

Statistical bulletin

# Birth characteristics in England and Wales: 2020

Annual live births in England and Wales by sex, birthweight, gestational age, ethnicity and month, maternities by place of birth and with multiple births, and stillbirths by age of parents and calendar quarter.



Contact:  
Data Insights and Data Science  
team  
[health.data@ons.gov.uk](mailto:health.data@ons.gov.uk)  
+44 1329 444110

Release date:  
13 January 2022

Next release:  
To be announced

## Correction

**3 May 2024 08:43**

The percentage of "live births" that took place at home was previously calculated for maternities rather than for live births. This has now been corrected and the adjusted value has been changed from 2.4% to 2.3%.

# Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Birth characteristics](#)
3. [Age of parents](#)
4. [Stillbirths](#)
5. [Gestational age](#)
6. [Place of Birth](#)
7. [Births data](#)
8. [Glossary](#)
9. [Measuring the data](#)
10. [Strengths and limitations](#)
11. [Related links](#)

# 1 . Main points

- In 2020, the average age of mothers in England and Wales remained at 30.7 years, while the average age of fathers increased slightly to 33.7 years.
- The stillbirth rate was 3.8 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2020 - a record low, and in line with previous decreasing trends.
- The highest stillbirth rates, in 2020, were seen in women aged 40 years and over at 5.5 stillbirths per 1,000 births, and women aged 20 to 24 years at 4.5 stillbirths per 1,000 births.
- Babies from the Black ethnic group have the highest stillbirth rate at 6.3 stillbirths per 1,000 births, but this has decreased from 7.1 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2019.
- The overall percentage of preterm live births decreased from 7.8% in 2019 to 7.4% in 2020; babies from the Black ethnic group were the only ethnic group to see an increase between 2019 and 2020 (8.5 % to 8.8%).
- In 2020, the percentage of home births increased to 2.3% of all live births.

Delays in birth registrations because of the coronavirus pandemic have affected [2020 births data](#).

## 2 . Birth characteristics

Following our yearly [Births in England and Wales: 2020 bulletin](#), this bulletin provides information on different birth and parental characteristics, such as age of parents, birthweight, and place of birth. This bulletin contains data on births that occurred during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. However, research to understand the effect the pandemic may have had on birth trends is in the early stages.

In this bulletin, we use birth notification data linked to birth registrations data. This differs from our [Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020 and Quarter 1 \(Jan to Mar\) 2021](#) article. More information can be found in our [User guide to birth statistics](#).

### 3 . Age of parents

In 2020, the standardised mean age of mothers remained unchanged from 2019 at 30.7 years; ending an 11-year run of consecutive increases. The standardised mean age of fathers increased slightly from 33.6 years to 33.7 years between 2019 and 2020. Both are record highs since data collection began.

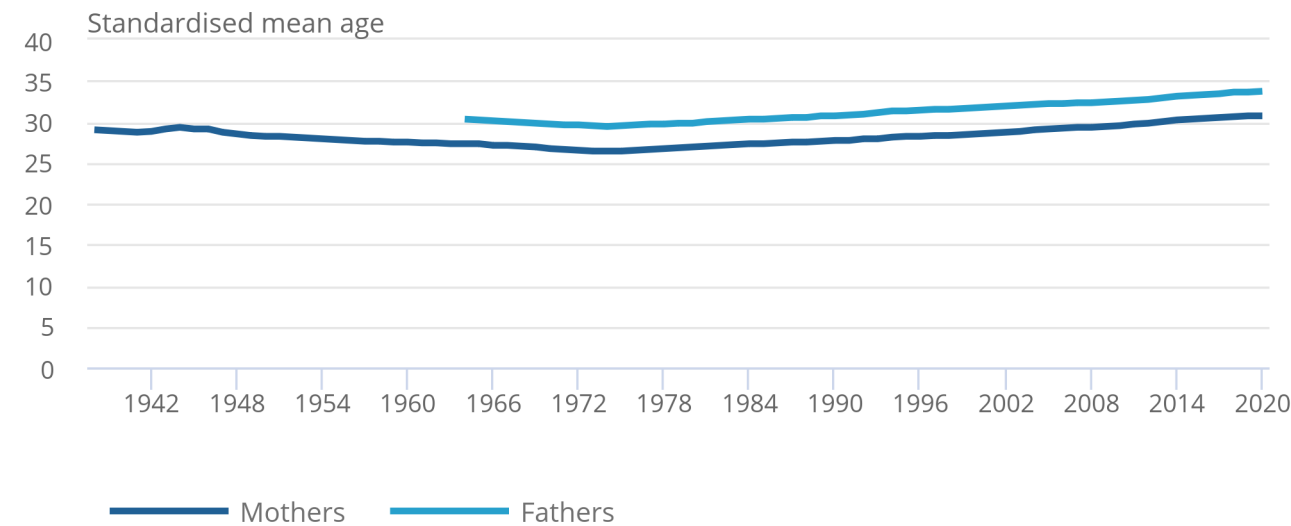
For births registered under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, 2008, the age of the second parent has been included with the age of the father. Therefore, it has been included in the production of the standardised mean age of the father. Given the relatively small number of births registered to same-sex couples, this has a negligible impact on the statistics.

