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.



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