

CHOICE OR CIRCUMSTANCE?

RISING CHILDLESSNESS IN IRELAND





INTRODUCTION

Ireland was once characterised by a strong family formation culture. The data today tell a different story. Childlessness among Irish women has risen across successive generations, and on current trends close to one in four Gen Z women is projected to reach age 45 without having had a child.

This report presents that evidence, drawing on cohort-level data from the Human Fertility Database (HFD) and extending the analysis forward using demographic modelling.

Childlessness in this report refers to women who have not had a child by the time they reach age 45. This is the demographic threshold at which fertility is (for the overwhelming majority of women) biologically concluded. We sometimes show data to age 50, merely to illustrate how little it changes beyond that age. Childlessness captures women who:

1. Chose not to have children (voluntary childlessness), and
2. Wanted children but did not have them (involuntary childlessness).

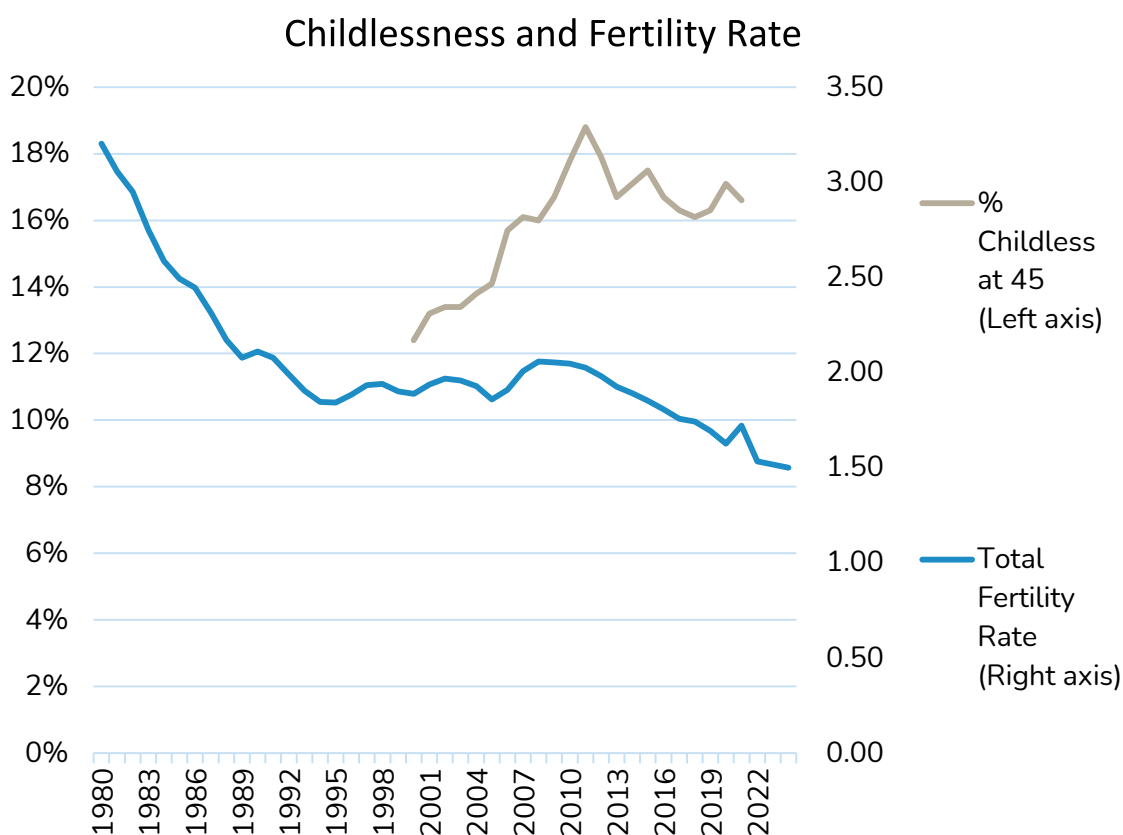
The Irish data do not allow us to distinguish between these groups. Voluntary childlessness is a valid personal choice while involuntary childlessness is often a source of significant personal distress. Both are increasing, and the policy response to each differs.

