

Statistical bulletin

Divorces in England and Wales: 2016

Dissolutions and annulments of marriage by previous marital status, sex, age, fact proven and to whom granted.



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Release date:
18 October 2017

Next release:
September to October 2018
(Provisional)

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1 . Main points

- There were 106,959 divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2016, an increase of 5.8% compared with 2015.
- There were 112 divorces of same-sex couples in 2016; of these 78% were among female couples.
- In 2016, there were 8.9 divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 and over (divorce rates), an increase of 4.7% since 2015; however, divorce rates in 2016 are over 20% lower than the recent peak in divorce rate in 2003 and 2004.
- The divorce rate for opposite-sex couples was highest among men aged 45 to 49 and women in their thirties (ages 30 to 39).

2 . Statistician's comment

“Although the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples in England and Wales increased by 5.8% in 2016 compared with 2015, the number remains 30% lower than the most recent peak in 2003; divorce rates for men and women have seen similar changes. This is the second year that divorces among same-sex couples have been possible since the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples in March 2014. Our latest marriage figures show that of the 4,850 marriages formed between same-sex couples in 2014, 56% were female couples. In 2016, there were 112 divorces among same-sex couples, with female couples accounting for 78% of these.”

Nicola Haines, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics.

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3 . Things you need to know about this release

Important information for interpreting these divorce statistics:

- divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service during the divorce process
- figures represent both divorces and [annulments](#) that took place in England and Wales; annulments are where the marriage was not legally valid in the first place
- divorce statistics do not include married couples who separate but do not divorce
- divorces where the marriage took place abroad are included provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales
- marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014; the first divorces recorded between same-sex couples were in 2015

4 . First notable increase in divorces of opposite-sex couples since 2009

In 2016, the number of divorces among opposite-sex couples in England and Wales increased by 5.8% compared with 2015 to 106,959. However, this followed a large fall in the number of divorces between 2014 and 2015 (9.1%); divorces in 2016 consequently remain 3.8% lower than in 2014 and are also 30% lower than the most recent peak in divorce numbers seen in 2003 (Figure 1).

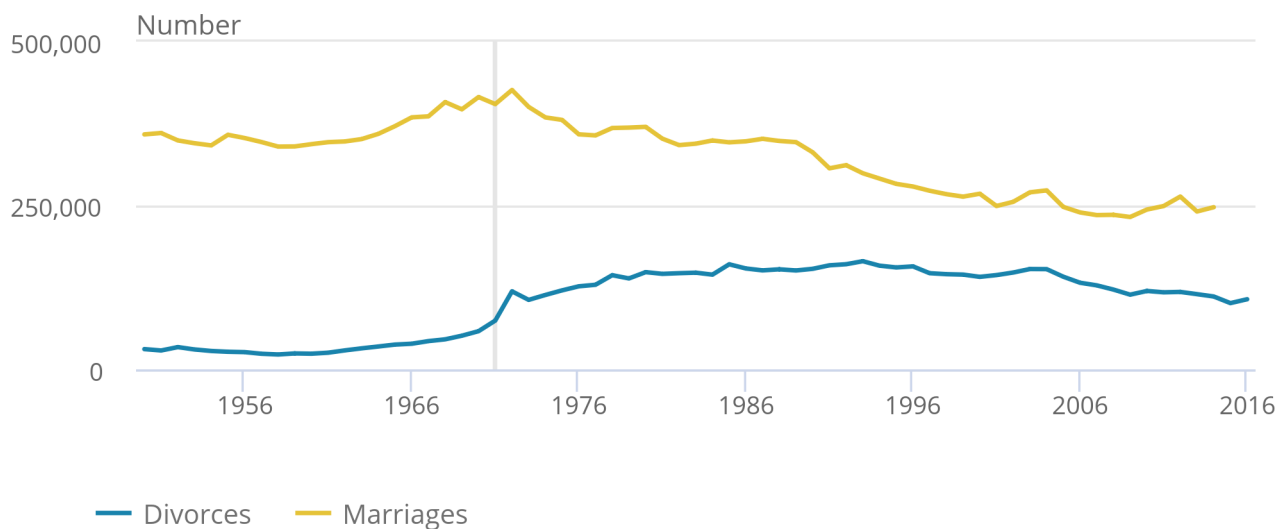
Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2016

England and Wales

Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2016

Divorce Reform Act 1969 effective from 1 Jan 1971

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

This is the first year that the number of divorces has risen since a small rise (0.5%) between 2011 and 2012, and a larger rise (4.9%) between 2009 and 2010. A period of relative stability occurred between 2010 and 2012, followed by a decline in numbers between 2013 and 2015.

