

# **RECENT FERTILITY CHANGE IN IRELAND**

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## Abstract

Using data from vital statistics from the Republic of Ireland, this paper describes the substantial changes in marriage and fertility that have taken place in Ireland over the last twenty years. Between 1975 and 1995, the Total Fertility Rate in Ireland declined from 3.55 to 1.87, a decline of almost 50 percent that effectively ended Ireland's position as the high fertility outlier in Europe, a position it had held at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. This decline in overall fertility was the net result of sometimes dramatic changes in more refined indicators of fertility and marriage behavior. Both first marriage rates and marital fertility rates declined throughout the period. However, non-marital fertility increased among women of all reproductive ages, with 20 percent of all births in 1995 occurring to never-married women. Although changes in marriage, marital fertility and non-marital fertility all contributed to overall fertility change in Ireland, changes in marital fertility made the greatest contribution to the overall decline. Changing marriage patterns also contributed to lower fertility, whereas increases in non-marital had a smaller effect, in the opposite direction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, Ireland has been widely recognized as a demographic outlier in Western Europe. The Irish demographic regime in this century can be characterized by high rates of out migration, especially of women, late marriage, high rates of permanent celibacy, low rates of cohabitation, low rates of non-marital fertility, and very high rates of marital fertility. Although Ireland did experience some decline in fertility in the first half of the twentieth century, the decline was considerably less than those that took place elsewhere in Europe. In 1950, in spite of continuing late marriage and substantial permanent celibacy, Irish total fertility was still 3.3, among the highest in Europe. Throughout the 1970s, TFRs were still above three births per woman, and Ireland could still be described as the outlier in terms of European fertility.

However, Irish fertility began to change dramatically in the 1980s. Coleman (1992) and Murphy-Lawless (1987) have chronicled this rapid change; TFRs at the end of the decade of the 1980s were approaching replacement level, having been 3.2 at the start of the decade. Coleman (1992) and Murphy-Lawless (1995) were both confident that Irish fertility in the 1990s would drop below replacement level, converging with levels that had been

achieved decades earlier in other Western European countries. Our goal in this paper is to carry forward a descriptive examination of recent fertility change in Ireland into the 1990s, to determine if and when Ireland's fertility convergence with the rest of Western Europe was completed; we propose to extend the analyses of Coleman (1992) and Murphy-Lawless (1995) into the mid-1990s. Although we will allude to the broader social and economic changes that have accompanied Irish demographic change, we will reserve more extensive discussions of policy debates and policy changes that have taken place in Ireland in recent years for a subsequent paper. Issues related to access to contraception, access to information about abortion, and the legalization of divorce have been so much at the forefront of political debate in Ireland for the last 15 to 20 years that these issues warrant a full discussion beyond the scope of this descriptive paper (Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy, 1997).

### **IRISH FERTILITY: 1975 - 1995**

During the last two decades, from 1975 to 1995, fertility in Ireland fell by almost 50 percent: the Total Fertility Rate was 3.55 in 1975 and 1.87 in 1995. Data on each of these twenty years are presented in Figure 1. The greater part of the decline took place during the 1980s, when Total Fertility dropped from 3.23 in 1980 to 2.08 in 1989. Even within the decade of the 80s, the decline was concentrated in the first half of the decade; TFR reached 2.5 in 1985. After experiencing a slight increase from 2.08 in 1989 to 2.12 in 1990, TFR has

continued to decline, although it does appear that the rate of decline slowed once TFR dropped below 2.0, a slowing that is probably inevitable as fertility reaches such low levels. Clearly the absolute decline in TFR, equivalent to 1.15 births, that took place in the 1980s is not likely to be repeated in the 1990s.