The causes of rising childlessness are many. Later marriage (or no marriage at all) is among the most significant structural drivers, even though many births are now outside marriage. Ireland is also experiencing the broader Western pattern of educational and career prioritisation delaying family formation, alongside rising housing costs that make family life more economically precarious. The decline in religious affiliation removes a cultural driver that historically encouraged earlier marriage and childbearing. These forces compound each other across generations.

A note about language: While this report refers to “women” throughout, it’s important to remember that all family formation trends involve both men and women. The constant reference to “women” might lead readers to posit that it’s mostly the decisions of women that influence these trends. It takes two to tango. Men should be considered equally in thinking about why these trends have emerged. Since women are the only ones who bear children, only their data can be meaningfully analysed.

CHILDLESSNESS AND THE FERTILITY RATE

It is useful to first place the issue within the broader context of Irish fertility trends. Chart 1 below plots the percentage of women childless at age 45 (left axis) and Ireland’s Total Fertility Rate or TFR (right axis).



Source: Human Fertility Database / CSO / Iona Estimates

Chart 1: Childlessness at Age 45 and Total Fertility Rate, Ireland 1980-2022

Note: Chart 1 uses calendar year, the year in which a woman reached age 45 and the year in which the TFR was recorded. This is different from the year-of-birth approach used later in the report. A woman who reached age 45 in 2000 was born in 1955.



Irish women are, on average, having significantly fewer children than their mothers' generations.

Ireland's TFR fell steeply from 3.2 in 1980 to 1.9 by the year 2000. While it rebounded slightly through the financial crash, it has continued to decline in the years since, reaching 1.5 in 2024 (well below the replacement level of 2.1). The trajectory is unambiguous. Irish women are, on average, having significantly fewer children than their mothers' generations.

Childlessness at age 45 tells a more complex story. It was 12% around the year 2000 when the series began. This refers to women born in 1955 (Boomer generation). It rose progressively through the 2000s to peak at 18% in 2011. This was the generation of Gen X women born in the 1960s who entered adulthood during the 1980s, when the aforementioned decline in fertility took place. It suggests that the 1980s wasn't just a trend of falling family size, it was fewer women starting families at all. The picture in the years since is mixed. Childlessness at age 45 has fallen modestly to 17%. It is still elevated compared to past generations.



ACTUAL TRENDS IN CHILDLESSNESS

The following data track groups of women by generation of birth year and observes how their childlessness rates have evolved as they aged. This is a more informative lens than aggregate statistics, because it allows us to compare like with like across generations. It also reveals how childlessness develops as women move through their childbearing years.

Note: The cohorts are labelled by approximate birth period (e.g. 'Late 1950s', 'Early 1970s') rather than exact birth year. The underlying data use specific representative birth years (1957, 1962, 1967 and so on).

% of Women Childless by Age Cohort and Generation (Actual)