The fall in divorces between 2003 and 2009 is consistent with a decline in the number of marriages over the same period; the decrease in marriages may be due to the [increasing number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than enter into marriage](#).

When considering changes in the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples, it is important to also take account of the size of the married population, since any changes in this will affect the number of divorces. In 2016, the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 and over (divorce rates) also increased for both men and women to 8.9, compared with 8.5 in 2015 (Figure 2). Divorce rates for both men and women in 2015 and 2016 still remain well below the most recent peaks in 2003 and 2004. Information about how divorce rates are calculated is available in the Quality and methodology section (final paragraph).

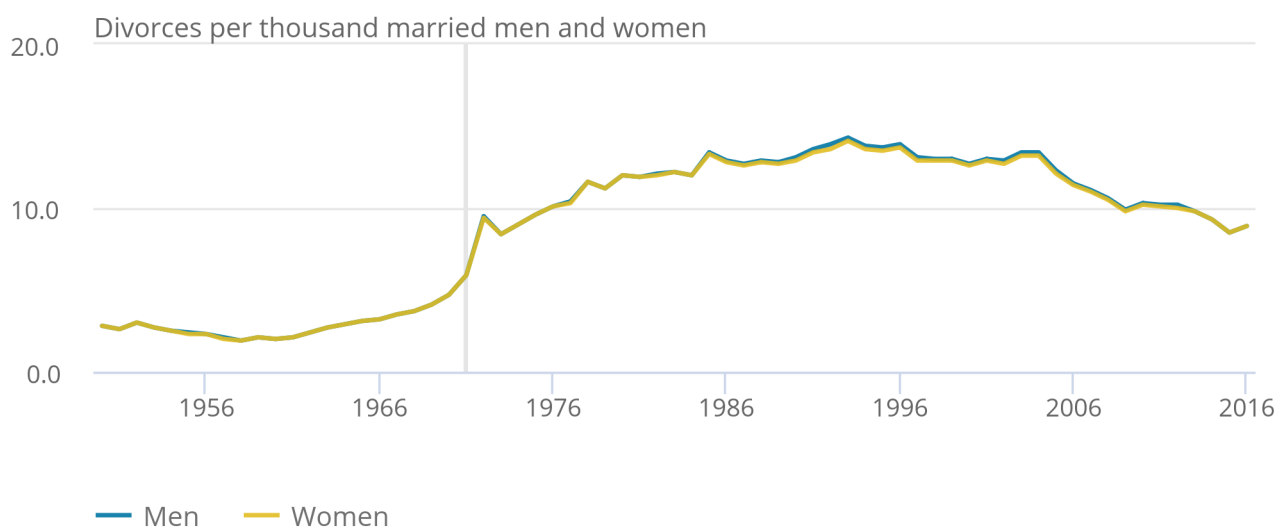
Figure 2: Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2016

England and Wales

Divorce Reform Act 1969 effective from 1 Jan 1971

Figure 2: Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Changes in behaviour and attitudes to divorce are considered to be an important factor behind the increase in divorce rates between the 1960s and the early 1990s. Also, the Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation – this caused a large increase in divorce rates in 1972.

Changes in attitudes to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or prior to marriage, particularly at younger ages, are likely to have been a factor affecting the general decrease in divorce rates since 2003; [levels of cohabitation](#) increased over this period while the married population declined.

5 . Females accounted for majority of divorces among same-sex couples

In 2016, there were 112 divorces among same-sex couples in England and Wales, which was five times more than in the previous year, when there were 22. Over three-quarters (78%) of these divorces were among female couples. Marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014.

The average (mean) age at divorce for same-sex couples who divorced in 2016, was 40.4 years for men and 38.2 years for women.

Unreasonable behaviour was the most common grounds for divorce among same-sex couples, accounting for 96% of divorces among men and 93% of divorces among women. Unreasonable behaviour within same-sex couples can include having a sexual relationship with someone else.

