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STATISTICS THAT SHOW THE STATE WE ARE IN

By David Phillips

April saw the release of the most recent Social Trends statistics. Some of these make grim reading and demonstrate the problems we face in modern Britain and how Christian standards are being eroded in national life.

The survey shows that the population increased by 1.1 million from 2001 to 2005. Of one third was due to natural change (mainly people dying at a later age) whilst two thirds was due to migration.

The survey also reveals the extent of ageing in the population (which will mean congregations getting older). Despite the overall rise in population the number of under 16 year olds in the country has dropped since 2001 by 77,000 per year, that is a staggering 2.7 million overall. There are now 2.2million more people over 65.

Collapsing families

One of the figures to hit the headlines was that almost a quarter of children live in lone-parent families. This proportion has doubled since 1971. Bear in mind in relation to this that not all two-parent families are the parents of the child. This is an area where ignoring the standards set in God's Word has social consequences. There is an impact on broken relationships, loneliness and on the children themselves.

Another area where this impacts is housing. Over the 35 years, there have been nearly 6 million new homes required, that is 160,000 new dwellings per year. Now much of this is due to population increase, but a quarter, that is 40,000 per year, is a consequence of the decline of marriage and family as a unit of society. Sadly political policies in recent years have served only to exacerbate this problem, despite the clear costs.

More than 4 in every 10 children were born to couples who are unmarried at the time of the birth.

These statistics all show some of the issues we face as a nation, but they also show the challenges facing churches. Increasingly people are living on their own, children do not have two role-models in the home and there are relationship breakdowns. All this will impact on how churches evangelise, care for others and live out the Christian life. It is particularly striking from the report that nearly 3 million pensioners live on their own. Put another way, in your parish there are around 250 pensioners living on their own.

Civil Partnerships also feature in the survey which reveals that during the first year there were 15,700 entered into. After the initial flurry this has settled down to about 1,500 each year. This equates over to less than one third of one percent (one in every 300 people in the population). Nearly two thirds of the CPs are between two men.

There were almost as many divorces in 2005 (155,000) as there were first marriages (171,000). The total number of marriages has kept up in large part because of re-marriages. The number of first marriages is less than half what it was in 1971, despite overall population growth.

The statistics for abortions are another shocking reflection on our modern society. The report itself avoids giving the worst figures but it seems that in 2001 there were 176,000 unborn children put to death and the rate seems to be rising. In a year in which we have celebrated the ending of the slave

trade this mass killing of children is an enduring stain on us.

Poverty

Real disposable income has almost doubled since 1971. If you had £100 to spend in 1971 then at the same average prices you would today have £180. However, as might be expected the rate of improvement has been less for the poor than it is for the rich. The poor are getting richer, but by no means as fast as the rich are getting richer and the gap between rich and poor has grown in the last 35 years. This is one of those figures that can be read both ways. Clearly the gap between rich and poor is growing, but it could also be argued that the significant improvement in the lot of the poor is a spin off from the general improvement.

Religion is listed as one of the subcategories of Lifestyle and social participation and is the very last set of statistics in the report. Despite this relegation to the margins the survey shows that just over 60 percent of people claimed to belong to a religion, whilst just under 40 claimed to have no religious allegiance. Notice, that this does not make those 40% atheists, they just have no allegiance to a particular set of religious beliefs.

In addition, more than half (54%) of those surveyed asserted allegiance to the Christian faith and more than a quarter of the population (26.6%) claim to belong to the Church of England. What these figures show is that despite the impression often given in the media, and despite our own reservations about what is meant by Christian, Britain remains a predominantly Christian country and the arguments often advanced for religious pluralism are ungrounded.

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