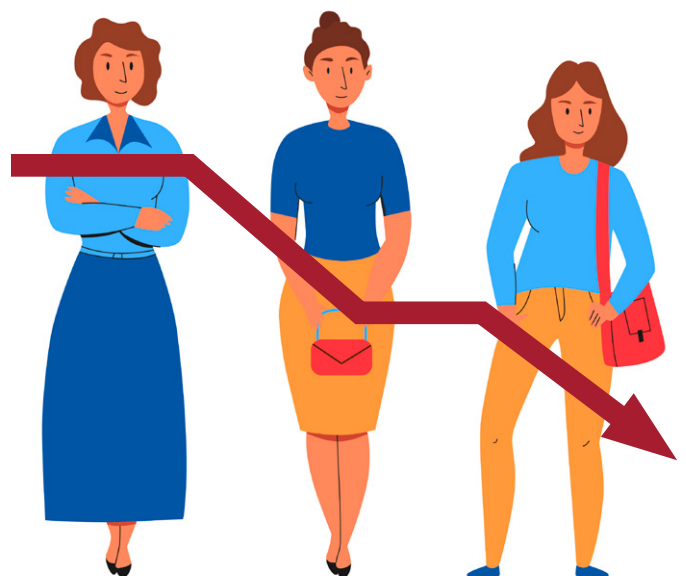
Generation	Born	25	30	35	40	45	50
Boomer	Late 1950s	58.5%	30.9%	18.2%	14.4%	13.5%	13.4%
Boomer	Early 1960s	65.8%	38.9%	23.6%	17.7%	16.2%	16.1%
Gen X	Late 1960s	74.4%	50.1%	29.0%	20.3%	18.2%	18.0%
Gen X	Early 1970s	77.1%	54.6%	30.5%	19.1%	16.7%	16.3%
Gen X	Late 1970s	75.8%	56.0%	29.7%	18.1%	15.5%	
Millennial	Early 1980s	75.8%	53.6%	29.2%	17.2%		
Millennial	Late 1980s	75.9%	57.6%	32.3%			
Millennial	Early 1990s	80.4%	63.6%				
Gen Z	Late 1990s	86.7%					

