

Statistical bulletin

Divorces in England and Wales: 2021

Annual divorce numbers and rates, by duration of marriage, sex and to whom granted and reason.



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1 . Main points

- In 2021, there were 113,505 divorces granted in England and Wales, a 9.6% increase compared with 2020 when there were 103,592 divorces.
- The number and timelines of divorces granted during 2020 may have been affected by disruption to family court activities during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic; the increase in divorces granted in 2021 may partially reflect these delays as well as the impact of the pandemic on divorce applications.
- The majority (111,934) of divorces in 2021 were among opposite-sex couples, with 1,571 (1.4%) among same-sex couples; female couples made up 67.2% of same-sex divorces.
- Divorce rates in 2021 were 9.3 for men and 9.4 for women per 1,000 of the married population (including both opposite-sex and same-sex couples); in comparison the rates in 2020 were lower, with 8.5 for men and 8.6 for women per 1,000 of the married population.
- Among opposite-sex couples in 2021, females were more likely to petition for divorce (63.1%) compared with males (36.9%); these are similar proportions to those in 2020, with 62.6% of petitions where females petitioned and 37.4% with males petitioning.
- Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for females petitioning for divorce among opposite-sex couples in 2021, accounting for 48.1% of applications; for males, the most common reasons for divorce were unreasonable behaviour or two-year separation, which both accounted for 34.8% of applications.

Statistician's comment

Today's data show there was an increase in the number of divorces in 2021, however this follows a decrease in 2020. It is important to remember that divorces in both 2020 and 2021 may have been affected by disruption to family court activities because of the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on divorce applications. If we look at trends over a longer period of time, we have seen changes in the percentage of marriages ending in divorce by their 10th wedding anniversary. Back in 1965, 1 in 10 couples who married that year were divorced by their 10th anniversary. This increased to 1 in 4 couples for those married in 1995. However, for couples married in 2011 (the most recent cohort to have reached this milestone), we have seen a decrease, with fewer than 1 in 5 marriages ending in divorce by their 10th wedding anniversary.

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2 . Number of divorces and rates

Opposite-sex divorces

In 2021 there were 111,934 opposite-sex divorces, which is an increase of 9.3% from 2020 and 4.0% from 2019 divorces. This is the highest number seen since 2013, where there were 114,720 divorces. In 2021, 63.1% of opposite-sex divorces were petitioned by females, with only 36.9% petitioned by males. This is similar to the percentages seen in 2020; 62.6% where females petitioned, and 37.4% where males petitioned. Cases of decree of nullity (annulments) included in our divorce statistics have decreased, from 297 in 2019, to 257 in 2020, and down to 231 in 2021.

Same-sex divorces

There were 1,571 same-sex divorces in 2021. This is an increase of 36.1% compared with 1,154 same-sex divorces in 2020. Of these divorces in 2021, 67.2% were female couples, which was slightly lower than the proportion in 2020 (71.3%).

Same-sex divorces have only been possible since 2015 because of the introduction of same-sex marriages in 2014. Since the first same-sex divorces in 2015, when there were 22 divorces, the number has increased year on year.

Divorce rates

In 2021, the divorce rate for opposite-sex and same-sex couples combined was 9.3 for men and 9.4 for women per 1,000 of the married population. These are the highest rates since 2014, where the rates for men and women were 9.3 per 1,000 of the married population (opposite-sex only). The 2021 rates are an increase of 0.8 compared with 2020 rates for both men and women.