The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for same-sex couples who divorced in 2016 was 4.6 years for men and 2.2 years for women. Although marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014, it was legal for same-sex couples to marry in certain other countries prior to this date, for example, [the Netherlands](#). Divorces relating to marriages that took place abroad are included in our figures, provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales. Additionally, same-sex couples have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage since 10 December 2014; if a civil partnership has been converted into a marriage, the duration of marriage is based on the date the civil partnership was formed rather than the date on which the civil partnership was converted into a marriage. Consequently the duration of marriage to divorce for same-sex couples can exceed the 29 March 2014 commencement date for marriages of same-sex couples.

6 . Unreasonable behaviour remained the most common grounds for opposite-sex couples divorcing

The majority of divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2016 where a decree absolute was granted, were petitioned by the wife (61%). Between 1980 and 2000, this proportion had consistently been at or above 70%. The most common grounds for divorce was unreasonable behaviour, with 36% of all husbands and 51% of all wives petitioning for divorce on these grounds.

Unreasonable behaviour has consistently been the most common ground for wives petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s; previous to this, the ground was named “cruelty”. Unreasonable behaviour has only been the most common ground for husbands petitioning since 2006; in the 1980s and 1990s adultery was generally the most common ground for husbands petitioning, while between 1999 and 2005 it was separation (two years and consent).

7 . At what age were opposite-sex couples divorcing in 2016?

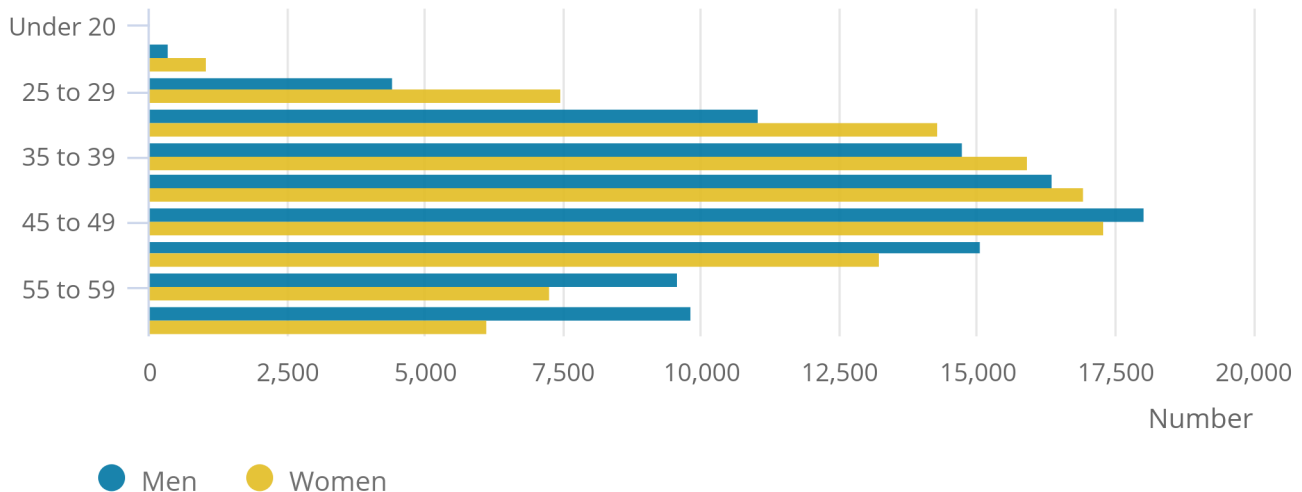
Among opposite-sex couples in 2016, more women than men divorced below the age of 45; at older ages more men than women divorced (Figure 3). This pattern is unchanged from 2015 and reflects the fact that on average men marry women who are younger than themselves. The number of divorces was highest among both men and women aged 45 to 49.

Figure 3: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, age of men and women divorcing, 2016

England and Wales

Figure 3: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, age of men and women divorcing, 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Figures by age will not sum to the total number of divorces because 6.9% of records have no age stated for men and 6.7% of records have no age stated for women.