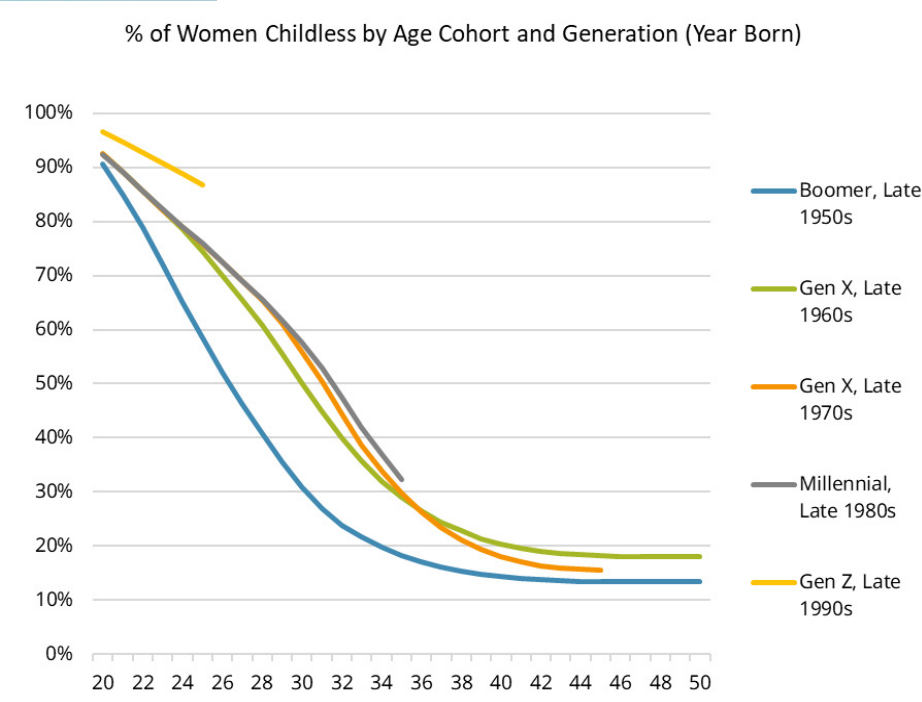
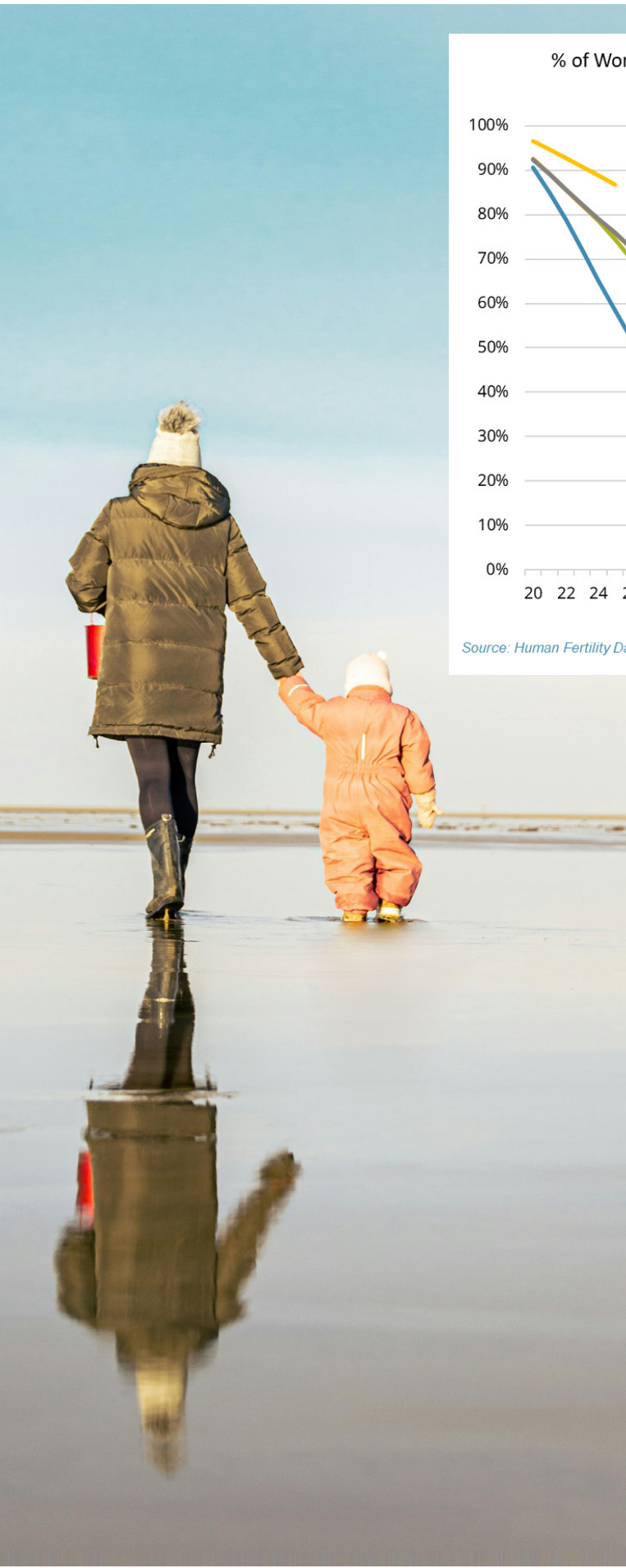
Table 1: % of Women Childless by Age and Cohort (Actual)

Several features of the data stand out. For Boomer women (Late 1950s cohort), childlessness had fallen to 13.5% by age 45. The early 1960s cohort saw a slightly higher rate of 16.2%, reflecting the social transitions of the 1980s. The pattern across Gen X shows childlessness at 45 ranging from 15.5% to 18.2%.

Among Millennials, it is notable that they have reached age 30 with a rate of childlessness between 53.6% and 63.6%. This was much higher than the Boomers, only 30.9% of whom were childless at age 30.

For Gen Z women (Late 1990s cohort), 86.7% of women born were childless at age 25. It was once as low as 58.5% among the earliest Boomer generation.





Source: Human Fertility Database (HFD) / Iona Estimates

Chart 2: % of Women Childless by Age Cohort and Generation (Actual)

Chart 2 plots the same data as Table 1 as declining curves from age 20 to age 50. Each cohort begins above 90% childless at aged 20. The curves decline through the 20s and 30s before flattening after 40. The Boomer curve reaches the lowest final value (the fewest women childless by age 45-50). The Gen Z curve begins at a considerably higher starting point than any prior generation, signalling higher eventual childlessness.

