

ON THE WRONG COURSE

BIRTH, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
TRENDS IN IRELAND





INTRODUCTION

Ireland has undergone profound social transformation over the past few decades. Shifts in fertility, family structures, religious practice, and population demographics have reshaped the country's societal landscape. This paper examines three key domains: birth and fertility patterns, population ageing, evolving family and marriage dynamics. Each reflects not only statistical change but also a deeper transformation in how Irish society understands itself.

As we can see, Ireland is now recording its lowest ever birth rate, its lowest ever marriage rate and a very rapidly ageing population, all indicating that as a society we need a course correction. We believe these trends need to be better known and their underlying causes, whether social or economic, properly debated and discussed.

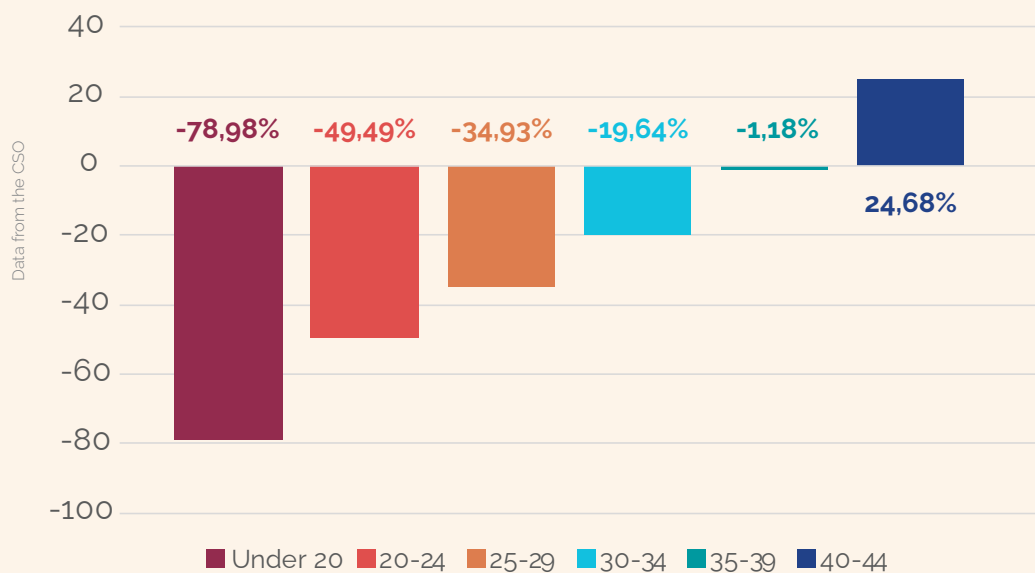
1. BIRTH AND FERTILITY TRENDS

Falling Fertility Rates

Irish mothers are having fewer babies. Ireland experienced the second largest decline in fertility rates in Europe over the past 20 years, surpassed only by Finland. From a position of having the highest fertility rate in 2004 (1.99 births per woman)¹, it has now declined to just 1.5², slightly above the EU average (1.38)³ but well below the replacement level of 2.1. This decline is part of a broader European trend but is particularly striking in Ireland.

A fertility rate of 1.5 means that 100 grandparents can expect to have only 56 grandchildren, whereas when four children were the average family size, 100 grandparents would have 400 grandchildren. The decline will be even more dramatic if the rate were to fall further, as predicted by the CSO (see more later).

Percentage change in births (2004-2024) per age group



Delayed and Fewer Births

Not only are Irish mothers having fewer children, but they are also having them at older ages. Births are declining among all age groups except for 40-44 year-olds.

