

Family formation and dissolution in Europe: Scotland in a European context

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This Research Finding draws together existing data on patterns of family formation and dissolution across Europe. It sets the pattern of change in Scotland in partnership and parenting in its wider European context. This follows an earlier research finding which focuses on family formation and dissolution in Scotland specifically. This Finding can be downloaded at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/resfinds/1sf43-00.asp>.

Main Findings

- In most European countries, including Scotland, family structures are becoming more diverse, cohabitation is increasing, there are increasing numbers of children born out-with marriage and there are more single person households than in the past. However, these general trends overlook some marked differences between countries.
- Throughout Europe (as in Scotland), there has been a trend towards smaller households, with the EU-15 average declining from 2.8 to 2.4 between 1981/82 and 2002. In Scotland, the average household size in 2004 was 2.2. As we have witnessed in Scotland, household composition has also changed throughout Europe, with a typical pattern of more small households consisting of one person or a lone parent and children, and fewer married couple households.
- The recent Scottish pattern of fewer and later marriages is reflected throughout Europe. Looking at the 15 countries of the EU overall in 2001, before the accession of the Eastern European countries, we see a marked decline of more than a third in the number of marriages over a thirty year period, from nearly 8 per 1000 people in 1970 to 5 per 1000 people in 2001.
- The recent pattern in Scotland of later marriages is also typical of EU countries, and for similar reasons. For example, more people cohabit before they marry and more marriages are remarriages, where the partners are typically older than first marriages.
- Divorce rates throughout Europe climbed overall between 1960 and the mid 1980s and the risk of divorce for newer cohorts of marriages is higher than for older marriages. More recently since the mid-1980s, the growth in the numbers of divorces has slowed or remained steady or showed a modest decline. However, this does not reflect the full extent of relationship breakdown where cohabitation rates are high.
- Throughout Europe, more couples than in the past are living together as unmarried cohabitantes—about 9% of all couples across the EU. However, these rates vary across the member states, ranging from over 20% in Sweden and Finland to very few in the Southern countries. In Scotland, approximately 7% of households were cohabiting couples (with or without dependents) in 2001.
- Whether cohabitation is also a setting in which couples have children also varies across the EU. Generally where cohabitation rates are high, there are higher proportions of cohabiting couples with children. Thus, it is much more common for cohabiting couples in Nordic countries to have children than in southern countries, with more children living with unmarried cohabiting parents.
- Partly as a result of later parenthood, but also for other social and economic reasons that are not entirely understood, couples across the EU are having fewer children than previously. Scotland's fertility rate is about average within the EU.

Introduction

The substantial scale of change in family structures and living arrangements that we have witnessed in Scotland over the last generation has been mirrored across the countries of the European Community. In other countries family structures are becoming more diverse, cohabitation is increasing, there are increasing numbers of children born out-with marriage and there are more single person households than in the past. However, these general trends overlook some marked differences between countries.

This briefing will set the pattern of change in Scotland in both partnership formation and dissolution and parenting in its wider European context. It is written as a companion to an earlier Research Finding: Family formation and dissolution: Trends and attitudes among the Scottish population Research Finding 43, available on the Scottish Executive website: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/resfinds/lfsf43-00.asp>.

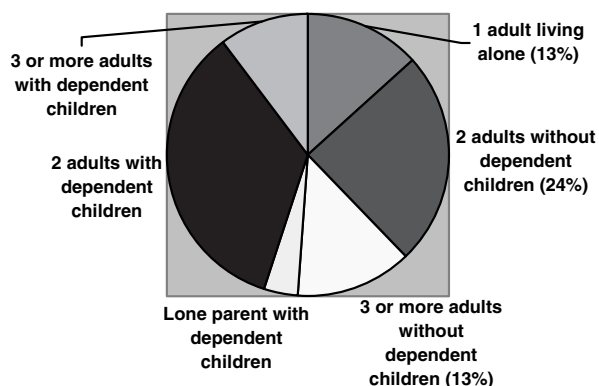
In looking at patterns of family life across Europe, policy analysts find it useful to group countries with others that share similar patterns of family formation and dissolution and these countries are usually (but not always) geographically close to each other. Three groups of countries in the European Union have been identified in the study *Diverse Europe* (2005), with Scotland and the UK in the middle category.

- **Nordic states:** including Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands
- **North/central states:** including the UK; Belgium; Luxembourg; France; Germany and Austria
- **Southern countries:** including Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and also Ireland.

Smaller households and greater diversity

Throughout Europe, there has been a trend towards smaller households, with the EU-15 average declining from 2.8 to 2.4 between 1981/82 and 2002. While the average household size has declined in all EU-15 countries, it has been from different starting points. The typical household size is lowest in the Nordic states, with an average of 2.2 in

Figure 1. Population living in private household type, EU15, 2002



Source: Eurostat: Living Conditions in Europe 1998-2002 (2003), p. 19.

