



MIND THE GAP

**How marriage and family
differ by social class**

Preface *By David Blankenhorn*



I welcome this timely report from the Iona Institute for two reasons. The first is that the report frankly addresses what is arguably the most important family trend of our time, both in Ireland and the United States – the bifurcation of marriage along class lines.

In the U.S., probably our most glaring and consequential societal division today is between the 30 % who are thriving and the rest who are falling behind. Those in the 30 % typically have four-year college degrees. Most enjoy stable, reasonably satisfying family lives — most marry, few of their children are born to unmarried mothers, and most children in the 30 % grow up living with both parents. These families typically earn enough to avoid chronic financial insecurity, build assets over time, and save a bit for the future. They're usually members of groups and networks — from extended families to civic, religious, and professional associations — that connect them to others and enrich their lives.

Those in the 70 % lack these advantages. Their education is non-elite. Their family lives are often fragmented, chaotic and painful. They typically have jobs, not careers, often with pay that's not enough and bosses they don't trust. Their social mobility is either static or downward. Their networks, especially if they're male, are often thin to non-existent, unless we count things like hanging out in bars and playing fantasy sports.

Which features of the lives I'm describing here are causes of the class divide, and which are mainly the results, or manifestations, of it? The short answer is that no one knows for sure. At the same time, there is growing agreement among diverse scholars, including some of those cited in this report, that family structure is not only a manifestation of the new American class divide, but also an important cause of it. For example, summarizing a large body of evidence, the respected scholars Sara McLanahan and Chris-

tine Percheski conclude that “family structure has become an important mechanism for the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequalities.” In 2015, more than 100 family scholars and leaders of civil society (I was one of them) similarly concluded that “American marriage today is becoming a class-based and class-propagating institution.” Is the same true in Ireland? The answer, based on this report, appears to be yes.

I also welcome this report because it suggests the possibility of a new and much broader pro-family coalition. For a number of years now, the fight over gay marriage has divided us. I was personally involved in that conflict, first as an opponent of gay marriage and later as a supporter.

But now that issue is largely behind us. And so, for the first time in many years, a new pro-family coalition — bringing together left and right, gay and straight, secular and religious — is now possible. In the U.S., I'm seeing it up close. I'm part of an initiative called the Marriage Opportunity Council — a group of scholars and leaders from across the political spectrum who've come together to overcome the American class divide in marriage by working, as our first public statement puts it, to “make marriage achievable for all who seek it.”

In 2016, our situation is new. We face new challenges, most importantly the one described in this report, and at the same time we have an opportunity to transcend the old divisions. In short, we have an opportunity to think about marriage in a way that brings us together rather than drives us apart. Think about it: What for most of our lives has been a culture war can now become a common cause. This valuable report can contribute to that possibility.

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Introduction

Patterns of family life in Ireland differ sharply by social class. This can be seen in two ways. First of all there is a large marriage gap between the lowest socio-economic group in the country and the highest.

Secondly, there is 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.

However, the purpose of this briefing note isn't so much to say why or if it matters (although it will briefly address this) so much 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 Ireland: an overview

Patterns of family life in 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.

The marriage rate in Ireland as at 2014 was 4.8 per thousand. This compares with 7.5 in 1973, a decline of 36 % in the intervening years. (For comparison purposes, the rate of marriage in the UK in 2011 was 4.5 per thousand. In Sweden it was 5.0)

The decline in the popularity of marriage in Ireland is contrary to the popular impression. While it is true that large numbers of Irish people in absolute terms still marry [22,025 couples married here in 2015 compared with 16,174 in 1996], this is mainly because of the large increase in the size of the population in that period.

In line with the relatively low marriage rate, the percentage of adults aged 20 or older who are married has also declined, from almost 60 % in 1986 to 51.4 % in 2011.

This is on a par with the percentage of adults who are married in countries like Britain and America. In both of those countries the percentage of adults who are married is at historically low levels.

Cohabitation is increasing rapidly. It was not even recorded in Census 1986 due to it being so uncommon. In 1996, there were 31,296 cohabiting couples in the country and by 2011 this had climbed to 143,600. This amounts to 15.1 % of all couples and is lower than the cohabitation rate in Britain but is lower than the rate in the US.

The number of births taking place outside marriage was about one in 20 in 1980 and is now around one in three.

The percentage of children raised outside marriage was 12.8 % in 1986 and this had more than doubled to 28.1 % by 2011. Of these, 21 % were being raised by lone parents and 7 % were being raised by cohabiting couples.