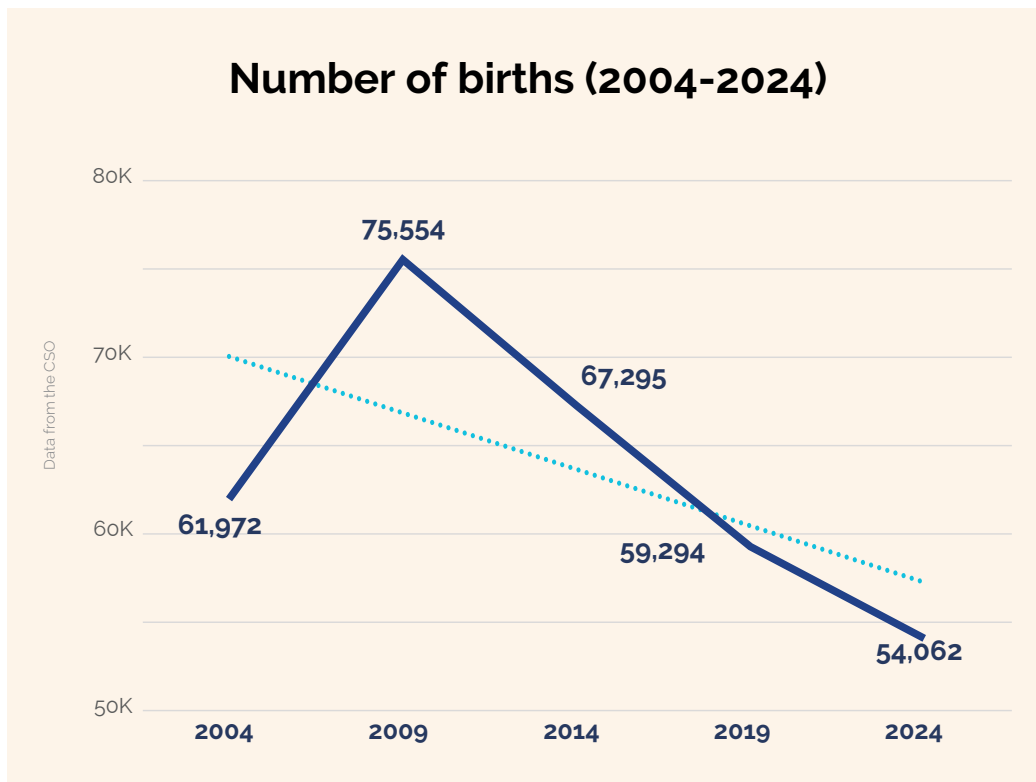
The average age of first-time mothers in Ireland was the second highest in Europe, at 31.6.⁴ Ireland also has the highest proportion in Europe of all births to mothers aged 40 and over.⁵

Births are falling sharply despite a growing population (the vast majority of which is due to immigration).



Ireland is now recording its lowest ever birth rate, its lowest ever marriage rate and a very rapidly ageing population."





2. THE AGEING OF IRELAND

Some might think that a decrease in births is not a big problem as Ireland's population is growing anyway, due to immigration and because people are living longer. However, it is the changing balance between generations, rather than the total population size, that should raise the greatest concerns.