**Figure 1: Average age of parents remains at record highs**

Standardised mean age of mothers and fathers, England and Wales, 1938 to 2020

Figure 1: Average age of parents remains at record highs

Standardised mean age of mothers and fathers, England and Wales, 1938 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Births in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Electronic data on the standardised mean age of father is not available before 1964.
2. The age of second parent has been included with age of father.

## 4 . Stillbirths

The [NHS guidance on pregnancy and coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) currently highlights that pregnant women are at higher risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19. In addition, if a pregnant woman gets COVID-19 late in their pregnancy, the baby could also be at risk. A [study on the outcomes of pregnant women with SARS-CoV-2 infection](#) undertaken by National Maternity and Perinatal Audit (between May 2020 and January 2021) found that pregnant women who test positive for COVID-19 at the time of birth may be at higher risk of experiencing a stillbirth or pre-term birth. However, the actual increases remain low.

The stillbirth rate for England and Wales was 3.8 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2020 - a record low, and in line with previous decreasing trends. There are small differences in the stillbirth rates between quarters, and the rates appear to be slightly higher in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2021. You can find out more in the [provisional data on stillbirths in Quarter 1 2021](#). However, changes in rates each quarter are still within the plausible range that we might expect to see from random variation.

Stillbirth rates can vary by different characteristics such as age of mothers. The highest stillbirth rates remain in women aged 40 years and over at 5.5 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2020, which is no change compared with 2019. Mothers aged 20 to 24 years had the second highest stillbirth rate at 4.5 per 1,000 births, an increase from 4.2 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2019. This ends an 11-year trend of the highest stillbirth rates being seen in the oldest (aged 40 years and over) and youngest (aged under 20 years) age groups.

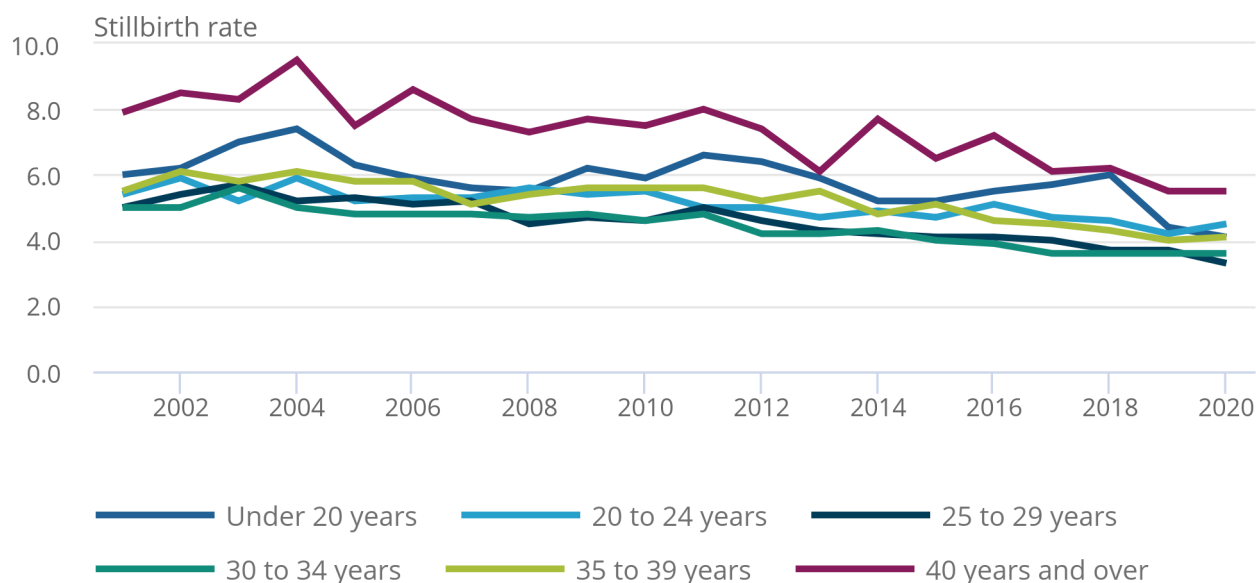
The stillbirth rate for mothers aged 30 to 34 years has remained the same for the past four years, at 3.6 stillbirths per 1,000 births. Women in this age group represent the largest proportion of live births. Consequently, a continued stagnation in stillbirth rates in this age group may slow decreases in the overall stillbirth rate for England and Wales.

