

Fertility in Contemporary Northern Ireland

Key Findings:

- this study was based on the fertility history of 157,000 women over the period 1997-2007;
- overlapping non-Catholic (NC) cohorts tend to be fairly similar (suggesting a stable fertility pattern) whereas the Catholic (C) cohorts are considerably more dispersed (signifying fertility is still changing): these differences are most marked for older age groups (see Figure overleaf);
- fertility patterns for the two religious communities seem to be converging in recent years: this is, in part, due to younger women who are postponing childbearing (see Figure overleaf);
- despite recent increases in the period fertility rate for NI, this research shows average parity (total number of births per woman) is declining: this reflects in part the association between higher educational attainment and the postponement of childbearing.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Catholic fertility has historically been higher than non-Catholic fertility in Northern Ireland and many other countries. For the purposes of this analysis, religion was based on an individual's community background as recorded in the 2001 Census, that is, their current religion or religion of upbringing. 'Non-Catholics' include those who assigned their community background as 'Protestant' and also those who stated they had 'No Religion'.

According to the 2001 Census, 40.3% of the population declared themselves as Catholic and 45.6% as other Christian denominations. Presbyterians, Church of Ireland and Methodists made up 86.7% of the latter. Of the 13.9% of the population that had no religion, or who refused to state it, 44% came from a Catholic background and 53% from a Protestant one.

The aims of this study are to:

- (1) look at the course of fertility of Catholics and non-Catholics over the period 1997-2007 and;
- (2) examine the extent of the convergence in fertility rates between the two communities.

The result was that the fertility history of over 157,000 women was studied over the period. Some preliminary findings are reported in the Figure overleaf that compares the average number of children that women have by age, cohort and religion.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

A longitudinal analysis was conducted using the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) which included over 157,000 women aged between 16 and 44 years at some time in the period 1997 to 2007.

Their births in each year were ascertained through linking their records with births data from the Northern Ireland General Register Office. Religion and other socio-economic characteristics were established through the linked 2001 Census returns. Information on the parity of women is not available from the census thus an indirect method was employed that used both the 2001 and 1991 Censuses as well as the births data.

To gauge change over time within, and between, the two communities, the sample was divided into cohorts to represent different time periods. For example, the cohort 83-87 was born in the years between 1983 and 1987 and by 2007 was aged between 20 and 24. For any age in a woman's childbearing period there are 3 overlapping cohorts. By comparing the average number of children a woman has at a particular age, say 30, by cohort it is possible to obtain an impression of how fertility is changing over time.

Thus Catholic women in the 68-72 cohort had on average 1.44 children when they were 30, compared to 1.20 for the cohort 73-77 and 1.15 for 78-82. This shows Catholic fertility is declining but so was that for non-Catholics for whom the corresponding figures were 1.26, 1.11 and 1.06. What is striking is the decline in the fertility of the older Catholic cohorts compared to the relative stability of the non-Catholic. Differential fertility at this time was declining sharply; for the youngest cohorts there is still a small but distinct differential.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Accurate forecasts of fertility have a major impact on all aspects of health and social services planning and can be used to improve the allocation of health and educational resources in terms of antenatal and postnatal provision and school places.

NORTHERN IRELAND LONGITUDINAL STUDY (NILS)

The NILS, a sister study to the Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS), is a large-scale record linkage study based on an approximate 28% sample of the Northern Ireland population (c. 500,000 individuals). Both studies allow exploration of health and socio-demographic characteristics.

The **NILS Research Support Unit** provides information, advice and support for users of the NILS and NIMS databases. Contact us at: www.nils-rsu.census.ac.uk.

Figure: Average Number of Children per Woman by Cohort, Religion and Age