In absolute terms the number of children being raised outside marriage in 2011 was 456,661.

Marriage breakdown has also increased in Ireland. In 1986, 40,347 people had undergone a marital breakdown. By 2011 this had soared to 246,924. This figure combines the number of people who had separated or divorced.

However, marriage breakdown in Ireland is still low by EU standards. This is the most important respect in which family patterns here differ from those in most other Western countries.

Marriage by social class and through time

In the quarter of a century since the 1986 census the percentage of people who are married has declined significantly. As already noted, the percentage of adults who are currently married declined from almost 60% in 1986 to barely half in 2011.

Again using data from Census 2011, we see there are also significant changes when marriage by social class is examined. Among the upper ABC1 social classes marriage has fallen by 6.7 % points to 55.9% while in the most disadvantaged social classes (E and 'other') marriage has fallen by 9% points to 35.7%, meaning that just over one in three people in these groups are married. *(See appendix for a note on differing social class classifications used in this paper).*

The decline in the percentages of people who are married has largely taken place in urban areas. Since 1986 the percentage married has fallen by 12 points to 47% in urban areas while in rural areas it has decreased by only 1.7% points to 58.7%.

The declining popularity of marriage is best encapsulated by examining the change in the age group 40-49, the age at which most people will be married if they intend to marry. In 1986 the number currently married in this age group was 81.1% but by 2011 this had plummeted to 67.7%. This decline is only partly accounted for by the increase in marital breakdown also seen over the period in question.

If marriage itself remained as popular as in the recent past, we would expect that by the time people had reached middle age, the percentage of people who are married would still be at roughly 1986 levels.

It is also worth looking more closely at those in the age bracket 18-49 who are married. This is an important age group because it is the one in which people are most likely to start their families. If many people in this age group are not marrying, or are not forming long-term relationships this will have consequences for the expectation that children will be raised by both parents living under the same roof.

As the tables below show, there is big variation by social class and the biggest variation is between the highest socio-economic group, A (senior managers), and the lowest, G and I. (G consists of service industry workers and I of unskilled workers).

In terms of the percentage who are married the difference between A and I is more than two to one.

When we look at the percentage of 18-49 years olds who have children, the same pattern emerges, namely that 86 % of category A who have children are married versus only 63.6 % of category I. Just 5.9 % of category A who have children are lone parents versus 20.9 % of category I and 24.8 % of category F. These are big differences.

(Note: The data in the following two tables come from the National Household Survey for the fourth quarter of 2015 and are provided by the CSO).

Percentage of 18-49 year olds by social class who are married/cohabiting/lone parenting

	SOCIAL CLASS								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
MARRIED	65.7	56.9	54.7	54.2	53.2	41.9	30.9	53.8	31.8
COHABITING	13.8	13.0	14.6	11.8	14.2	13.6	14.8	14.7	10.2
LONE PARENTING	4.1*	3.3	3.2	7.1	1.8*	14.7	7.5	**	9.4

Percentage of 18-49 years olds with children by social class who are married/cohabiting/lone parenting

	SOCIAL CLASS								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
MARRIED	86.0	87.0	84.4	79.8	83.0	62.3	62.2	80.2	63.6
COHABITING	8.1	7.1	9.7	8.3	13.9	12.9	19.3	15.2	15.5
LONE PARENTING	5.9	5.9	5.9	11.9	3.1	24.8	18.5	4.6*	20.9

* The data sample here was small and so this the margin of error in the calculation is quite wide. **The data sample in this case was too small to be reliable.

Marriage and Family: the regional picture (Census 2011 data)

All married/widowed aged 18 and over.			
CITY	% MARRIED 1986	% MARRIED 2011	CHANGE IN % POINTS
CORK	51.8	38.7	-13.1
DUBLIN	46.5	36.3	-10.2
GALWAY	49.4	36.9	-12.5

Lone parent families 1986 and 2011 (from Census data)

As at the 2011 census the total number of children was recorded as 1,625,975.

Of those, 351,996 were children of lone parents. This represented 21.6% of the total number of children.

The % of lone parent children has almost doubled between 1986 and 2011.

