Demographic Transitions and Family Change in Ireland

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Abstract:

Demographic and family patterns in Ireland during most of the Twentieth Century were considered exceptional and a challenge to commonly held contentions about change. Ireland’s mortality rates were higher than the European norm and only gradually declined over time. The fertility rate did not drop substantially following the decline in mortality. Despite high fertility levels population size declined. Irish families were characterized as patriarchal, stem-extended, and large. Available data document most of these patterns in the past, but during the last half of the Twentieth Century rapid and broad population and family changes occurred. These changes are consistent with the Demographic Transition Pattern and the Convergence Pattern for families. Since the 1960s, Irish emigration, fertility, and mortality levels have moved closer to European norms and Irish families have become more democratic, smaller, more independent, the result of individual choice, and more diverse. Ireland began the Second Demographic Transition with gusto even before it completed the first transition. Many major influences on the population and families in the past, like emigration, dominance of rural livelihoods and private property relations, low incomes, the Constitution of 1937, and the Roman Catholic Church, are less powerful today. Factors that helped account for the recent changes include industrialization, urbanization, joining the European Union, feminism, more education, children becoming economic liabilities, married women entering the workforce, and utilization of contraceptives. Rapid economic development pressured individuals and families to make many changes. Major growth spurts in the economy during the 1990s can be traced back to the early 1960s when Ireland embarked on a program of industrial development based upon a free trade policy and in the 1970s to entering the European Economic Community. Once again Ireland has headed into a new century on a wave of rapid change.

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