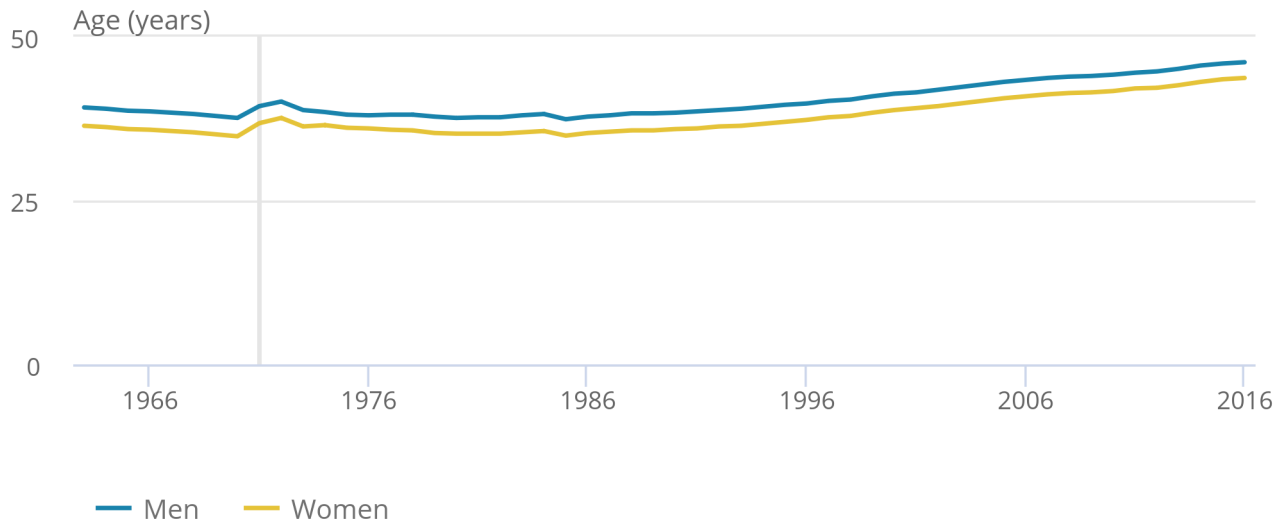
The average (mean) age at divorce for opposite-sex couples in 2016 was 46.1 years for men and 43.7 years for women. The average age at divorce has increased year-on-year since 1985, rising by more than 8 years for both men and women (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, average (mean) age at divorce for men and women, 1963 to 2016

England and Wales

Figure 4: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, average (mean) age at divorce for men and women, 1963 to 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Average age at divorce is only available back to 1963.

[Age at marriage is considered to be closely linked to the risk of divorce](#) with those marrying in their teens and early twenties being at greater risk of divorce.

Divorce rates among opposite-sex couples in 2016 were highest among men aged 45 to 49 and among women in their thirties (ages 30 to 39). This reflects the fact that women generally marry men older than themselves.

Compared with 2015, divorce rates in 2016 have increased for men aged 25 and over and for women in all age groups with the exception of those aged 25 to 29.

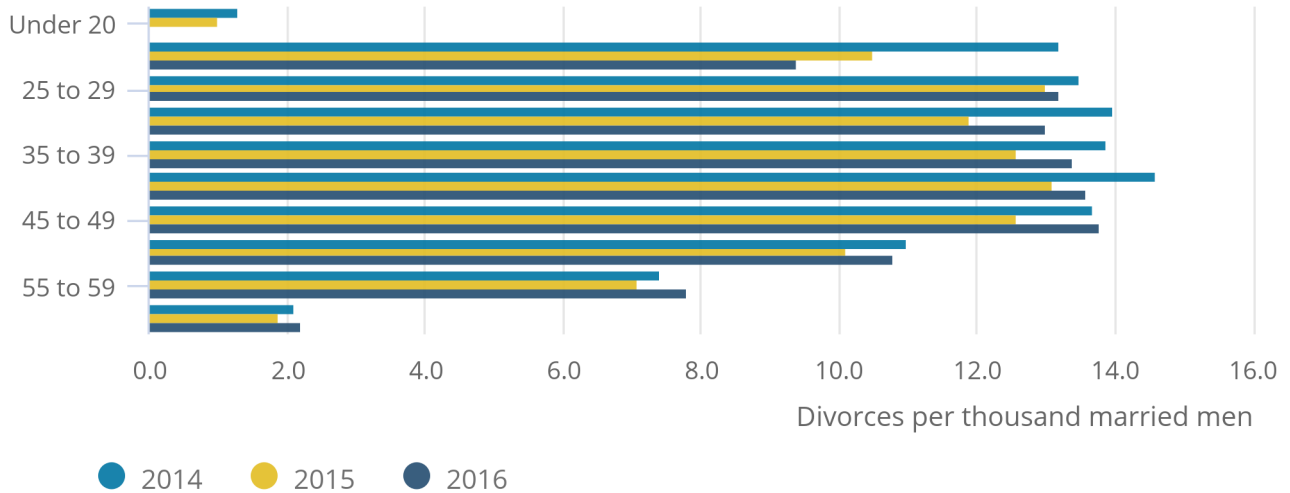
Overall, divorce rates in 2016 are lower than in 2014. This suggests that the downward trend in the number and rate of divorce could still be continuing but could be masked by the relatively large fall recorded between 2014 and 2015. Compared with 2014, divorce rates in 2016 have decreased for men aged under 45 and 50 to 54 and for women aged 20 to 34, 40 to 44 and 50 to 54 (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for men, 2014, 2015 and 2016

