

## Survey reveals more relaxed attitude to sex

Today's coverage of the Irish Times/Behaviour & Attitudes Social Poll is the first in a three part series which deals with the issues of sex and relationships, religion and morality.

Fieldwork for the study was undertaken last month, amongst a representative sample of the 3.2 million Irish adults aged 18 years+ in the Republic of Ireland. More importantly, the poll records the views and opinions of Irish people ten years into the new millennium, following a period of unprecedented social turmoil, and a shift in the national psyche away from an unquestioning acceptance of Catholic Church dogma, and the influence it once had over people's behaviour and attitudes.

In today's piece we explore Irish people's values regarding sex and relationships. The most recent 2006 census data revealed a total of 122,000 co-habiting couples in Ireland, by far the fastest growing type of family unit. While all of the evidence would suggest that the great majority of individuals in Ireland eventually enter into a formal marriage, there is a debate as to whether co-habitation poses an inherent threat - either to the institution of marriage itself, or the stability of those marriages which are eventually formed.

Our poll findings indicate that the common consensus is that living together before marriage is likely to result in a more stable marriage than would have been the case if the couple had not co-habited. Thus, almost six in ten of all adults believe the trend towards living together is eventually likely to result in more stable marriages, a view which is remarkably consistent between men and women, people from all socio-economic backgrounds, and from all parts of the country.

Analysis by age suggests that three-quarters of those aged 18-24 years are in favour of couples taking time to test the strength of their relationship prior to committing to a formal marriage, suggesting that such arrangements may well become the norm rather than the exception for future generations.

Given this broad acceptance of fully committed relationships outside marriage, it is no surprise that eight in ten reject the notion that sex outside marriage is immoral. In fact, just 15% are prepared to condemn extra marital sex on moral grounds, a proportion which does however rise to a fairly sizeable 31% of everyone over the age of fifty-five. We also see that those living in rural locations are twice as likely as their urban counterparts to frown upon such behaviour, albeit at significantly lower levels than would presumably have been the case even a generation ago.



Notwithstanding the generally relaxed attitude of Irish people towards sex, it is interesting to note that half of us express a sneaking admiration for those who choose long-term celibacy for religious or moral reasons. At a time when there is an ongoing debate as to the potentially negative effects of compulsory celibacy for Catholic priests, this finding would suggest that it is the enforced nature of such celibacy which people are opposed to, rather than the concept itself.

The poll also touched upon people's views as to the most appropriate age for young people to begin having sex. Taking the responses of all survey participants into account, the average age people feel teenagers should begin to have sex at is eighteen years. The legal age of consent for sex is of course seventeen years of age, and the great majority of Irish people clearly feel that this is, if anything, too young an age at which to make such a decision. There are, however, some significant differences between different types of people at this question, with one in five of all males, and a similar proportion of people aged under thirty-five and those living in Dublin, all of the view that people should be allowed have sex at sixteen years of age or even younger. The data does suggest though that, with just 10% of those aged over thirty-five condoning sex by teenagers under the age of seventeen, people's views on the matter become considerably more conservative once they have teenage children of their own to worry about.

With regard to the policing of the legal age of consent, the vast majority ( approaching nine in ten) of all individuals feel that it is unjust that boys can be prosecuted for having sex with girls under seventeen, while girls cannot be prosecuted for having sex with underage boys.

It is now seventeen years since homosexuality was decriminalized in Ireland, with significant advances having been made in the area of Gay Rights since then. Ninety-six percent of the people who participated in this poll described themselves as heterosexual, although it is possible that a certain proportion of those may be gay but found it uncomfortable to discuss this aspect of their lives with the survey interviewers. Regardless of their personal sexuality however, ninety percent of people reject outright the notion that they might think less of a person if he/she revealed to them that they were gay or lesbian.

Indeed, over two-thirds of the population believe that gay couples should be allowed to marry, although resistance to gay marriage stands at four in ten of those aged over fifty years, as well as those from a rural farming background. Opinion is more evenly divided as to whether gay couples should be allowed to adopt children, with a majority of females, those aged 18-44 years, and urban dwellers supportive of the idea.

All in all, therefore, the results of today's poll suggest that the Irish have adopted a laissez faire attitude towards the nature of people's personal relationships and sexual behaviour. The fact that attitudes towards such issues are significantly more liberal amongst those aged in their mid forties and younger suggests that previous generations' moral conservatism with regard to such matters is indeed becoming a thing of the past.



This seismic shift in values has of course coincided with the Catholic church's diminishing grip on Irish society, a theme which tomorrow's social poll deals with it in some detail.

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