**Figure 2: Mothers aged 40 years and over continue to have the highest stillbirth rate**

Stillbirth rates by age of mother, England and Wales, 2001 to 2020

Figure 2: Mothers aged 40 years and over continue to have the highest stillbirth rate

Stillbirth rates by age of mother, England and Wales, 2001 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Births in England and Wales

As highlighted in the [2019 Births and infant mortality by ethnicity article](#), the stillbirth rate varies across ethnic groups. Babies from the Black ethnic group have the highest stillbirth rate at 6.3 per 1,000 births. However, this has decreased from 7.1 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2019.

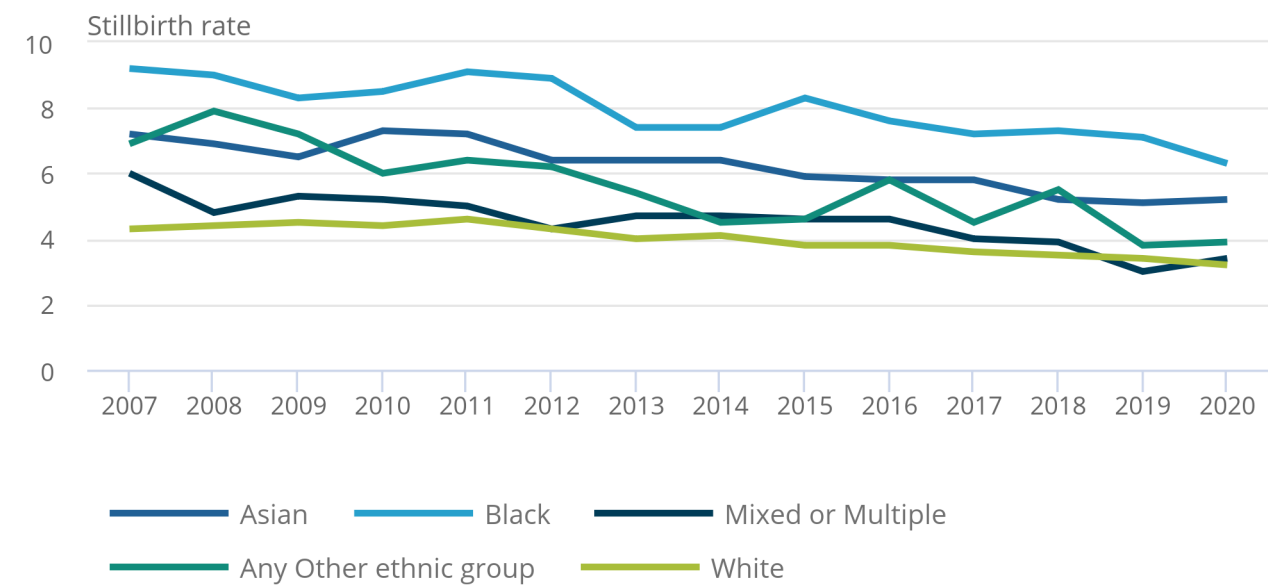
While there are fluctuations in stillbirth rates across the ethnic groups over time, they have all generally decreased since 2007. The biggest decreases were seen in the Black African ethnic group (from 10.0 to 6.2 stillbirths per 1,000 births), followed by the Pakistani ethnic group (from 8.9 to 5.6 stillbirths per 1,000 births).