England and Wales

Figure 5: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for men, 2014, 2015 and 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

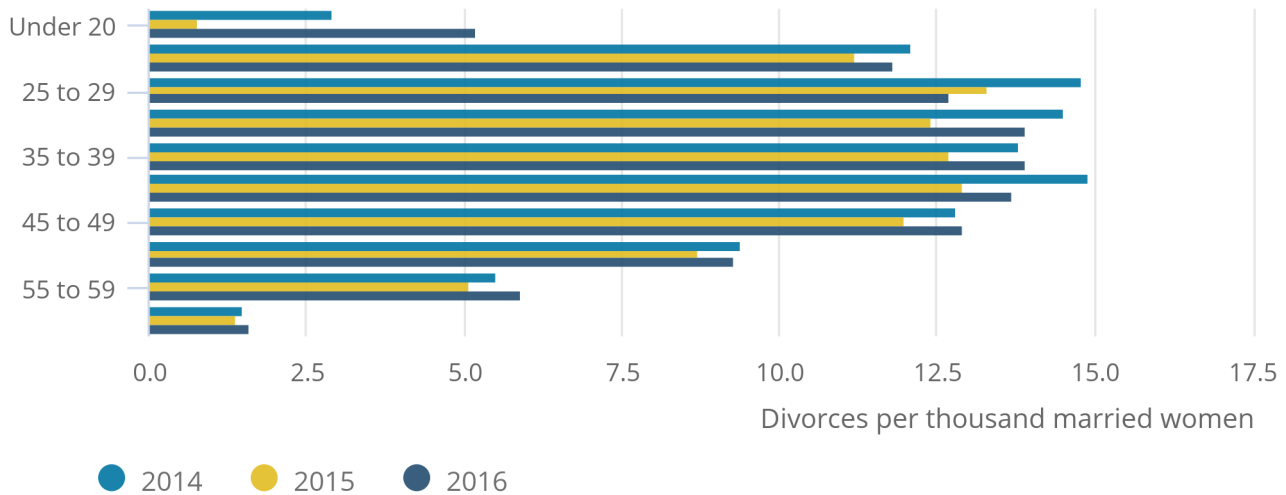
1. Rates by age have been calculated excluding the records where age was not stated
2. In 2016, fewer than 3 men aged under 20 divorced; rates are not calculated when there are fewer than 3 divorces as rates based on such low numbers are susceptible to inaccurate interpretation.

Figure 6: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for women, 2014, 2015 and 2016

England and Wales

Figure 6: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for women, 2014, 2015 and 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Rates by age have been calculated excluding the records where age was not stated.

8 . Median duration of marriage among divorcing opposite-sex couples was 12 years

The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for divorces granted to opposite-sex couples in 2016 was 12.0 years, increasing slightly from 11.9 in 2015. There has been a very gradual increase in the median duration of marriages that end in divorce since 2009 when it was 11.4 years. Over the last 50 years, the median duration has remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 8.9 years and 12.2 years (Figure 7).