**Age-specific fertility:** Table 1 sheds additional light on this decline by presenting patterns of age-specific fertility over the same period of time. The results show that fertility declined at all ages, with most of the decline concentrated in middle part of the reproductive age span, between 20 and 39. Fertility among the youngest Irish women, those 15 to 19, changed least from 1975 to 1995, declining from 22.7 per 1000 at the start to 15.4 per 1000 at the end of the period. Throughout the entire period, fertility among young Irish women was considerably lower than that experienced by young women in other industrial countries; in the mid-1990s adolescent fertility was twice as high in England and Wales and four times higher in the United States. Fertility among women of all other ages declined considerably. Absolute levels of decline among women 40-44 and 45-49 were less, but only because fertility at these ages was already low in 1975. The greatest absolute declines took place among women 20-24 and 25-29; from 141 and 227 per 1000 to 51 and 105, respectively. In relative terms, this amounts to fertility in 1995 that is only 36% and 46% of what it was in 1975. Somewhat smaller, but still considerable declines took place among women aged 30-34 and 35-39.

When describing overall changes in Irish Total Fertility Rates, using data from Figure 1, we observed that the decline in TFR has continued since 1990, but at a slower rate of decline than was observed through the 1980s. The more detailed, age-specific data presented in Table 1 show interesting differences between the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Among women at both ends of the reproductive age span, that is those 15-19 and 30 or over, fertility declines have very clearly leveled off since 1990. By contrast, declines among women in their 20s have continued. Considering data from each of the years between 1990 and 1995 (data not shown) reveals some differentiation with this rather narrowly defined group. Among women 20-24, fertility continued to decline through 1994, before turning up slightly in 1995. There is the possibility, considering data points for 1993, 1994 and 1995, that the decline among women 20-24 is leveling off. However, substantial fertility declines among women 25-29 continued through 1995, and show no signs of slowing, let alone leveling off. The slowing, in the 1990s, of the overall fertility decline is clearly the result of patterns that differ by age; during the 1990s, women in their 20s (especially those 25-29) continued to have substantially fewer children, whereas both younger and older women have experienced almost level fertility in the very recent past.

Figure 2 presents age-specific fertility data selected from the data in Table 1, but in a different format; namely a comparison of fertility schedules from 1975 and 1995. This Figure presents a clear summary of results reported above, and highlights one aspect of recent fertility changes that might not be

immediately clear from Table 1. Figure 2 shows that between 1975 and 1995 fertility in Ireland declined among women throughout their reproductive lives (the 1995 curve is below the 1975 curve at each point), and that declines were greatest among women in their 20s (the gap between the lines being greatest at those two points). Furthermore, Figure 2 demonstrates that the shape of the fertility distribution in Ireland has changed, as well as the level. From 1975 to 1995, the peak of the Irish fertility schedule has shifted from the 25-29 age group to the 30-34 age group.

**Changing Irish marriage patterns:** The concentration of fertility decline (over the entire period under study) in the age group of the 20s suggests the possibility that a traditional Irish fertility-regulating mechanism might be operating, namely changes in marriage patterns. Could the decline observed during recent decades be explained by changes in age at marriage? Data presented in Table 2 lend some support to this explanation. There was a dramatic decline, in both absolute and relative terms, in first marriage rates among women aged 20-24, with rates declining from 151 per 1000 in 1975 to 64 per 1000 in 1990. Women aged 15-19 actually experienced a greater relative decline, from 23 to 4 per 1000; early marriage was rare in Ireland in 1975 and declined to almost non-existent by 1990. (By contrast, early marriage rates in England and Wales were three times higher in 1975 and five times higher in 1990.) Among women aged 25-29, first marriage rates declined early in the period under consideration, but then fluctuated and recovered some of the decline later in the period. However, even after the recovery later in the

period under study, first marriages rates among women 25-29 in 1990 were more than 10 percent below 1975 rates for women the same age. Among women in their thirties and forties, first marriage rates remained largely unchanged throughout the period. Overall, between 1975 and 1990, age-specific marriage rates declined among women younger than 30, and remained relatively constant among women 30 and older. Because rates among older women remained constant, and did not increase, while rates among younger women decreased, it is likely that these changes represent a movement away from formal marriage, as opposed to an increase in age at marriage. Had the changes been reflective of a change in age at marriage, one would expect to see decreases at younger ages balanced by increases at older ages.

(Age-specific first marriage rates are not available for very recent years. However, both the numbers of marriage performed in the 1990s and the marriage rate per 1000 population declined slightly during this period, indicating that there is still some change in Irish marriage patterns occurring.)