**Figure 3: Stillbirth rates were highest for babies from the Black ethnic group**

Stillbirth rate by ethnicity of the baby, England and Wales, 2007 to 2020

Figure 3: Stillbirth rates were highest for babies from the Black ethnic group

Stillbirth rate by ethnicity of the baby, England and Wales, 2007 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Births in England and Wales

We will continue to monitor changes in the stillbirth rates and potential effects of COVID-19.

## 5 . Gestational age

A preterm birth is a birth that takes place before 37 weeks' gestation. In 2020, 7.4% of live births were preterm births, a decrease from 7.8% in 2019. In 2020, the number of live births occurring with a gestational age of under 24 weeks decreased to 0.13%, compared with 0.15% in 2019. In the last few years, the proportion of live births under 24 weeks has risen, despite [the overall decrease in total live births](#). In 2014, live births where gestational age was under 24 weeks was 0.10%, and first rose to 0.12% in 2016, and then 0.13% in 2017. This overall increase may contribute to recent variations in the neonatal mortality rate. Gestational age is a known risk factor for infant mortality. In 2015, NHS England launched the National Maternity Safety Ambition to improve outcomes for mothers and babies - you can view the [Safer Maternity Care Progress Report \(PDF, 927KB\)](#) to find out more.

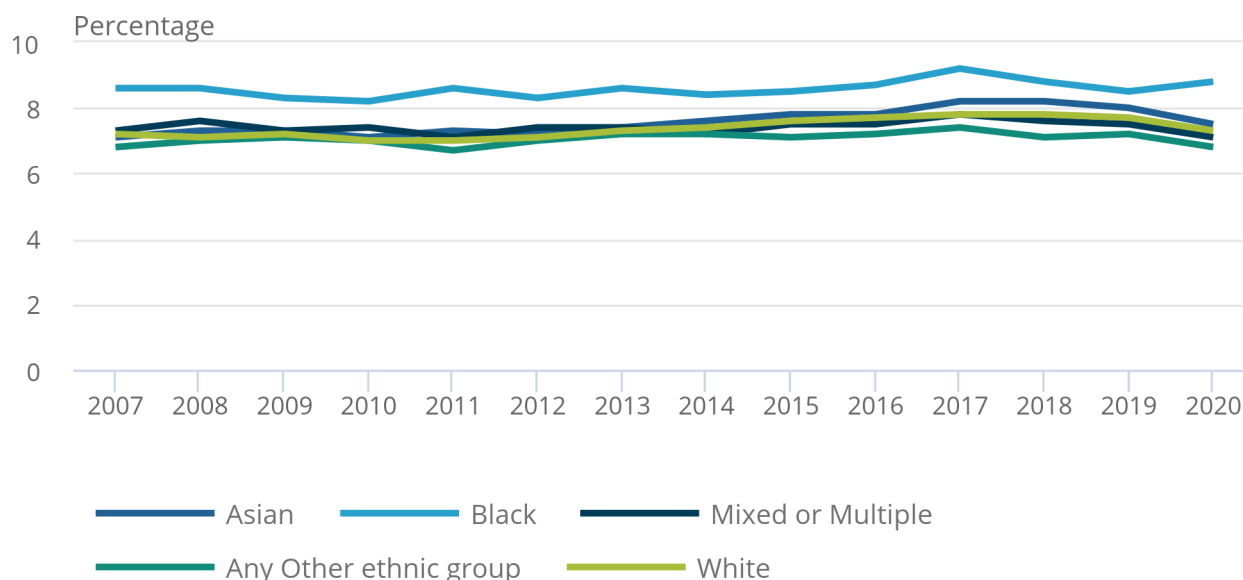
The percentage of preterm live births varied by ethnicity of the baby. In 2020, Black Caribbean and Any other Black background ethnic groups had the highest percentage of preterm live births, at 10.6% and 10.2% respectively. While most ethnic groups had seen decreases in the percentage of preterm births, the Black ethnic group was the only ethnic group to see an increase in the percentage of preterm births between 2019 and 2020, (8.5 % to 8.8% respectively).