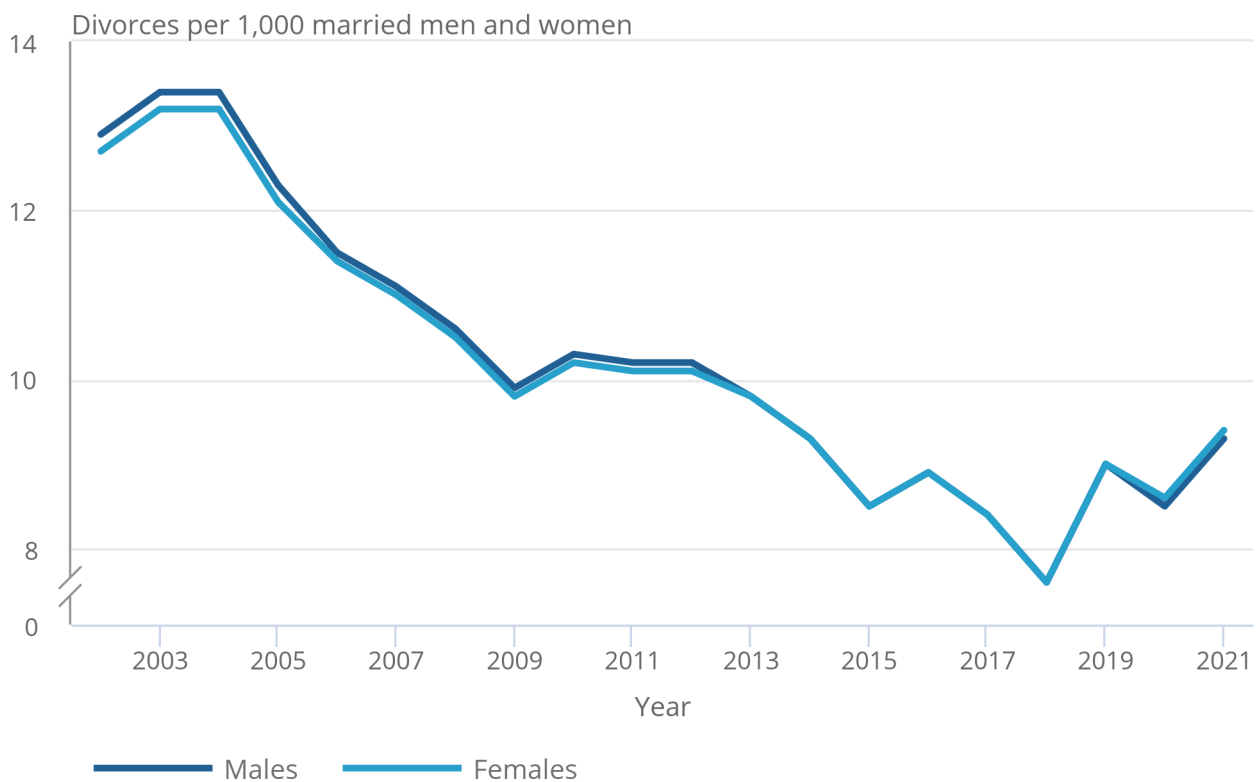
There has been an apparent increase in divorce rates in recent years. However, the timing of divorce completions has been affected by processing delays (in 2017 and 2018) and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which may be affecting the trend since 2020.

Figure 1: Divorce rates have increased in recent years

Divorce rates for males and females per 1,000 of the married population aged 16 years and over, England and Wales, 2002 to 2021

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Divorce rates for males and females per 1,000 of the married population aged 16 years and over, England and Wales, 2002 to 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Divorces in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Divorce rates from 2015 include both opposite-sex and same-sex couples.

3 . Marriages ending in divorce

The cumulative percentages of marriages ending in divorce by their 25th (silver) wedding anniversary has increased over time. For couples who married in 1963 (the first cohort with data available), 23% had divorced by their 25th anniversary. This has steadily risen to 41% for couples who married in 1996 (the latest marriage cohort to potentially reach their 25th anniversary).

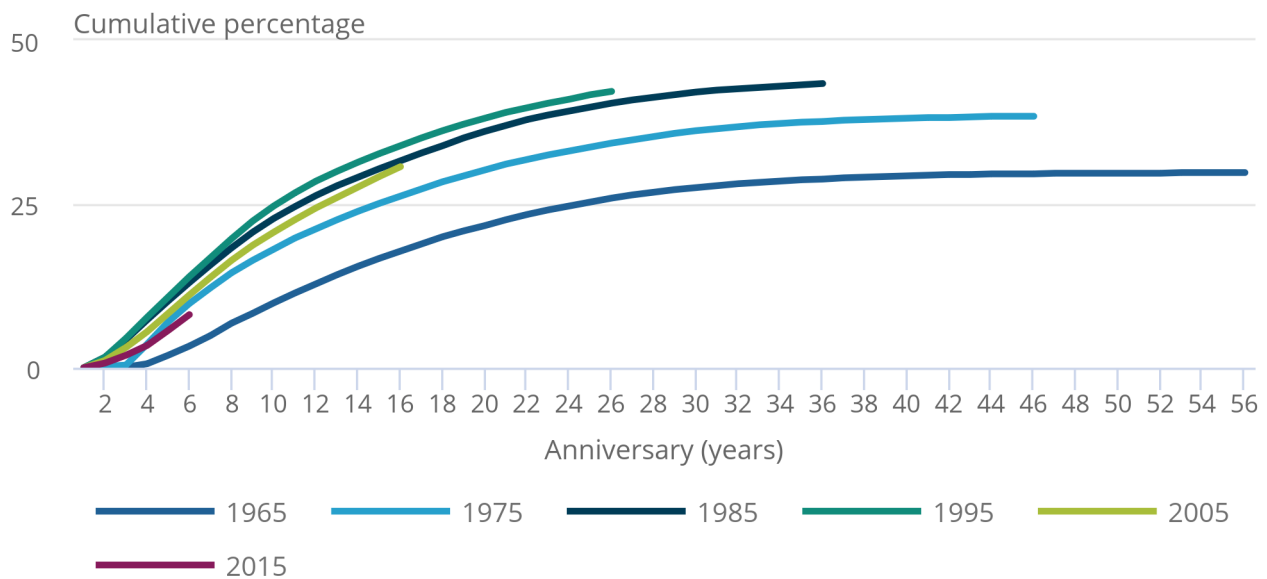
There have also been changes in the percentage of marriages ending in divorce by their 10th wedding anniversary over time. This has increased from 1 in 10 couples married in 1965 (10%) to 1 in 4 couples in 1995 (25%). For couples married more recently there has been a decrease, with 18% of marriages in 2011 ending in divorce by their 10th wedding anniversary (the most recent cohort to reach their 10th anniversary).