**Marital fertility:** Data presented in Table 2 suggest that changes in marriage patterns may well have contributed to the overall decline in fertility recorded in Ireland between 1975 and 1995. However, data in Table 3 show that marital fertility also declined throughout the period, with lower rates at the end of the period among women in each age group. In fact, absolute declines in marital fertility were also greatest among women aged 20-24 and 25-29, the same age groups that experienced the greatest declines in first marriage rates.

Smaller absolute declines were recorded in each of the other age groups included in Table 3. The greatest relative declines in marital fertility took place among women aged 40-44 and 45-49; from 46 to 17 and from 3 to 1, respectively.

Marital fertility rates for women aged 15-19, presented in Table 3, need to be interpreted with particular caution. As we discussed above, marriage is now extremely rare among women aged 15-19 in Ireland, with the result that marital fertility rates at that age are volatile, and contribute very little to the overall fertility of 15-19 year old women. There was an overall decline in marital fertility among women 15-19 during the period under study; in 1975 the rate was 635 per 1000, compared with 570 per 1000 in 1990. However, in two years (1984 and 1989, data not shown), there were sizable peaks in 15-19 marital fertility, producing rates well above the 1975 levels. Our caution in interpreting these rates is the result of the very small numbers of marital births to women aged 15-19, especially by the end of the period being analyzed. For example in 1995, there were only 130 births in Ireland to married women aged 15-19, and 106 of these were to women aged 18 or 19, leaving only 24 births to married women under age 18. The small numbers in each of these categories can result in rates that vary considerably from year to year.

Another series of data on births provides a perspective on the dramatic changes in fertility that have taken place in Ireland over the last twenty years. The traditional Irish demographic regime that we described at the start of this paper included a combination of low marriage rates and high marital fertility.

This combination produced large family sizes, and relatively high proportions of women reporting large numbers of previous births. In 1975, for example, 17 percent of births in Ireland occurred to women who had four or more previous live-born children and 10 percent occurred to women who had five or more previous births. By 1995, these percents had declined to 7 and 3 respectively. There are now many fewer traditional, large, Irish families than in the past, even in the recent past.

**Non-marital fertility:** Data presented in Table 4 and Figure 3 show that recent changes in Irish fertility have not been confined simply to declines in overall and marital fertility. Table 4 demonstrates clearly that there have been substantial increases in non-marital fertility rates among Irish women of all reproductive ages. (The denominators for these rates are all single, widowed and divorced women in each age group.) Absolute increases were especially great among women aged 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34. Substantial relative increases took place among other ages, with the greatest relative increases among women aged 35-39 and 40-44. The consistency, across all ages, of increases in non-marital fertility is notable. In 1990, non-marital fertility was highest among women between the ages of 20 and 34; even women aged 35-39 have higher non-marital fertility than women aged 15-19, the age group usually identified with non-marital fertility. (Although the relative increases in non-marital fertility in Ireland have been substantial, the absolute level of even the most recent rates is still considerably below comparable marital fertility rates in Ireland.)

As a result of these increases in fertility rates among non-married women, along with decreases in marital fertility presented in Table 3, the proportion of all births that occurred to women who were not married increased dramatically over the past 20 years. As data in Figure 3 show, 3.7 percent of births in 1975 were to unmarried women, compared with 22.2 percent of births in 1995, a relative increase of six-fold. Although the proportion on non-marital births is still considerably lower in Ireland than in other industrial countries, the rate of increase has been considerable and shows no sign of leveling off.

**Accounting for the overall decline in Irish fertility:** Data presented above demonstrate clearly that there have been substantial, and sometimes compensating changes in several aspects of Irish fertility; marriage and marital fertility rates have declined while non-marital fertility rates have increased. To assess the relative importance of each of these three general factors (i.e. marriage, marital fertility and non-marital fertility), we carried out two standardization exercises, the results of which are reported in Table 5.