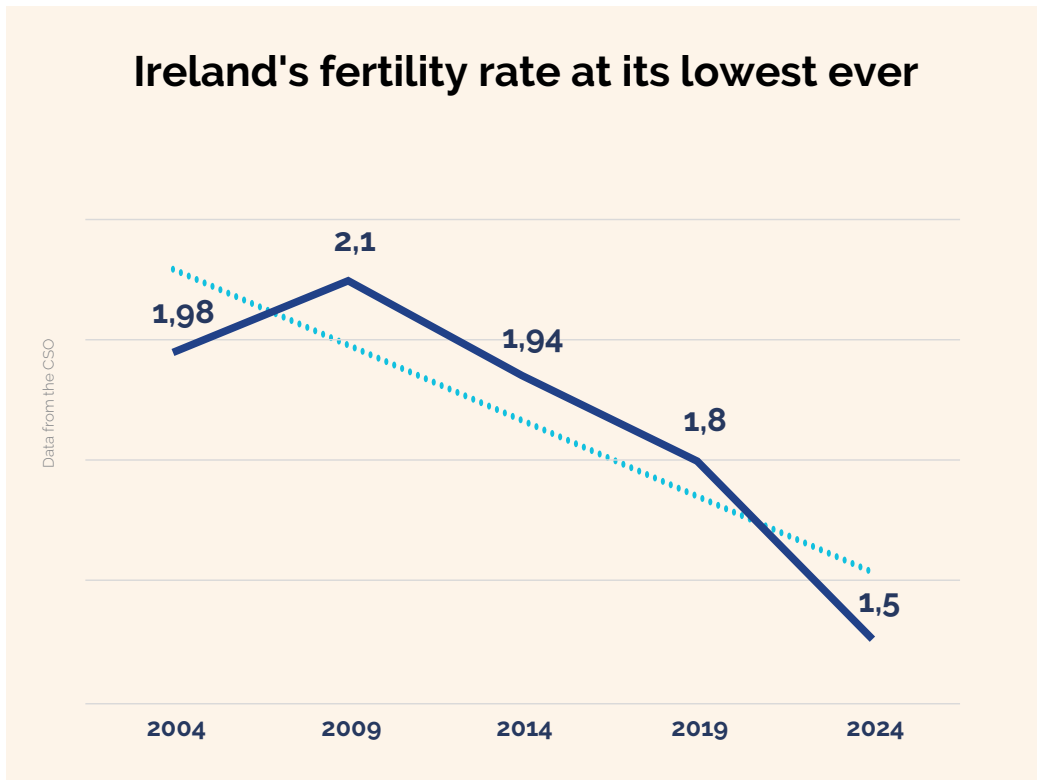
Demographic Projections

The latest projections from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), covering the period 2023 to 2057, outline a stark future in which the country's age profile will shift dramatically, posing significant social and economic challenges.⁶

These projections are based on three possible scenarios, depending on different proportions of immigration.

- The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is projected to decline from 1.55 in 2023 to just 1.3 by 2038, stabilising at that level. By 2047, in every scenario considered by the CSO, the number of deaths will exceed the number of births.
- A TFR of 1.3 means 100 grandparents can expect to have 42 grandchildren. It is possible that the TFR might go even further down, as it is already the case in other European countries.
- Migration will mitigate some of this in the short-to-medium term. However, as the global population will also shrink in the next decades, Ireland will face increasing competition from other countries in attracting immigrants.