The key insight from Chart 2 is the shape of the curves. Women aren't just delaying childbearing and catching up by their mid-40s. A larger proportion are ending up childless.

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FORECASTED TRENDS IN CHILDLESSNESS

Methodology

Forecasting childlessness for cohorts that have not yet completed their reproductive lifecycles requires a method that goes beyond simple trend extrapolation. This report uses the Brass Relational Model¹. Across observed cohorts, the trajectory of childlessness across a woman’s lifetime follows a predictable curve. High in the early 20s, declining steeply through their 30s as they have children, and then flattening to a stable floor by the mid-40s. While the level of that floor varies across generations, the shape of the curve follows a pattern.

For cohorts where partial data is available, the model uses observed data points at earlier ages (e.g. 25 and 30) and projects the remainder of the curve. For Gen Z women (born in the late 1990s), only the ages 20 and 25 are available, making the forecast more sensitive to model assumptions.

Important caveat: *the Brass Relational Model projects what will happen if current trends continue. It is not a prediction that outcomes are fixed. Changes in policy, housing conditions, cultural norms, or the economics of family formation could alter the trajectory. The projections should be read as a description of where current trends lead. It's not a certain destiny.*

Forecast Data

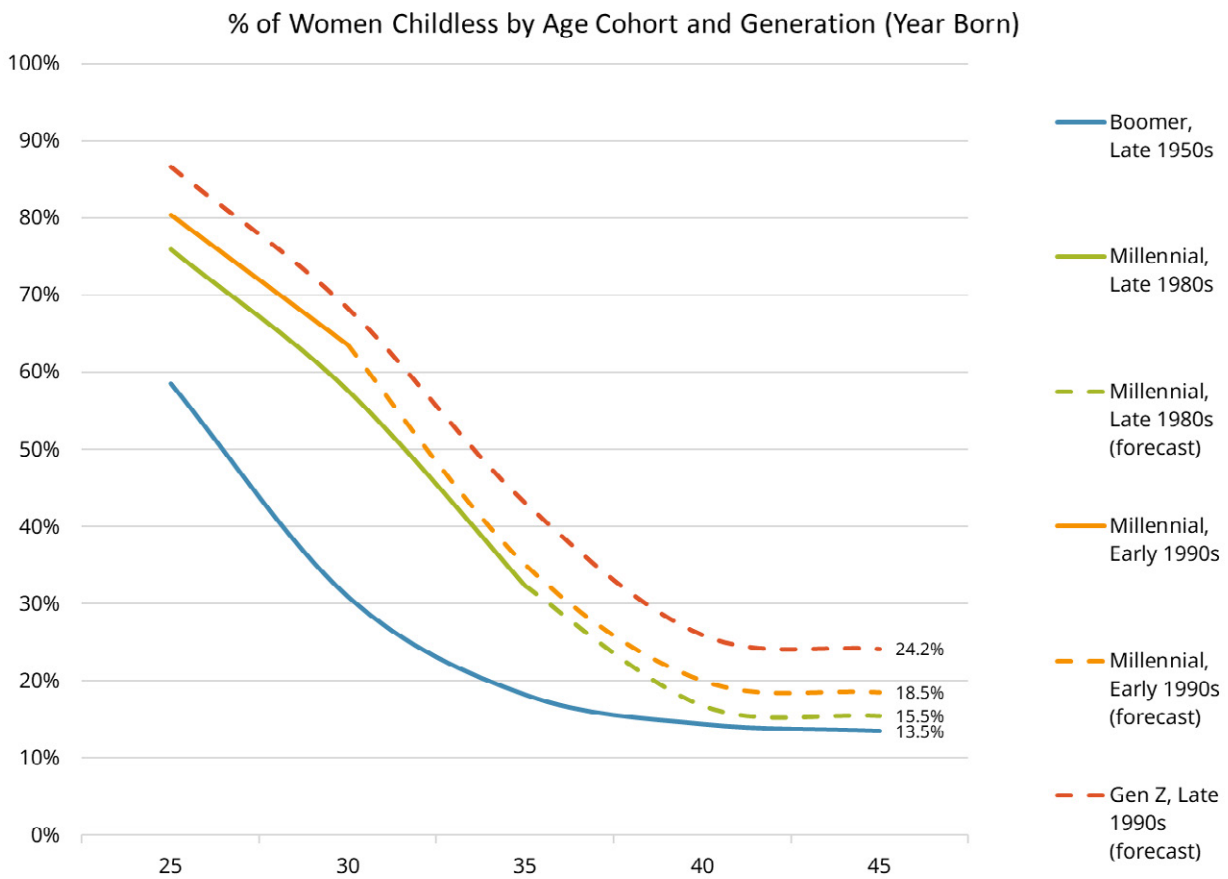
Table 2 extends Table 1 by adding projected values for the ages that Millennial and Gen Z cohorts have not yet reached. The trajectory is clear. Childlessness at age 45 rises from 13.5% for Boomer women (born in the late 1950s) to a projected 24.2% for Gen Z women (born in the late 1990s).