The first line in Table 5 presents the Total Fertility Rates observed, in five year intervals, for the period for which we have complete data. Over this interval, there was a decline in TFR of 1.3 births per woman, from 3.5 in 1975 to 2.2 in 1990. In the first standardization (S1), we consider the possible impact of changes over the period in the age and marital status composition of the population. Results of this standardization, presented in line 2, suggest that holding the population constant at the age and marital status distributions that were observed in the 1971 Irish Census would have produced a TFR in 1995 of

2.6. This decline is less than the one actually observed, but still substantial. In effect, of the observed decline of 1.3 births per women. only .4 births can be attributed to changes in population composition (i.e. to changes in the distribution of the population by age and marital status). The remaining, and more substantial change is the result of changes in marital-status and age-specific fertility rates.

We know from data presented above that the overall change in fertility is in fact that result of compensating changes in marital fertility rates (which declined) and non-marital fertility rates (which increased). To assess the relative contribution of changes in marital versus non-marital fertility rates to overall fertility changes, we carried out a second standardization (S2), reported in the third line of Table 5. We continue to hold the population distribution constant at 1971 patterns, and further constrain the analysis by holding non-marital fertility rates constant at 1975 levels. With population distribution held constant, fertility declined from 3.5 to 2.6 (S1); had non-marital fertility rates also remained constant, the TFR would have fallen slightly more to 2.2 (S2).

The conclusion from the full array of data presented in Table 5 is that changes in population composition (principally changes in the marital status composition of the population) and increases in non-marital fertility have had measurable impacts on overall fertility trends in Ireland, with changing composition having the larger impact. However, these results suggest that the strongest single factor in shaping recent Irish fertility is the decline in marital fertility rates observed between 1975 and 1990. Even if marriage patterns and

non-marital fertility rates had not changed during this period, Ireland would have still recorded a substantial decline in overall fertility. Changing marriage patterns augmented the decline, with some slight compensation resulting from increases in non-marital fertility.

## **DISCUSSION**

Data presented in the paper show clearly, and at times dramatically, that Ireland experienced considerable changes in fertility and marriage over the last twenty years. Overall fertility declined by almost half; first marriage rates declined among all but one age group of women; marital fertility declined at every age; and non-marital fertility increased at every age. A few numbers can summarize these changes. Total fertility was 3.54 in 1975 and 1.87 in 1995; 3.7 percent of births in 1975 were to non-married women whereas in 1995 the comparable number was 22.2 percent. Change was particularly dramatic among young women. Among women aged 20 to 24, data presented above reveal that overall fertility declined by 64 percent; marriage rates declined by 58 percent; marital fertility declined by 30 percent, and non-marital fertility rates more than doubled.

As a result of two standardization exercises, we conclude that the majority of the overall change in Irish fertility between 1975 and 1990 can be attributed to declines in marital fertility. A smaller portion of the overall decline was the result of changes in the composition of the population, specifically a decline in the proportion of women who are married. This change in marital

status composition took place among women at all ages but was especially substantial among women aged 20 - 29.

However, not all changes in Irish fertility patterns contributed to this overall pattern of declining fertility. While marriage rates and marital fertility rates declined, non-marital fertility rates increases substantially, in relative terms if not in absolute terms. These increases combined with declines in marital fertility to produce dramatic increases in the proportion of all births born to unmarried women. In spite of the considerable attention that increasing non-marital fertility receives among the general public in Ireland, a second standardization exercise leads us to conclude that increases in non-marital fertility have a fairly small impact on overall fertility change in Ireland. Had non-marital fertility remained at low, 1975 levels throughout the entire period, overall fertility would have been only slightly lower.

Therefore, we conclude that the most important factor shaping recent Irish fertility levels has been a substantial decline in marital fertility. Of secondary importance was a movement away from marriage. Increasing non-marital fertility has had a small, compensating effect, slightly tempering the declines that have resulted from fewer marriages and fewer births to married women.