Ireland's fertility rate at its lowest ever

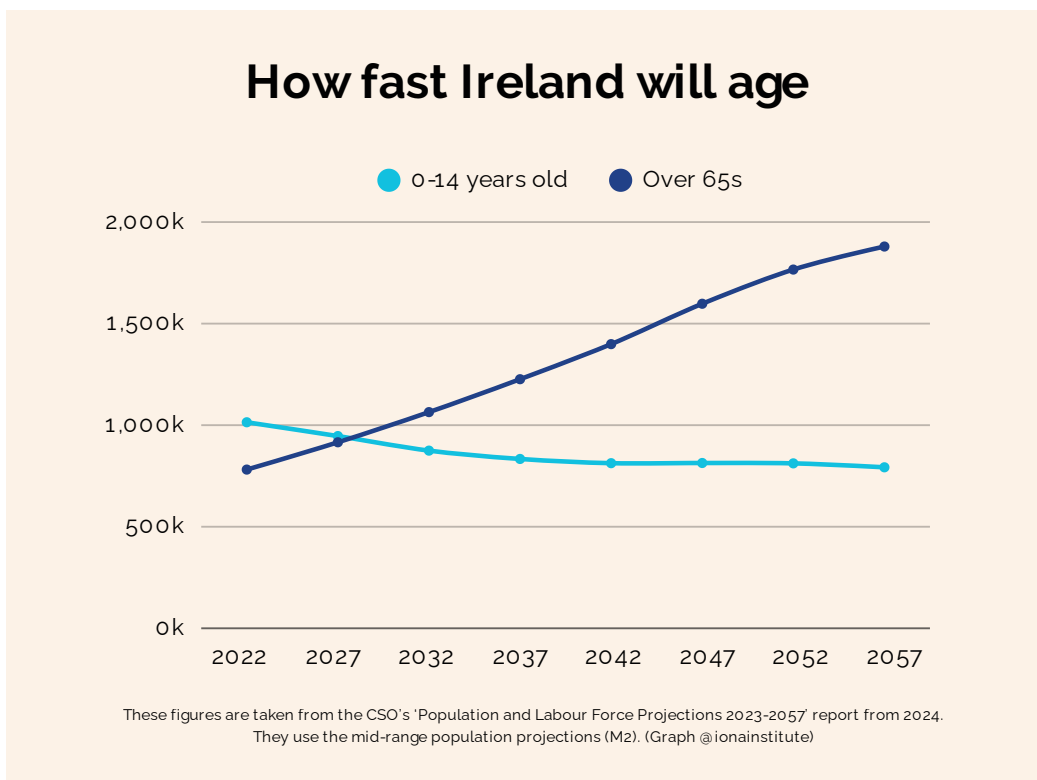


Generational Imbalance

The balance between generations will also change dramatically.

In 2023, just 15pc of the Irish population was aged 65 or over. By 2057, that share will roughly double.⁷ This shift is largely driven by longer life expectancy, which is of course a positive development, but also by persistently low birth rates, which have serious long-term consequences.

How fast Ireland will age

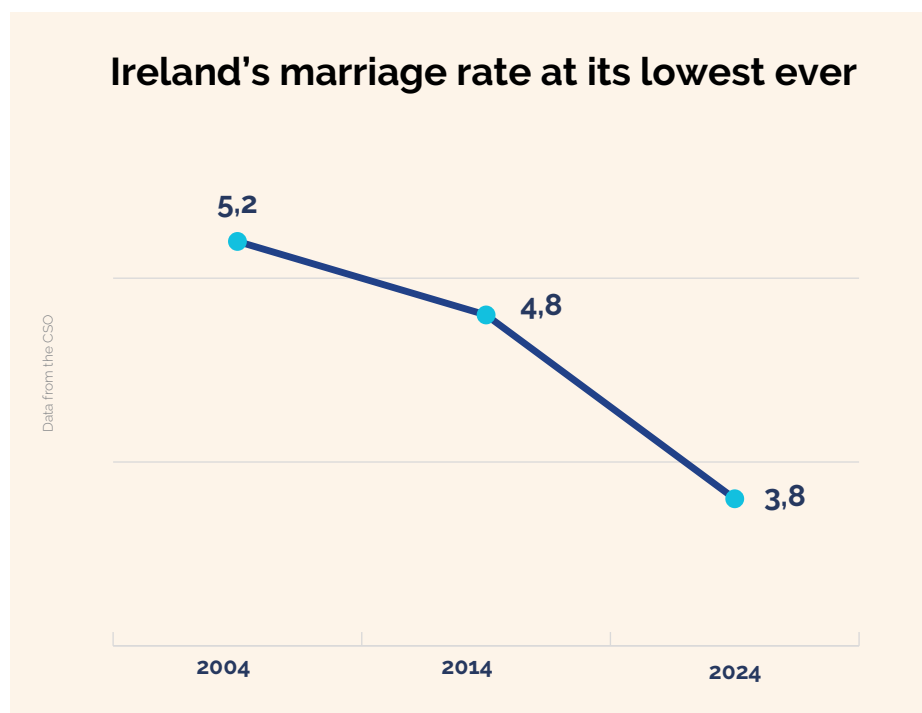


3. EVOLVING FAMILY AND MARRIAGE PATTERNS

Marriage Decline and Delay

Ireland's marriage rate has now reached its lowest ever level, not including the years of the pandemic when for a period weddings were not permitted.⁸

At 3.8 marriages per thousand adults last year, the rate has fallen below the EU average (4.0) and is very likely to fall even lower.⁹ The marriage rate was 5.2 in 2004 and 4.8 in 2014.



The age at first marriage has risen, and rates among those in their 20s have sharply declined.

The marriage rate among those in their early to mid-20s has dropped considerably in the last ten years alone. For males aged 20–24, the rate dropped from 4.1 to just 1.8 per 1,000 people, and for females in the same age group, from 8.1 to 2.6 per 1,000.