**Figure 4: Babies from the Black ethnic group saw a rise in the percentage of preterm live births in 2020**

Percentage of preterm live births by ethnicity of the baby, England and Wales, 2020

Figure 4: Babies from the Black ethnic group saw a rise in the percentage of preterm live births in 2020

Percentage of preterm live births by ethnicity of the baby, England and Wales, 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Births in England and Wales

A study by the [National Maternity and Perinatal Audit \(between May 2020 and January 2021\)](#) found that coronavirus (COVID-19) may have affected preterm births. The English study found that 12% of pregnant women, who had tested positive for COVID-19 at the time they gave birth, gave birth prematurely (before 37 weeks). In comparison, 5.8% of women who had tested negative at the time they gave birth, gave birth prematurely. It was also stated that women that had tested positive for COVID-19 at the time of birth were more likely to be younger, and from Black, Asian or minority ethnic groups. For more information, you can [find out more about pregnancy and coronavirus \(COVID-19\) on the NHS website](#).

## 6 . Place of Birth

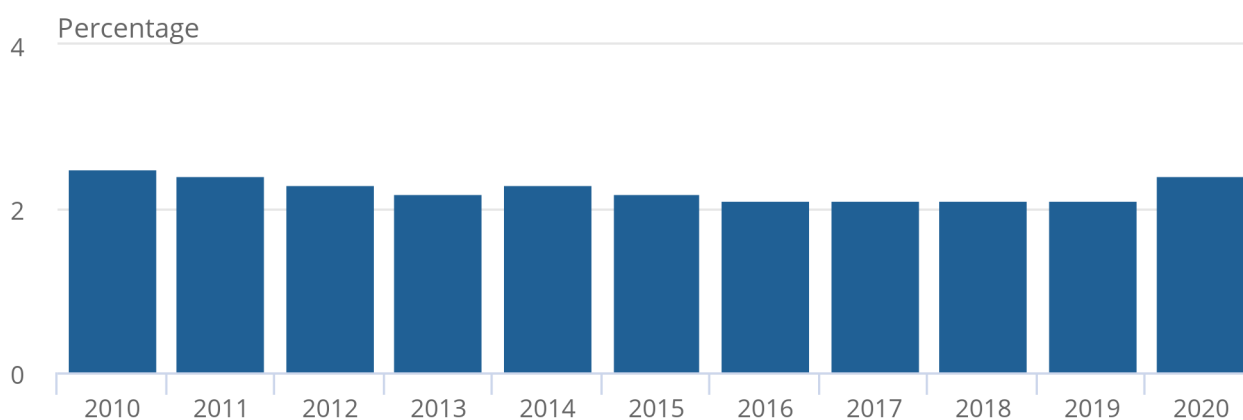
In 2020, the percentage of births taking place at home was 2.4%, a slight increase from 2.1% in 2019. Most births in 2020 occurred during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic caused disruption to health services and restrictions on birthing partners. Therefore, coronavirus could have had an indirect effect on place of birth which may include people choosing to stay away from healthcare settings.

**Figure 5: Home births have increased between 2019 and 2020**

Percentage of live births occurring at home, England and Wales, 2010 to 2020

Figure 5: Home births have increased between 2019 and 2020

Percentage of live births occurring at home, England and Wales, 2010 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Births in England and Wales

## 7 . Births data

### [Birth characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 13 January 2022

Annual live births in England and Wales by sex, birthweight, gestational age, ethnicity and month, maternities by place of birth and with multiple births, and stillbirths by age of parents and calendar quarter.

### [Births by parents' characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 13 January 2022

Annual live births in England and Wales by age of mother and father, type of registration, median interval between births, number of previous live-born children and National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC).



## Filter these data

[Live births in England and Wales: birth rates down to local authority areas \(2013 to 2020\)](#)

[Live births in England and Wales by sex and characteristics of mother: national and regional \(2013 to 2020\)](#)

[Live births in England and Wales by characteristics of mother and father \(2013 to 2020\)](#)

[Live births in England and Wales down to local authority local area \(2013 to 2020\)](#)

[Live births in England and Wales for small geographic areas \(2013 to 2020\)](#)

# 8 . Glossary

## General Register Office

The General Register Office (GRO) (part of the HM Passport Office) is responsible for ensuring the registration of all births, deaths, marriages, and civil partnerships that have occurred in England and Wales and for maintaining a central archive.

## Gestational age

A measure of how far along a pregnancy is in weeks at the time of birth.