Sweden, and 2.5 in Denmark, compared with larger households in the North/central group, where the UK is typical at 2.8. In Scotland, the average household size in 2004 was 2.2; this is projected to reduce further to 2.1 by 2012.¹ Larger households are found in the Southern countries, such as Spain with an average household size of 3.8 or Ireland with an average of 4 people per household.²

As we have witnessed in Scotland, household composition has also changed throughout Europe, with a typical pattern of more small households consisting of one person or a lone parent and children, and fewer married couple households. 34% of all people across the EU in 2002 lived in a household consisting of a couple with dependent children, whereas 4% lived in lone parent households and 13% lived in one person households (Figure 1).³

On the other hand, larger households of three or more adults are more common in Southern countries, accounting in 1999 for nearly 40% of households in Italy and Spain, but only 8% in Denmark and Sweden.⁴

Partnership and marriage

Partnership formation varies across Europe in its timing and type of partnership. While marriage is the usual first step of partnership formation in some European countries, unmarried cohabitation is more usual elsewhere. Broadly speaking, cohabitation is the most common first step of partnership formation in the Nordic countries, but relatively uncommon in the Southern countries, where the norm is to begin a partnership as a marriage. The North/central states occupy a middle position, but one where pre-marital cohabitation is also the norm.

The recent Scottish pattern of fewer and later marriages is reflected throughout Europe. Looking at the 15 countries of the EU overall in 2001, before the accession of the Eastern European countries, we see a marked decline of more than a third in the number of marriages over a thirty year period, from nearly 8 per 1000 population in 1970 to 5 per 1000 population in 2001.⁵ The UK is at the European mean. While the number of marriages has decreased in all countries, the decline is sharper in some countries, such as the Netherlands, where the number of marriages has declined from 9.5 per 1000 people in 1970 to 5.1. In others, such as Denmark, the decline has been less steep, from 7.4 in 1970 to 6.6 in 2001, marriages per 1000 people.

The recent pattern in Scotland of later marriages is also typical of EU countries, and for similar reasons, such as more people cohabit before they marry and more marriages are remarriages where the partners are typically older than first marriages. At opposite ends of the spectrum are Sweden, where the average age at first marriage for women went up from 26 in 1980 to 30 in 2000, and for men from 29 to 32⁶ and Belgium, where over the same period the

1 Scottish Executive Housing Statistics: 2000- based

2 Berthoud, Richard and Maria Iacovou, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex *Diverse Europe: mapping patterns of social change across the EU* (2005) London: ESRC European Panel Analysis Group: <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/epag/pubs/reports/index.php>.

3 Eurostat: Living Conditions in Europe 1998-2002 (2003)

4 Iacovou, Maria, 'Patterns of family living' in Berthoud, Richard and Maria Iacovou, eds. (2004) *Social Europe: Living Standards and Welfare States*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

5 Eurostat Yearbook 2003; 87.

average age of first marriage for women went up from 22 to 26, and for men from 24 to 28.

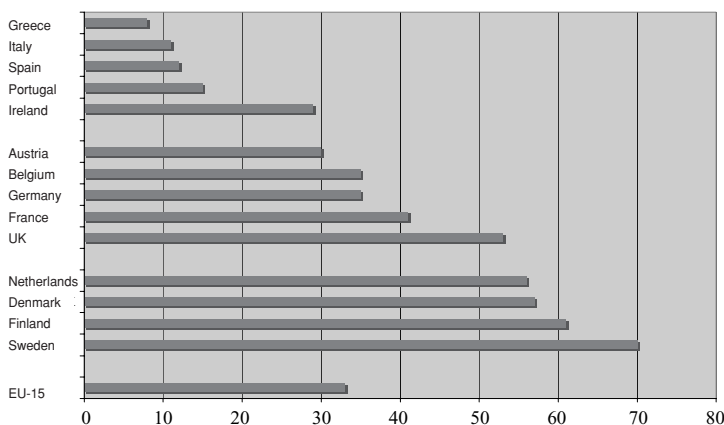
Divorce

Divorce rates throughout Europe climbed overall between 1960 and the mid 1980s and the risk of divorce for newer cohorts of marriages is higher than for older marriages. For example, across the EU-15, 15% couples who married in 1960 got divorced, compared with nearly double that rate, 29% of couples, who married in 1984. Divorce rates also vary across the EU, with the Nordic states the highest (e.g. Sweden, 52%) and the Southern states the lowest (e.g. Italy 9%). Atypical for its middle position, the UK rate was also high (23% of 1960 marriages ending in divorce, 42% of those in 1984). More recently, since the mid-1980s, the growth in the numbers of divorces has slowed or remained steady or showed a modest decline. However, divorce rates don't reflect the full extent of relationship breakdown where cohabitation rates are high.

Cohabitation

Throughout Europe, more couples than in the past are living together as unmarried cohabitantes—about 9% of all couples across the EU.⁷ However, these rates vary across the member states, ranging from over 20% in Sweden and Finland to very few in the Southern countries. In Scotland, approximately 7% of households were cohabiting couples (with or without dependents) in 2001. Cohabitation is becoming an increasingly common first stage of partnership formation, but the extent to which cohabitation is developing as a substitute for marriage varies considerably.