One may view this as a positive change, particularly if marrying in early to mid-twenties might be considered premature. However, we have also seen a big decline in marriage rates among those in their mid to late-20s. Among males aged 25–29 it has dropped from 29.7 per 1,000 to 13.9 since 2014, and among females in this age cohort from 39.8 to 21.8 per 1,000.

While marriage rates among individuals in their twenties have declined, a modest rebound occurs in the late thirties. Indeed, significantly more people marry between ages 30 and 39 than in their twenties. However, the increase is insufficient to offset the overall decline in marriage rates among younger cohorts.

Among individuals aged 30–34, marriage rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade. For males, the rate declined slightly from 49.3 to 43.5 per 1,000, while for females, there was a marginal increase from 44.3 to 44.9 per 1,000. In the 35–39 age cohort, male marriage rates decreased modestly from 24.1 to 23.7 per 1,000, whereas the rate for females rose slightly from 17.5 to 17.8 per 1,000.



These figures suggest two concurrent trends:

- Firstly, individuals are postponing marriage until later in life.
- Secondly, the overall proportion of the population choosing or finding the opportunity to marry is declining. Both trends are expected to persist.

Cultural shifts, economic uncertainty, and changing personal priorities have all contributed to those transformations.

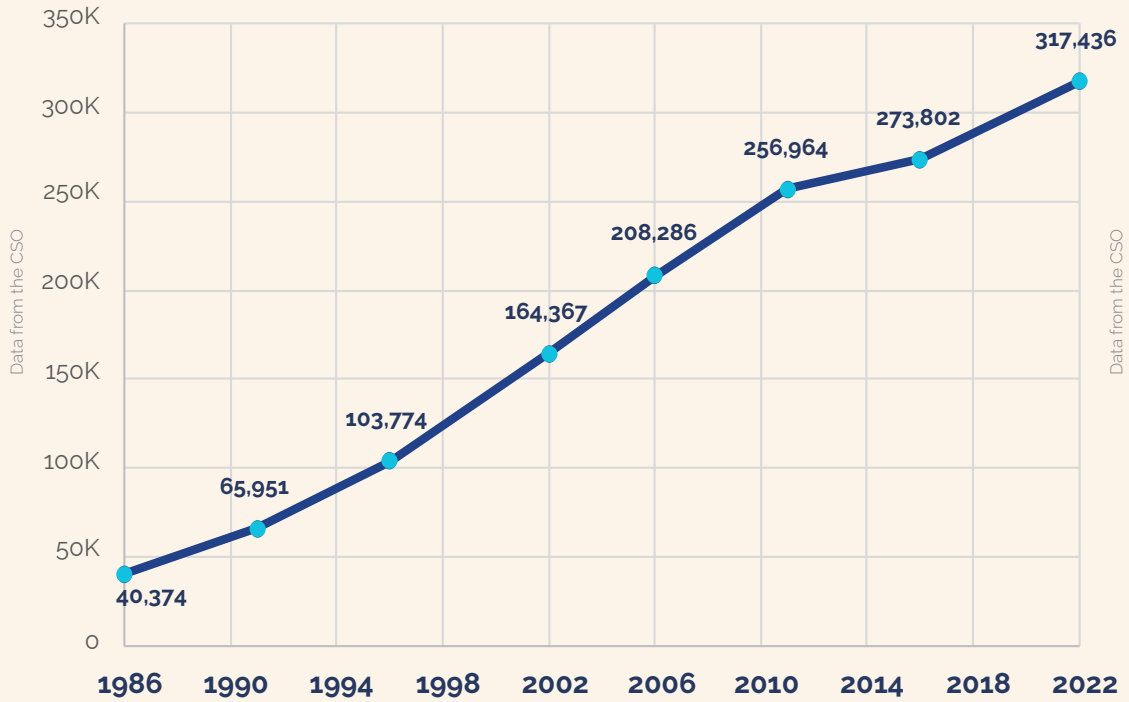
Divorce, Separation, and Lone Parenthood

The number of people who were registered as divorced or separated increased from 40,374 in 1986 to 252,872 in 2022, according to Census data.¹⁰ To this figure should be added those who were registered as remarried following divorce, which went from 15,982 in 1996 to 64,564 in 2022.