YEAR	NO.OF CHILDREN	NO. LONE PARENT CHILDREN	% LONE PARENT CHILDREN
1986	1,605,868	205,073	12.8
2011	1,625,975	351,996	21.6

City by city variations

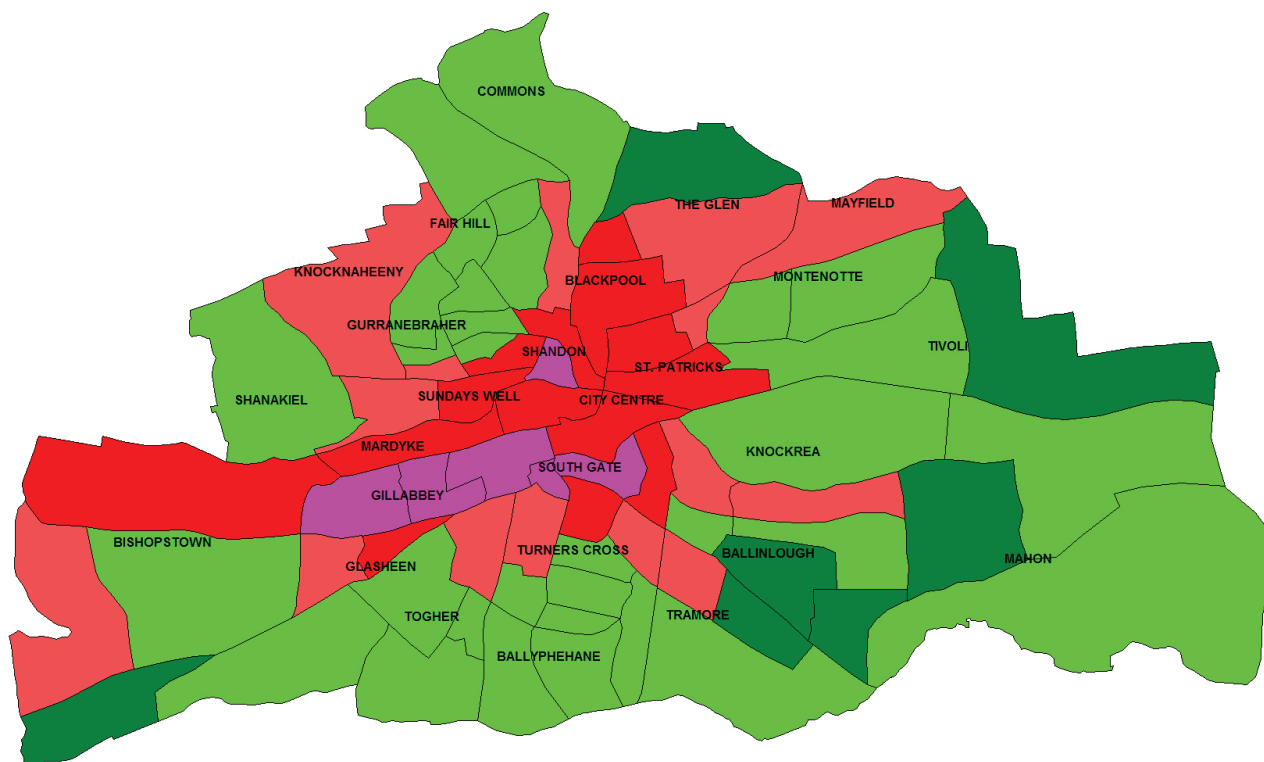
In regard to the 2011 figures, an analysis of our three main cities i.e. Cork, Dublin and Galway reveal that the % levels of lone parent children in these cities is higher than in the country as a whole which was 21.6% in 2011.