Figure 2. Percentage of couples aged 16-29 who are cohabiting, EU-15, 1998



Source: Eurostat: Living Conditions in Europe 1998-2002 (2003), p. 22.

For younger couples, cohabitation is much more common, with a similar pattern of variation between countries. One study⁸ found in its analysis of the ECHP that of women in their twenties who live with a partner, 92% in Sweden, 79% in Denmark and Finland are cohabiting, whereas only 5% in Italy and 6% in Portugal are cohabiting. Other data sources also

confirm from a slightly different perspective that the balance between cohabitation and marriage for younger couples varies. For example in 1998, the percentage of couples aged under 30 who were cohabiting but unmarried ranged from the high rates of 70% in Sweden, 57% in Denmark, 61% in Finland, 56% in the Netherlands to low rates for Southern countries (8% Greece, 11% Italy, 12% Spain, 15% Portugal) (Eurostat 2004). The proportion in the UK was 53%.

Whether cohabitation is also a setting in which couples have children also varies across the EU, with the broad pattern that countries with high cohabitation rates also have higher proportions of cohabiting couples with children. Thus, it is much more common for unmarried cohabiting couples in Nordic countries to have children than in southern countries. For example, in Denmark, 17% of all children in 1999 lived with unmarried cohabiting parents, compared with fewer than 2% of children in Italy and Spain⁹

Parenthood

The Scottish pattern of later parenthood has parallels in the EU-15 generally and is linked to later partnership formation. However, the age at which most women have children varies across Europe. In the UK and Austria, fertility is the earliest, with half of all women having children by the age of 27. In contrast, in the Netherlands and Italy, it is not until the age of 30 that half of all women have children¹⁰. Further, the proportion of women who remain childless has been on the increase in a number of European countries, including Scotland. In other countries this proportion has remained relatively constant.

Fewer children

Partly as a result of later parenthood, but also for other social and economic reasons that are not entirely understood, couples across the EU are having fewer children than previously. This is evident in statistics on both total fertility rates (TFR) and completed fertility rates (CFR). The number of babies born in the EU in 2001 was one of the lowest post-war levels and the overall EU-15 fertility rate fell from 2.6 in 1960 to less than 1.5 in 2001. The fall has been the sharpest in the southern countries, falling since the 1980s by one third to nearly one half.¹¹ Scotland's fertility rate is about average within the EU. The total fertility rate in Scotland is 1.5.

Births outside marriage

The proportion of children born outside marriage has increased throughout the EU, from 6% of all births in 1970 to 28% in 2000. However, the variation across countries is quite large. Over the same period, the proportions in Sweden increased from 19% to 55%, whereas for Greece at the other end of the spectrum, the increase was from 1% to 4% and Italy 2% to 10% (Figure 3). The UK began in the middle of the EU range and is now closer to the Nordic countries, with an increase from 8% to 40% births outside marriage. However,

6 Eurostat Yearbook 2003; 88

7 Living Conditions in Europe: Statistical Pocketbook, 1998-2002, Eurostat

8 Berthoud et al (2005) Diverse Europe

9 Iavocou 2004, p. 24

10 Berthoud, Diverse Europe; 17

11 Living Conditions in Europe Statistical pocketbook 1998-2002, (2003)

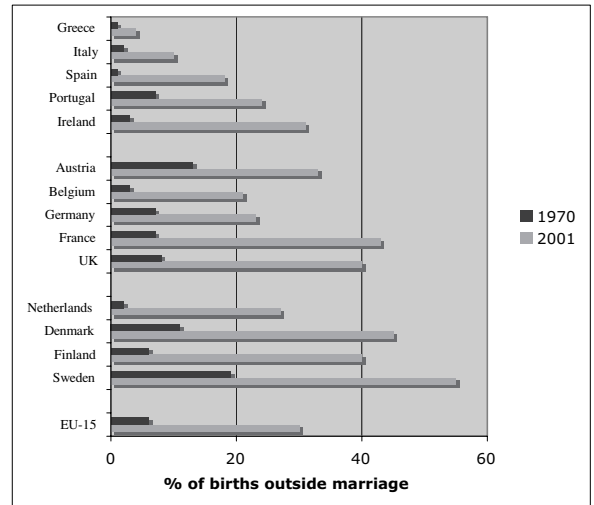
a large proportion of these births are to cohabiting parents. In Scotland, 45% of children were born to unmarried parents in 2003.

Step-parents and lone parents

As one might expect, step-parents are more commonly found in the Nordic countries and are infrequent in the Southern group. Lone parent families are a relatively uncommon living arrangement for children in Europe, with the UK having the highest proportion of children living in lone parent families (17% in 1998). In Finland, 12% of children live in lone parent families, compared with 8% of children in Italy and 5% in Greece.¹²

¹² lavocou 2004, p. 25

Figure 3. Percentage of births outside marriage, EU-15, 1970 and 2001.



Source: Eurostat: Living Conditions in Europe 1998-2002 (2003), p. 24

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