% of Women Childless by Age Cohort and Generation (Actual and Predicted)

Generation	Born	Age 25	Age 30	Age 35	Age 40	Age 45	Age 50
Boomer	Late 1950s	58.5%	30.9%	18.2%	14.4%	13.5%	13.4%
Boomer	Early 1960s	65.8%	38.9%	23.6%	17.7%	16.2%	16.1%
Gen X	Late 1960s	74.4%	50.1%	29.0%	20.3%	18.2%	18.0%
Gen X	Early 1970s	77.1%	54.6%	30.5%	19.1%	16.7%	16.3%
Gen X	Late 1970s	75.8%	56.0%	29.7%	18.1%	15.5%	15.5%
Millennial	Early 1980s	75.8%	53.6%	29.2%	17.2%	14.6%	14.6%
Millennial	Late 1980s	75.9%	57.6%	32.3%	16.8%	15.5%	15.5%
Millennial	Early 1990s	80.4%	63.6%	35.1%	20.0%	18.5%	18.5%
Gen Z	Late 1990s	86.7%	68.3%	43.1%	26.0%	24.2%	24.2%

Table 2: % of Women Childless by Age and Cohort (Actual and Predicted)

1 The Brass Relational Model (or Brass Logit System) is a demographic method used to estimate or smooth life tables, particularly in cases with incomplete or poor-quality demographic data. Developed by William Brass in 1971, it assumes that human mortality and fertility patterns are fundamentally similar and can be related through a linear transformation.