Figure 2: More recent marriage cohorts, married in 2005 and 2015, are showing reduced levels of divorce

Cumulative percentage of marriages ending in divorce by year of marriage and by year of anniversary, England and Wales, 1965 to 2015

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Cumulative percentage of marriages ending in divorce by year of marriage and by year of anniversary, England and Wales, 1965 to 2015



Source: Office for National Statistics – Divorces in England and Wales

4 . Duration of marriage

For opposite-sex divorces in 2021, the median duration of marriage at divorce (the mid-point of all durations) was 12.3 years, an increase compared with 11.9 years in 2020. This is slightly below the highest value for the median, which was 12.5 years in 2018. The lowest recorded median duration was in 1985 with 8.9 years. The most common duration of marriage for opposite-sex couples getting divorced in 2021 was 8 years, with 6,229 divorces.

For same-sex divorces in 2021, the median duration of marriage was 5.9 years for male same-sex couples and 5.1 years for female same-sex couples. Both male and female marriage durations are the highest seen, which reflects that same-sex divorces have only been possible in England and Wales since 2015. The most common duration of marriage for male same-sex couples in 2021 was 5 years (75 divorces) and 4 years for female same-sex couples (195 divorces).

5 . Grounds for divorce

The most common ground (facts proven) for opposite-sex divorces for females petitioning in 2021 was unreasonable behaviour (48.1%). This is slightly higher than in 2020 (47.4%). Unreasonable behaviour was the ground given for 43.2% of all opposite-sex petitions in 2021, including 34.8% of divorces where the petitioner was male. This has been the most common ground for females petitioning for over 40 years.

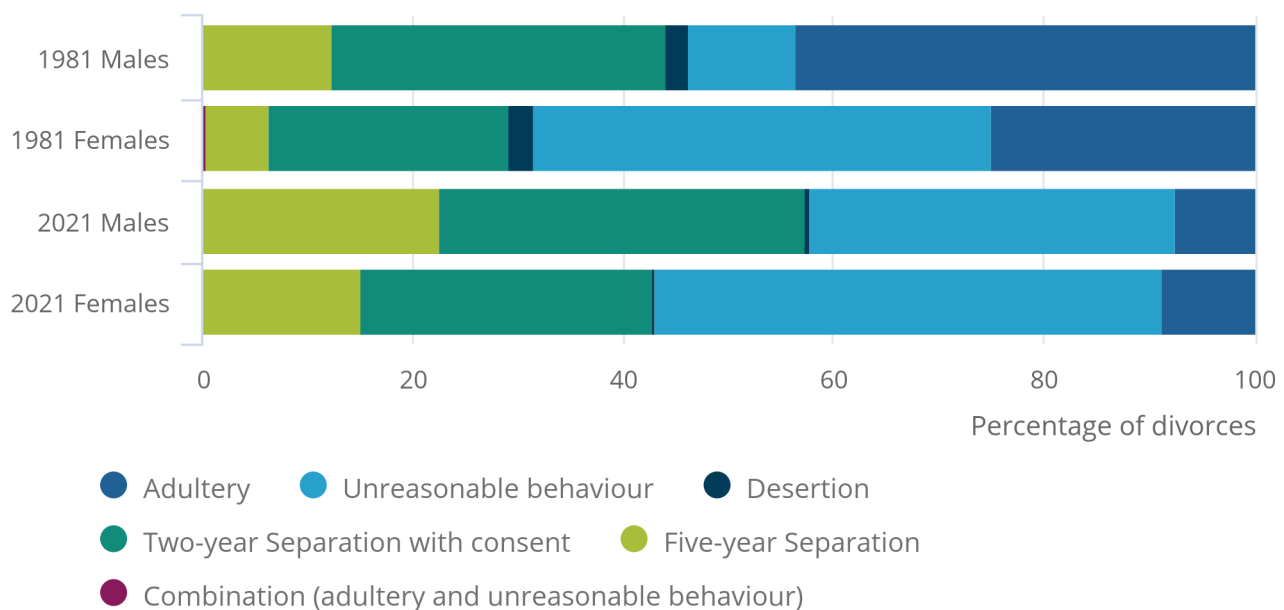
Between 2006 and 2019, the most common ground for males petitioning in opposite-sex divorces was unreasonable behaviour. In 2020, two-year separation became the most common ground. In 2021, both unreasonable behaviour and two-year separation each accounted for 34.8% of the grounds for males petitioning opposite-sex divorces.