Demographic changes of this magnitude cannot have taken place without equally dramatic changes in public attitudes and public policy. During the decades covered in this report, issues related to marriage and reproduction were among the most salient topics debated in both public and private spheres

in Ireland. Policy changes during these decades were especially dramatic. In 1975, the sale or importation of contraceptives was illegal in Ireland; in 1995 access to the full range of contraceptive methods was stated national policy in Ireland, with the Irish Department of Health committed to the development of “an accessible and comprehensive family planning service . . . “ in each region of the country (Department of Health, 1994). In 1975, abortion was completely illegal in Ireland and access even to information on abortion was almost totally restricted; in 1995, the right of Irish women to access to information about abortion services in Britain and their right to travel to obtain abortions have been approved by popular referendum. Although no legislation has been approved to regulate the provision of abortion services in Ireland, a 1993 Supreme Court ruling, which still stands, concluded that a right to abortion in Ireland exists in situations of real and substantial risks to the life of the mother. In 1975, divorce was not legally available in Ireland and marital separations were uncommon; in 1996 a popular referendum established the right to divorce in Ireland, and the first legal Irish divorce was granted in January, 1997. Prior to 1973, state support for unmarried mothers was extremely limited; in 1995, a lone parent allowance provides direct, albeit limited, financial support to all parents, including unmarried women, raising children on their own.

The causes of these substantial changes in behavior and public policy are, not surprisingly, varied and complex. Having established, in this paper, the extent of change in marriage and fertility that has taken place in Ireland over the past twenty years, our next task is to examine, in much more detail than in the

previous paragraph, the social and policy changes that have accompanied recent Irish demographic change. Any speculation on the future course of Irish fertility must await the completion of this social and political analysis of the determinants of recent fertility change in Ireland.

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## **Data Sources**

1975-1990: *Annual Reports on Vital Statistics*, Central Statistics Office, Dublin.

1991-1995: Numerators (counts of births by marital status and marriages) from *Annual Fourth Quarter and Yearly Summaries of Vital Statistics*, Central Statistics Office, Dublin.

1991-1995: Denominators (female population by age and marital status) from *Annual Population and Migration Estimates 1988-1995*, Central Statistics Office, Dublin. 24 October, 1995.

**Table 1. Age-specific fertility rates (births per 1000 women):  
Ireland 1975-1995 (selected years)**

<u>Age</u>	<u>Year</u>				
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>
<b>15-19</b>	23	23	17	16	15
<b>20-24</b>	141	125	87	66	51
<b>25-29</b>	227	202	159	148	106
<b>30-34</b>	173	166	138	128	127
<b>35-39</b>	105	97	75	65	61
<b>40-44</b>	38	30	22	15	13
<b>45-49</b>	2	2	2	1	1

**Table 2. Age-specific female first marriage rates (marriages per 1000 single women): Ireland 1975-1990 (selected years)**

<u>Age</u>	<u>Year</u>			
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1990</u>
<b>15-19</b>	23	21	9	4
<b>20-24</b>	151	126	86	64
<b>25-29</b>	183	152	155	161
<b>30-34</b>	91	80	88	86
<b>35-39</b>	37	36	40	43
<b>40-44</b>	16	14	12	14
<b>45-49</b>	8	8	8	7

**Table 3. Age-specific marital fertility rates  
(births per 1000 currently married women):  
Ireland 1975-1990 (selected years)**

<u>Age</u>	<u>Year</u>			
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1990</u>
<b>15-19</b>	635	554	503	570
<b>20-24</b>	407	347	298	286
<b>25-29</b>	310	277	226	236
<b>30-34</b>	205	193	159	158
<b>35-39</b>	123	111	84	74
<b>40-44</b>	46	34	25	17
<b>45-49</b>	3	3	2	1

**Table 4. Age-specific non-marital fertility rates  
(births per 1000 single widowed and divorced women):  
Ireland 1975-1990 (selected years)**

<u>Age</u>	<u>Year</u>			
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1990</u>
<b>15-19</b>	6	10	11	14
<b>20-24</b>	14	16	21	29
<b>25-29</b>	12	16	19	26
<b>30-34</b>	10	12	18	24
<b>35-39</b>	4	6	11	18
<b>40-44</b>	1	1	3	5
<b>45-49</b>	0	0	0	0.1

**Table 5. Observed and Standardized Total Fertility Rates:  
Ireland 1975-1990 (selected years)**

	<u>Year</u>			
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1990</u>
<b>TFR<sub>(O)</sub></b>	3.5	3.2	2.5	2.2
<b>TFR<sub>(S1)</sub></b>	3.5	3.1	2.6	2.6
<b>TFR<sub>(S2)</sub></b>	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.4