Cork – 31.9%

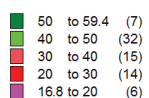
Dublin – 34.5%

Galway – 27.3%

% OF ALL PERSONS WHO ARE MARRIED AGED 18 AND OVER - CORK CITY

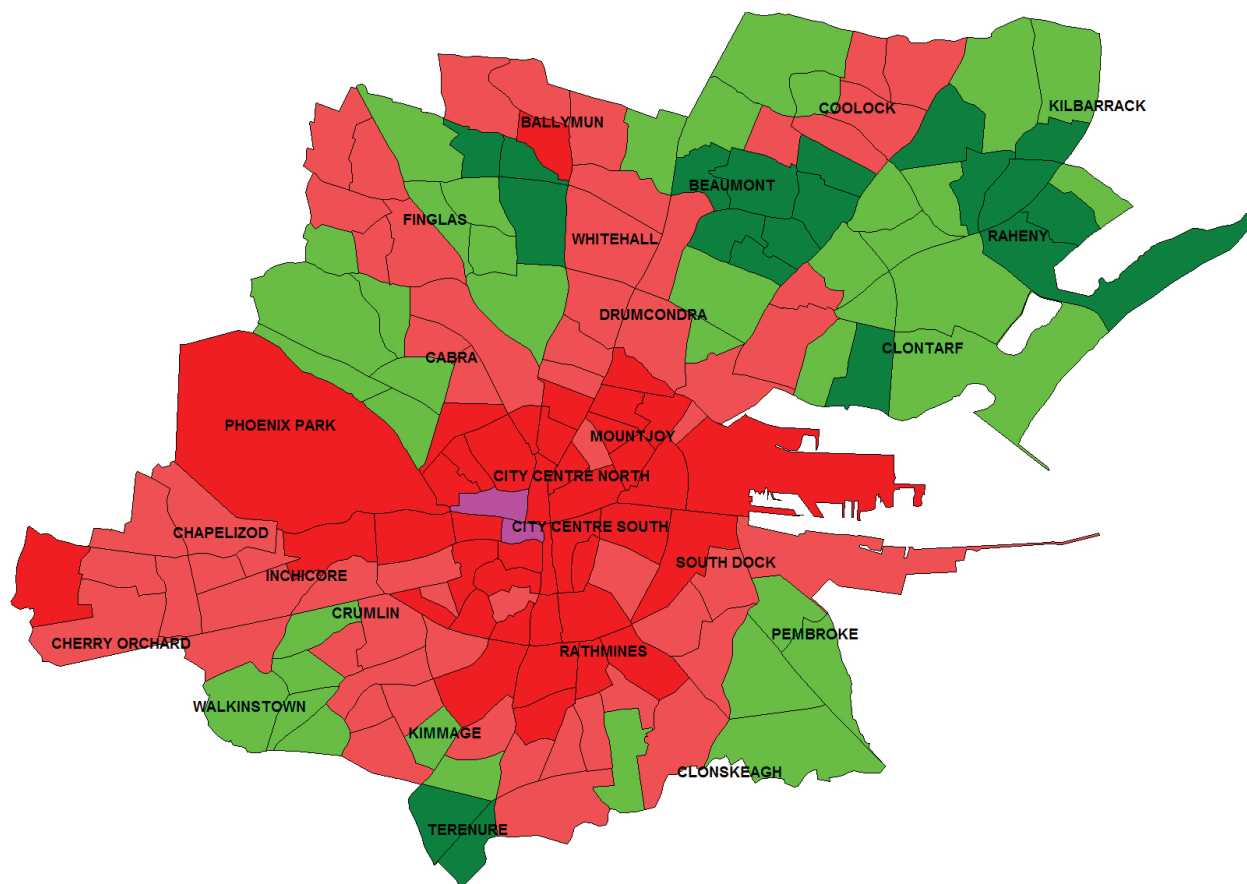


% MARRIED AGED 18 AND OVER CORK CITY



(From Census 2011)