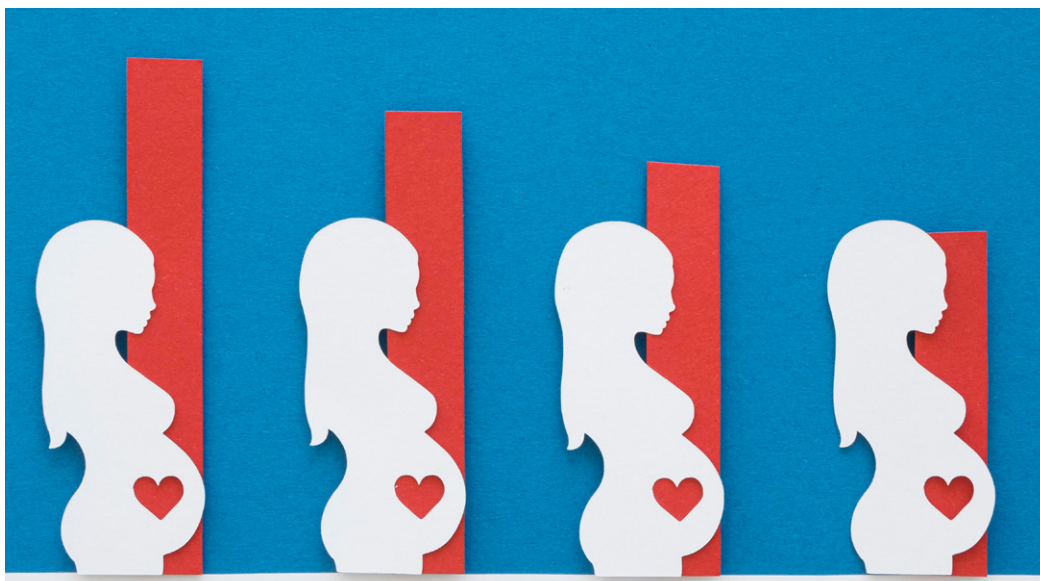


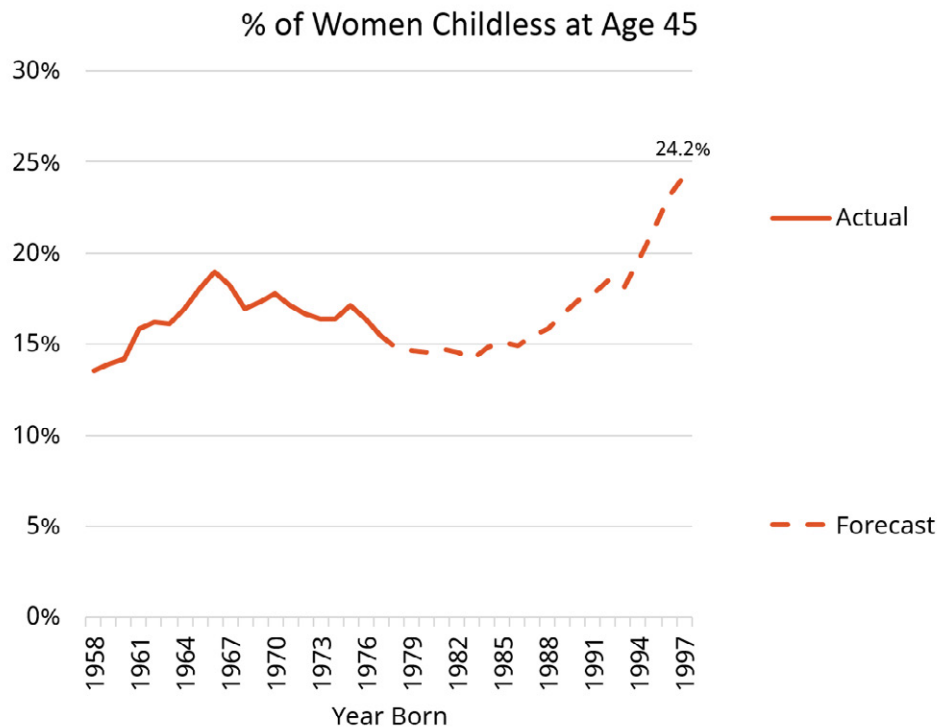
Source: Human Fertility Database / CSO / Iona Estimates

Chart 3: % of Women Childless by Age Cohort and Generation (Actual and Predicted)

The visual gap between the Boomer line and the Gen Z projection is the central finding of this analysis. Gen Z Irish women are on course for an historically high level of childlessness.

Chart 4 plots the projected childlessness rate at age 45 for every birth cohort from 1957 to 1997. It's the full arc from Boomer women who have already completed their reproductive lifecycles to Gen Z women (born in the late 1990s) who are currently in their late 20s.





Source: Human Fertility Database / CSO / Iona Estimates

Chart 4: % of Women Childless at Age 45 by Year Born, Actual and Forecast

This chart should be read as a forecast to the early 2040s when Gen Z women begin to turn 45. The anxiety of involuntary childlessness is set to emerge steadily through the 2030s, as increasing numbers of Gen Z women move through their 30s. Their encountering of fertility challenges is already coinciding with a booming industry of fertility treatments. This will help some, but not all.