## Live birth

A baby showing signs of life at birth.

## Low birthweight

A baby born with a birthweight under 2,500 grams.

## Notification

A document completed by the doctor or midwife present at the birth. It includes information that is not on the birth registration like birthweight, gestation length and ethnicity of the baby. We link birth registrations and birth notifications to produce some of our statistics as it enables us to provide breakdowns by these factors. The registrar also receives birth notification information so they can check whether all births have been registered or not.

## Place of birth

Place where a birth occurs.

## Preterm birth

A preterm birth is a birth that takes place before 37 weeks' gestation. We use the following [classifications of preterm](#) live births:

- extremely preterm (under 28 weeks)
- very preterm (28 to 31 weeks)
- moderate preterm (32 to 36 weeks).

## Standardised mean age

The standardised mean (average) age (for example, at birth or marriage) is a measure that eliminates the impact of any changes in the distribution of the population by age. Therefore, it enables trends over time to be analysed. Standardised means are calculated using rates per 1,000 female population by single year of age of mother.

## Stillbirth

A stillbirth is a baby born after 24 or more weeks' completed gestation and who did not, at any time, breathe or show signs of life.

# 9 . Measuring the data

Birth statistics represent births that occur and are then registered in England and Wales. Figures are derived from information recorded when live births and stillbirths are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement; these data represent the most complete data source available.

In England and Wales, the registration of births is a service carried out by the Local Registration Service in partnership with the General Register Office (GRO).

When a birth is registered, birth registration data is linked to NHS birth notification to obtain birthweight data.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) undertakes further linkage of birth registration to NHS birth notification. This is to obtain the age of the mother where this was missing on the birth registration, and to enable the analysis of characteristics such as ethnicity of the baby and gestation of live births.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Births QMI](#).

## Coronavirus and birth statistics

Delays in birth registrations because of [the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic affected births data for 2020](#). Our annual data extract would normally only include births registered before 25 February. In 2020, 42% of registrations came in after 42 days (the usual legal limit). Therefore, we decided to include all births registered up to 12 August 2021 in the 2020 dataset to ensure that our birth statistics for 2020 are as complete as possible and comparable with previous years. For more information, please see our [User guide to birth statistics](#). We are continuing to monitor the implications of [COVID-19 on the production of statistics](#).

# 10 . Strengths and limitations

Our [User guide to birth statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to conceptions, and it includes a [glossary of terms](#).

## National Statistics status for Births in England and Wales

[National Statistics](#) status means that our statistics meet the highest standard of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

Date of most recent [assessment and compliance check that confirms National Statistics status: September 2011](#).

The improvements we have made since the last review include:

- revisions to the way statistics are produced are explained in the [User guide to birth statistics](#), detailing the year the change took place and reason why
- in cases where corrections were implemented, they were accompanied by explanations of the change and the reasons why
- where applicable, we added background information into our User guide and [Births QMI](#) to inform the user of the differences in methods between the UK countries and the reasons underlying these differences
- following a [consultation on proposed changes to statistics](#), we made changes in 2018 to the way that birth statistics are published; five [explorable datasets](#) are now released in July alongside the first release of annual births data, which means more detailed birth data (including small area geographies) are now available in a timelier manner

## 11 . Related links

### [Births in England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 October 2021

Annual live births, stillbirths and the intensity of childbearing, measured by the total fertility rate.

### [Births by parents' country of birth, England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 October 2021

Annual statistics on live births including countries of birth for non-UK-born mothers and fathers.

### [Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020 and Quarter 1 \(Jan to Mar\) 2021](#)

Article | Released 24 June 2021

Provisional analysis of births occurring between January 2020 and March 2021 in England and Wales using NHS birth notifications to explore possible effects of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on live births and stillbirths.

### [Births and infant mortality by ethnicity in England and Wales: 2007 to 2019](#)

Article | Released 26 May 2021

Live births, stillbirths, infant deaths by ethnicity of the baby occurring annually in England and Wales.

### [Births in Scotland](#)

Web page | Updated as new data become available

National Records of Scotland's (NRS') statistics on births.

### [Births in Northern Ireland](#)

Web page | Updated as new data become available

National Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA's) Births statistics from 1887 onwards and Baby Names statistics from 1997 onwards for Northern Ireland.