% OF ALL PERSONS AGED 18 AND OVER WHO ARE MARRIED - DUBLIN CITY

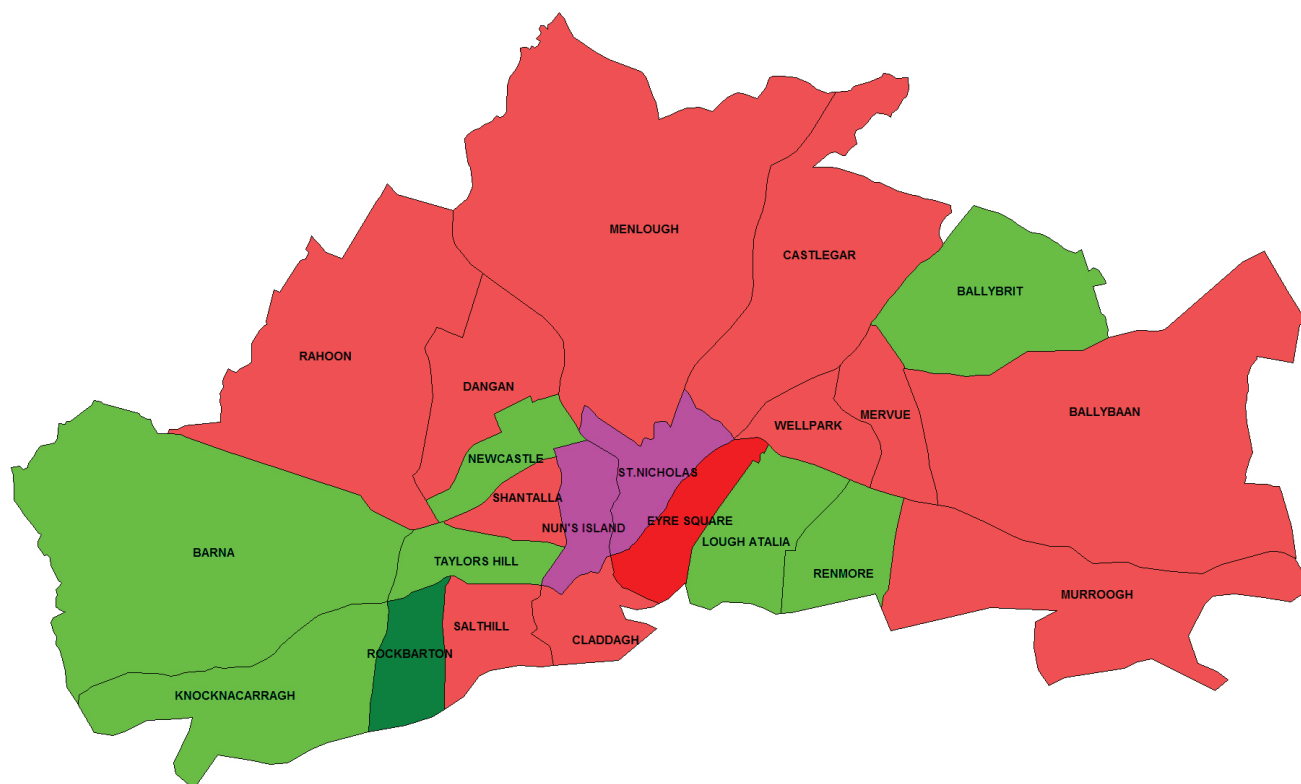


% MARRIED AGED 18 AND OVER DUBLIN CITY

50 to 59.7	(19)
40 to 50	(40)
30 to 40	(60)
20 to 30	(41)
18.7 to 20	(2)

(From Census 2011)

% OF ALL PERSONS AGED 18 AND OVER WHO ARE MARRIED - GALWAY CITY



% MARRIED AGED 18 AND OVER GALWAY CITY

50 to 53.4	(1)
40 to 50	(7)
30 to 40	(11)
20 to 30	(1)
19 to 20	(2)

(From Census 2011)



Do the differences matter? (Do fathers 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 are those in the highest socio-economic groups much more likely to be married, and to raise their children within marriage, than people from the lowest socio-economic groups?

Do people in social class A see more value in getting married than people in social class I? Are there impediments to people in social class I getting married and if so, what are they? How can they be removed? Should they be removed?

The Constitution still commits the State to guard marriage with “special care”. Is it being guarded with special care among the most socially disadvantaged?

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:

“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.

Adults and children in one-parent families have the highest deprivation rate in Ireland (56%), a very significant increase from 2009 (44%).”

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 in any case. 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.

Brookings Institute scholar, Dr Isabel Sawhill, 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’*. (The Brookings Institute is a liberal-leaning think tank). 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, 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

Why are those who are married much more likely to come from the highest socio-economic groups and why are they far more likely to marry before they have children? Why this large 'marriage gap'?

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 Ireland 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 wave two (when the children in the study reached age three), 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.

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.

He said: *"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."*

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.

Last year, Ireland voted to allow same-sex marriage on the basis that marriage matters. If that is so, then it makes sense to promote marriage and in particular it makes sense if we want more fathers to be more involved in their children's lives.

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.



Appendix

Designations used for Census 2011 data

Social Class A	Professional Workers
Social Class B	Managerial and Technical
Social Class C1	Non -Manual
Social Class C2	Skilled Manual
Social Class D	Semi-Skilled
Social Class E	Unskilled

Social Class Others - This includes others gainfully employed in generally menial tasks, welfare recipients and those who refused to answer question.

Quarterly household survey designations

Social Class A	Managers, directors and senior officials
Social Class B	Professional occupations
Social Class C	Associate professional and technical occupations
Social Class D	Administrative and secretarial occupations
Social Class E	Skilled trade occupations
Social Class F	Caring, leisure and other service occupations
Social Class G	Sales and customer service occupations
Social Class H	Process, plant and machine operatives
Social Class I	Elementary occupations