Single-parent families have also risen dramatically, from 104,713 in 1986 to nearly 240,000 in 2023.¹¹

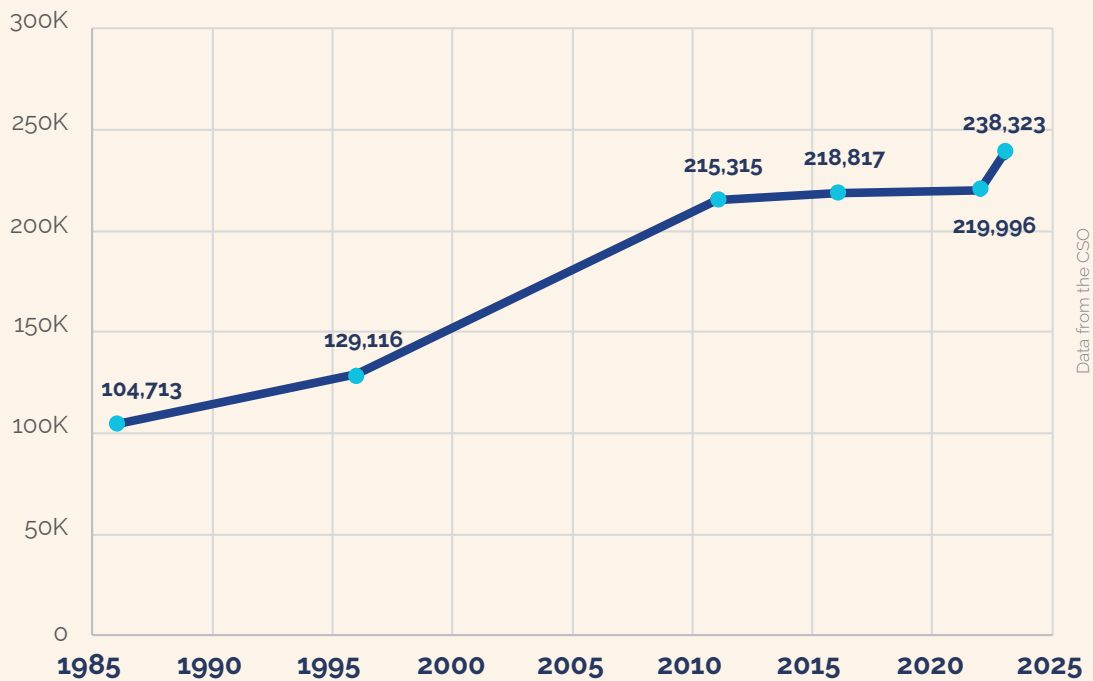


Ever divorced or separated (1984-2024)



(Note: The CSO no longer records the number who have remarried after a spouse dies. Based on previous years, we put the number for 2016 and 2022 at 10,000)

Single parent families (1985-2025)





In 2010 there was roughly one divorce application for every five or so new marriages; today, it is one for every four.

There are many ways to measure divorce rates. For instance, we often hear that the divorce rate in Ireland is quite low and stable, compared to other countries. The crude divorce rate, a commonly cited figure, is expressed as a percentage of every 1,000 people who divorce in a given year, and it is about 0.7 in Ireland. In other words, there are 7 divorces for every 10,000 people annually.

But the crude divorce rate can be misleading, especially in societies where fewer people are marrying. It includes the entire population, married or not, making it a fairly blunt tool for understanding real marital dynamics. A possibly more revealing statistic is the divorce-to-marriage ratio, which more accurately reflects the dramatic changes of the past 15 years in Ireland.

In 2010, there were 3,881 divorce applications and 20,594 marriages, giving a ratio of 18.8pc. By 2024, that ratio had increased to 24.6pc, with 5,004 divorce applications and 20,348 marriages recorded. In other words, in 2010 there was roughly one divorce application for every five or so new marriages; today, it is one for every four.



