

# THE COHABITATION DIFFERENCE

How marriage and cohabitation differ and why it matters



## Summary

Cohabitation has been increasing rapidly in Ireland in recent decades and so has the number of children being raised by cohabiting parents. It may seem that this does not really matter, but cohabiting relationships tend to be less stable and more short-lived than marriage and this can adversely affect children because children with cohabiting parents are more likely to experience their break-up.

A recent survey called the Global Family and Gender Survey throws some light on why cohabiting relationships tend to be more short-lived: cohabiting couples are less likely than married couples to be satisfied about their relationships and family life generally.

The survey looked at 11 countries, including Ireland. To a greater or less extent the same pattern was found everywhere. Almost 2,500 individuals with children were surveyed in Ireland. (See Note 1 below).

## KEY RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

### 1 Cohabiting couples have stronger doubts about their relationship

Only 18pc of married couples with children have had "serious doubts" in the last 12 months that their relationship with their partner will last, compared with 34pc of cohabiting couples. This is a difference of almost two-to-one.

TABLE 1

% who say they're had serious doubts in last 12 months that their relationship will last

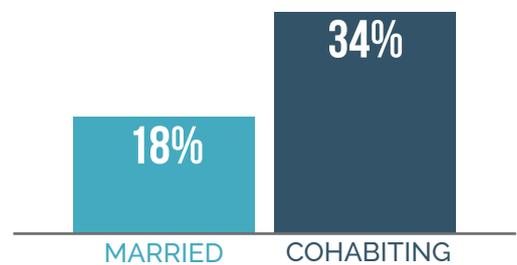
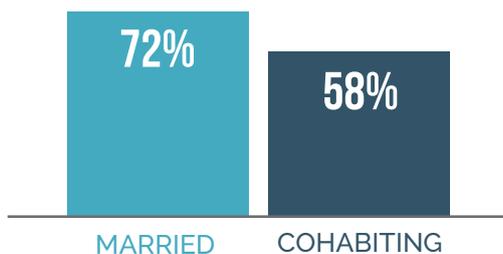


TABLE 2

% who say that relationship with their partners is more important than almost anything else in life



### 2 Cohabiting parents are less likely to stress importance of relationship

It also found that 72pc of married parents say their relationship with their partner is "more important than almost anything else in life", versus 58pc for cohabiting couples, a difference of 14 points.

Women are less likely than men to say their relationship with their partner is "more important than almost anything else". Sixty-five percent of married mothers say this compared with 79pc of married fathers. The figure for cohabiting couples is 53pc of mothers compared with 64pc of fathers.

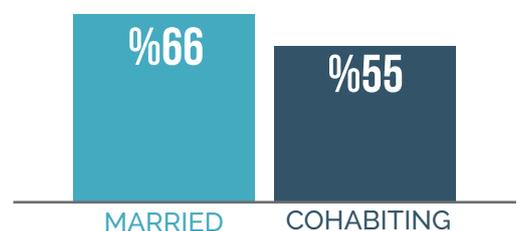
### 3 Cohabiting couples are less likely to be very satisfied with family life

Cohabiting couples are also less likely to be "very satisfied" with their family life than married couples. The figures are 56pc and 66pc respectively.

Roughly similar findings were found in the other 10 countries surveyed ranging from Australia to Chile and the UK (See Note 1 below). The findings hold after controlling for education, economic status, etc.

TABLE 3

% very satisfied with family life



## COHABITATION IN IRELAND

Ireland has seen a very sharp rise in the number of couples who either cohabit before marriage, or who cohabit as a substitute for marriage. The number of children being raised by cohabiting couples is also on the increase.

Census 1996 recorded only 31,296 cohabiting couples in Ireland. By Census 2016, this has jumped to 152,302, a huge fivefold increase.

The total number of children aged under 15 living with cohabiting couples was almost 100,000 (98,457). This accounts for 12.5 of all children under 15 in Ireland. The figure in 2011 was 79,636, or 10.5pc.

TABLE 4

Number of cohabiting couples 1996/2016



TABLE 5

Number of children under 15 raised by cohabiting couples 2011/2016



## COHABITATION AND STABILITY

While this survey does not measure relationship stability as such, other studies have shown that cohabiting relationships are less long-lasting than married ones.

Data from the 2017 World Family Map report (see note 2 below) indicate that children born to cohabiting parents in Europe and the United States are about 90pc more likely to see their parents break up, compared to children born to married parents. The differences in perceived stability this survey reveals between married and cohabiting parents in Ireland and elsewhere parallel this finding.

The Global Family and Gender Survey also suggests that one factor explaining the stability premium for family life associated with marriage is commitment. Specifically, this survey finds that married parents are more likely to attach great importance to their relationship, compared to cohabiting parents.

Differences in stability between cohabiting and married families are noteworthy because children are, as mentioned, more likely to thrive in stable families. They tend to do better when their lives are marked by stable routines with stable caregivers. This survey, then, suggests that in many countries across the Americas, Europe, and Oceania, children may be more likely to experience such stability in a married family than in a cohabiting family. Thus, society has an interest in encouraging couples planning to become mothers and fathers to marry.

**'CHILDREN BORN TO COHABITING PARENTS IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES ARE ABOUT 90% MORE LIKELY TO SEE THEIR PARENTS BREAK UP, COMPARED TO CHILDREN BORN TO MARRIED PARENTS'**

### Notes:

1. The Global Family and Gender Survey looks at family trends and attitudes in 11 different countries. These findings on cohabitation are the first in a series of findings that will be released from the survey over time.

It has been conducted by the Institute for Family Studies. It spoke to almost 2,500 people in Ireland. The study also examines wider issues of the family, as well as religious practice. Other findings will be released in due course.

The survey spoke only to couples aged 18-50 with children under the age of 18. Whether a couple has children or not obviously matters very greatly from a wider social point of view because society has a strong interest in the welfare of children. The findings are significant because good relationship stability has a strong positive effect on child welfare.

Results regarding cohabitation from the other 10 countries in this study can be found here:

<https://ifstudies.org/blog/less-stable-less-important-cohabiting-families-comparative-disadvantage-across-the-globe>

2. The World Family Map report can be found here: <http://worldfamilymap.ifstudies.org/2017/files/WFM-2017-FullReport.pdf> It shows that cohabiting parents are far more likely to break up than married parents across a range of countries and outlines why relationship instability in their parents can have bad effects on 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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