Within the Gen Z cohort, there will be a proportion who have actively chosen not to have children. The data do not allow us to separate this group. However, at these high levels, it strongly suggests a rise in involuntary childlessness. The very fact that a lot of women are now turning to fertility treatments in their late 30s and older is proof that much of the childlessness we are seeing, and will see, is involuntary.

In addition, a poll conducted by Amarach Research on behalf of the Iona Institute in 2022, showed that 85% of people would ideally like two or more children, which further buttresses the idea that a lot of childlessness (or having fewer children than you would like) is not chosen.

There are downstream implications for social cohesion and demographic sustainability. As documented, falling marriage rates are a significant structural driver of rising childlessness. Fewer men and women entering stable partnerships in their mid-to-late 20s naturally reduces the window for family formation.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS: FISCAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

The most fundamental social consequence of higher childlessness is demographic. Ireland's population is ageing. Lower fertility rates, combined with rising childlessness, mean that the ratio of working-age adults to elderly dependants is set to worsen over the medium term. Fewer births today mean fewer workers in 20 to 30 years' time. The dependency ratio (the proportion of people aged 65 and over, relative to those aged 15-64) will rise in Ireland as in most developed economies. The implication for public finances is unquestionable. A smaller working-age population will be asked to support a larger elderly population through the tax and social insurance system, putting pension sustainability, healthcare funding, and long-term care provision under growing pressure.

Housing and household formation patterns will also be affected. A rise in the proportion of adults who never have children tends to increase demand for smaller dwellings and single-person households. Planning frameworks, housing mix policy, and social housing provision may all require recalibration if childlessness continues to rise.

In recent decades, Ireland has used inward migration to offset demographic shortfalls in its labour force. This has been an effective and economically rational response in periods of strong demand. However, migration is not a structural solution to declining fertility. It addresses labour supply in the short to medium term but does not resolve the underlying demographic dynamic. A reliance on migration to compensate for structural childlessness is, at best, a temporary sticking plaster.

It bears repeating that projections are conditional on current trends. Policy and social trends independent of policy can alter trajectories. Countries that have invested seriously in family-friendly infrastructure (affordable housing for young families, accessible and high-quality childcare, flexible employment conditions, and tangible support for the costs of raising children) have seen only modest moves in their fertility rates.

We must also consider the personal pain a lot of women and men will feel if they do not fulfil their wish to have children.



Planning frameworks, housing mix policy, and social housing provision may all require recalibration if childlessness continues to rise.





CONCLUSION

The data presented in this report point to a clear, consistent, and concerning trajectory. Childlessness among Irish women is rising and there is no sign of a turnaround.

Each passing generation of women has entered its 30s with higher childlessness. Our modelling gives us reasonable grounds to anticipate that this pattern will continue. Modelling is not destiny, but it is a powerful indicator of where present conditions lead. This analysis should be read as a clear signal that the present conditions are producing an outcome that warrants serious attention.

If one in four women never has children, then the fertility rate for all other women must climb to maintain the overall fertility rate at replacement rate (2.1 children per woman). This would mean all other women needing a fertility rate of 2.8. The conditions for a widespread attainment of three-child families do not appear likely. This points to an inevitable conclusion. Such high childlessness undoubtedly means a further fall in the overall fertility rate.

An ageing population, a worsening dependency ratio, and the fiscal pressures that follow are not abstract concerns. They will manifest in real policy trade-offs within the working lifetimes of the very generation whose childlessness this report documents. The Gen Z women projected to reach age 45 without children in the 2030s and 2040s will also be the workers and taxpayers funding the pensions and healthcare of a proportionally larger elderly population.

Ireland has faced demographic challenges before and adapted. The question now is whether society has the will to respond.

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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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