O= Observed

S1= 1971 Census Population Distributions by Age and Marital Status;  
Observed Age-Specific Marital and Non-Marital Fertility Rates

S2= 1971 Census Population Distributions by Age and Marital Status;  
Non- Marital Fertility Rates Held Constant at 1975 level; Observed Age-  
Specific Marital Fertility Rates

Figure 1  
Total Fertility Rates:  
Ireland 1975 - 1995

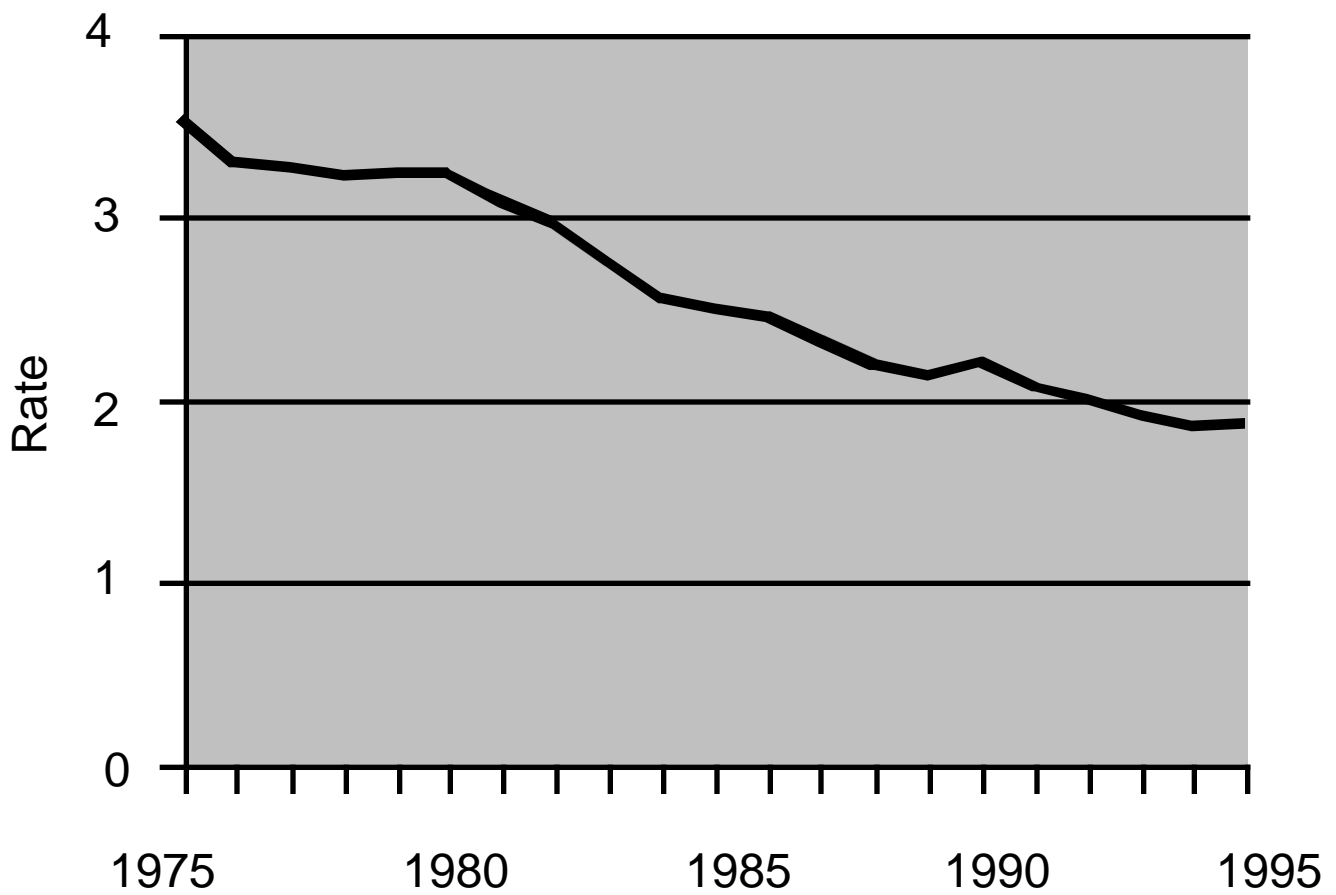


Figure 2  
Age Specific Fertility Rates:  
Ireland 1975 and 1995

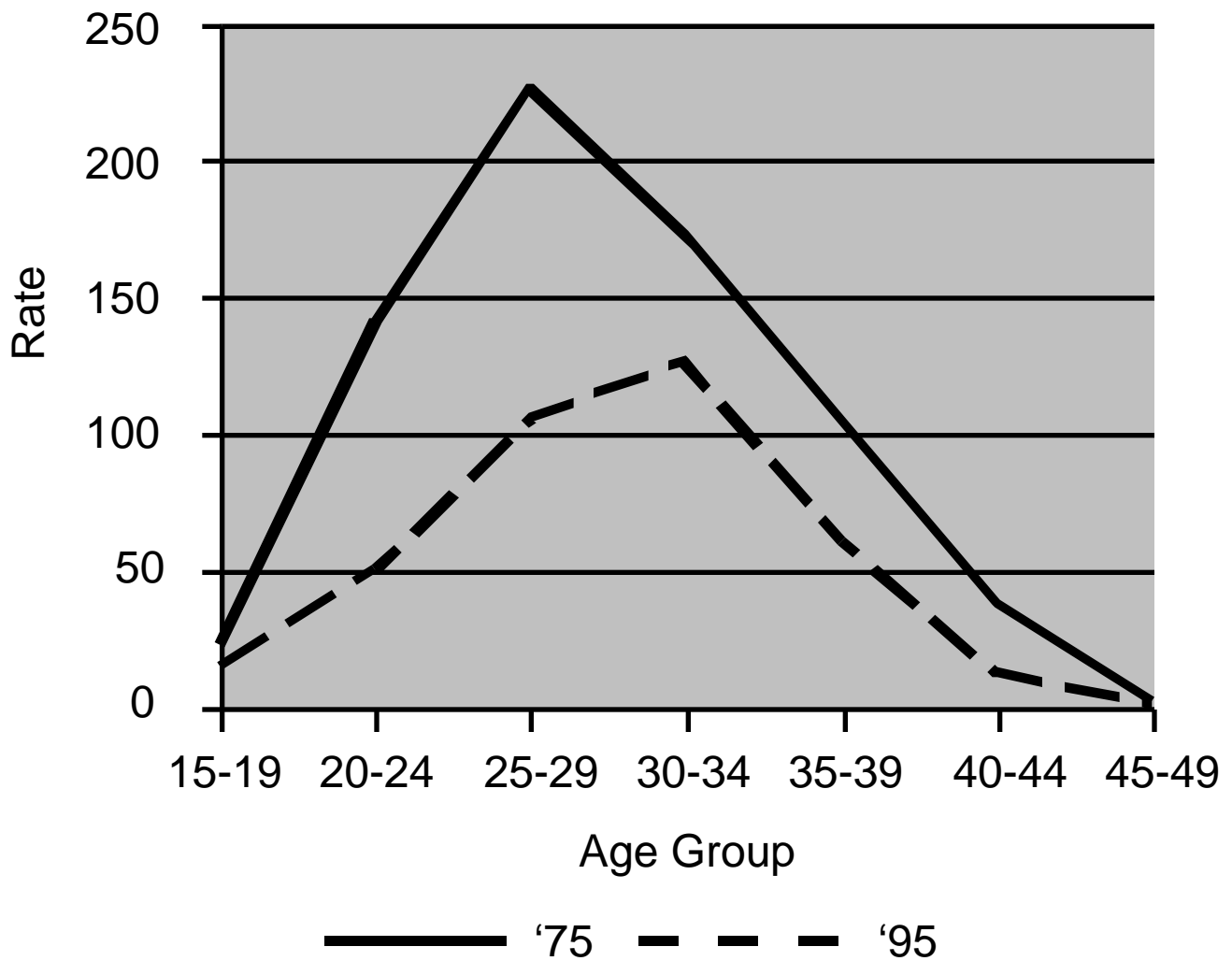


Figure 3  
Percent Non-Marital Births:  
Ireland 1975 - 1995