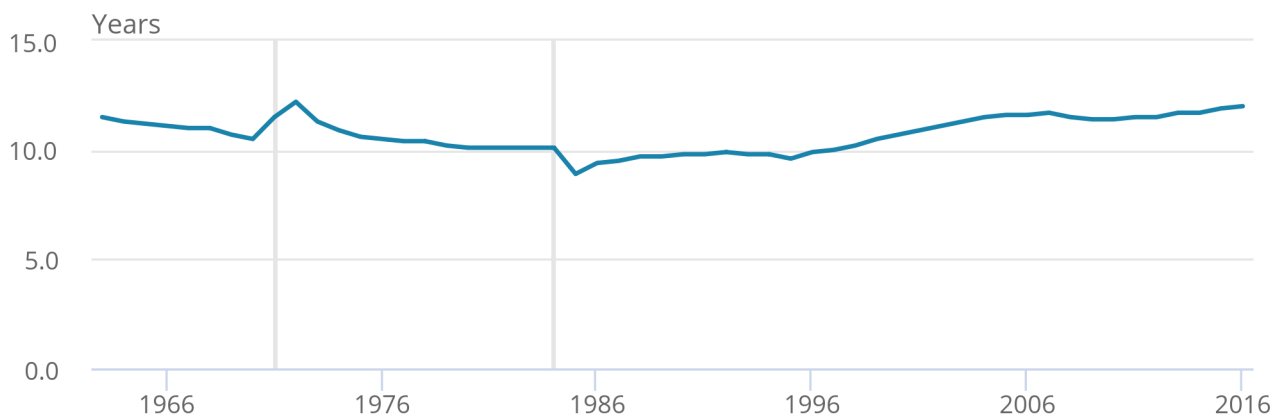
Figure 7: Median duration of marriages that end in divorce for opposite-sex couples, 1963 to 2016

England and Wales

Divorce Reform Act 1969 effective from 1 Jan 1971

Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 effective from 12 Oct 1984

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 replaced the minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce from three years to one year, resulting in a fall in the median duration of marriage in 1985.

9 . What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has generally increased for those marrying between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. For example, 22% of marriages in 1970 had ended by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 33% of marriages in 1995 had ended after the same period of time. For those marrying since 2000, there is some evidence of decreases in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce. The proportion of men and women who had ever divorced has also declined over recent decades.

The cumulative percentages of marriages that end in divorce increase more rapidly in the first 10 years of marriage than the 10 years after that. Once the 20th wedding anniversary is reached, the cumulative percentages increase less rapidly.

[What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) shows that the estimated percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage.

More explanations of these trends are available alongside the data.

10 . Links to related statistics

For more detailed divorce statistics see our [datasets](#), which provide a long time series, or our [explorable dataset](#), which provide detailed divorce statistics for 2009 to 2016.

The number of divorces and the divorce rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference tables](#).

Further statistics on [marriages](#), [civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available. We also have [explorable datasets](#) for marriages and a visual story about [marriage and divorce among older people](#).

Special extracts and tabulations of divorces data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and the [ONS charging policy](#), where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to Vital Statistics Outputs Branch by email to vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk or telephone: +44 (0)1329 444110. [User requested data](#) will be made publicly available.

11 . Quality and methodology

This is the first time that divorce statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2016; the release provides final annual data.

We previously aimed to publish annual divorce statistics around 12 to 13 months after the end of the reference period. Since 2016, we have been receiving monthly datasets rather than annual ones, which has enabled more timely publications than was previously possible.

Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes.

The [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information](#) report contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users
- how the output was created

Our [User Guide to Divorce Statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces and includes a glossary of terms.

Divorce statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information](#).

The [Revisions policy for population statistics \(including divorce statistics\)](#) is available.

The average (mean) ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing structure of the male and female population by age and marital status.

Divorce rates have been calculated in this release for opposite-sex couples. The rates have been calculated by dividing:

- the number of males or females, married in opposite-sex couples, who divorce in a particular year, by
- the estimated number of married males or females aged 16 and over in that year ([population estimates by marital status](#))

While the actual number of males and females in opposite-sex couples getting divorced in a particular year is equal, the number of married males and females can differ because one partner could live away, either overseas or in a communal establishment such as a care home or prison. For this reason, divorce rates for males and females can differ for a particular year.