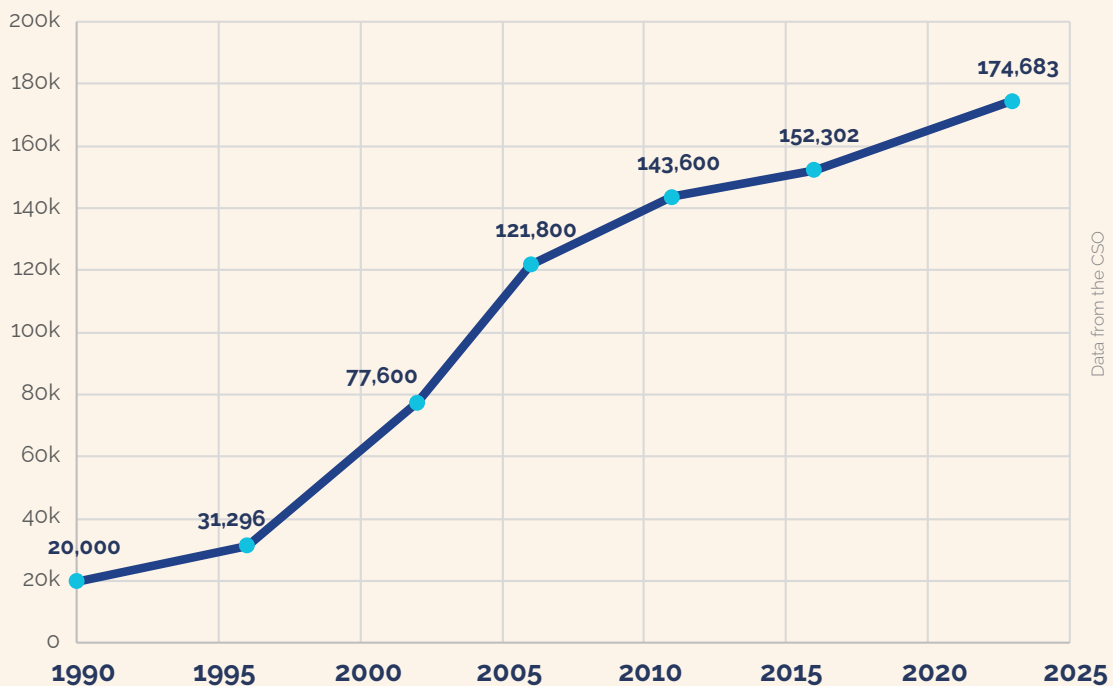
Rise of Cohabitation

The number of cohabiting couples increased more than tenfold, from 20,000 in 1990 to nearly 175,000 in 2023. For many, cohabitation has become a preferred alternative to formal marriage, signalling a shift in societal norms regarding relationships.

Historically, fertility rates tend to follow marriage rates, typically declining in parallel. Cohabiting couples tend to have fewer children compared to married couples. It is primarily with a return to marriage that births might also increase.



Cohabiting couples (1990-2025)



CONCLUSION

The Ireland of today is markedly different from that of a generation ago. Declining fertility, population ageing, new family structures, and waning institutional religion together paint a picture of a society in transition. These trends, especially demographic imbalances, raise urgent questions for the country's future. Understanding and addressing these interconnected trends is vital for shaping a sustainable and cohesive Ireland.



- 1 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/stat_05_136
- 2 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-vs/vs/vitalstatisticsyearlysummary2024/>
- 3 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics
- 4 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_find/default/table?lang=en
- 5 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/demography-2024#population-structure>
- 6 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-plfp/populationandlabourforceprojections2023-2057/>
- 7 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-plfp/populationandlabourforceprojections2023-2057/populationprojectionsresults/>
- 8 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mar/marriages2024/mainresults/>
- 9 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00206/default/table?lang=en>
- 10 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/householdsizeandmaritalstatus> These figures represent individuals currently in that civil status and do not include those who have remarried or are deceased.
- 11 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-ipeads/irishpopulationestimatesfromadministrativedatasources2023/familiesandhouseholds/>

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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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