Figure 3: Among opposite-sex couples, unreasonable behaviour has remained the most common grounds for divorce for petitions by females

Percentages of grounds given for divorce in opposite-sex divorces by females or males petitioning, England and Wales, 1981 and 2021

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Percentages of grounds given for divorce in opposite-sex divorces by females or males petitioning, England and Wales, 1981 and 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Divorces in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

For same-sex couples in 2021, unreasonable behaviour made up 54.5% of divorces. This comprises of 53.8% for females petitioning and 56.0% for males petitioning under this ground.

Unreasonable behaviour has been the most common ground for same-sex divorces since the first same-sex divorces in 2015. However, the percentage of same-sex divorce because of unreasonable behaviour has decreased with time, from 77.3% in 2015.

The proportions for the grounds given for same-sex couples are not directly comparable with opposite-sex couples because of same-sex marriage only being legal since 2014.

Following the [Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020](#), which came into effect on 6 April 2022, the requirement to specify grounds for divorce has been removed. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has stated that this might have affected divorces in 2021.

See the [User guide for divorce statistics](#) for more information.

6 . Divorces in England and Wales data

[Divorces in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 2 November 2022

Annual statistics on the number of divorce and divorce rates, by petitioner and decree granted, sex and duration of marriage.

[Explorable dataset for divorces in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 2 November 2022

This dataset provides statistics on divorces between opposite-sex couples, which took place in England and Wales, broken down by the year of occurrence, fact proven, who petitioned and duration of marriage.

7 . Glossary

Annulment

An annulment of marriage occurs following a successful petition for nullity. It declares that the marriage itself is void (that no valid marriage ever existed) or voidable (was legal at time of registration but is no longer legal).

Facts proven

The Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 came into effect on 6 April 2022. Before this, a petitioner had to prove one or more of five facts (adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion and separation, either with or without consent of the respondent) to establish the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS)

[HM Courts and Tribunals Service \(HMCTS\)](#) is an executive agency of the [Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\)](#) and is responsible for the running of most of the courts and tribunals in England and Wales. HMCTS supplies information on divorces to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Median

The median duration of marriage at divorce reported in this release is represented by the middle value when the data are arranged in increasing order. The median is used, rather than the mean, because the duration of marriage for divorces is not symmetrically distributed. Therefore, the median provides a more accurate reflection of the average duration of marriage. The mean would be affected by the relatively small number of divorces that take place when duration of marriage exceeds 15 years.

Petitioner

The person seeking a dissolution or annulment.

Respondent

The person who is served a petition for divorce.

Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) contains a glossary of other terms.

8 . Measuring the data

This release provides final annual divorce statistics for England and Wales for 2021.

Divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) during the divorce process. [Annulments](#) are for marriages that were not legally valid in the first place. Divorce statistics do not include married couples who separate but do not divorce.

Divorces for marriages that 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/or Wales.

Civil partnership dissolutions are not included in our divorce statistics; they are reported separately in our [Civil partnerships in England and Wales bulletin](#).

Quality and methodology

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in our [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) report](#). Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces and includes a glossary of terms.

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

9 . Strengths and limitations

Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for developing and monitoring government policy as well as by religious and other belief organisations to monitor trends and plan their services.

National Statistics status for Divorces in England and Wales

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

See our most recent full assessment from November 2013 which confirms National Statistics status in [Statistics on Marriages and Divorces in England and Wales: Letter of Confirmation as National Statistics](#).

Improvements since last review

- Coverage of annual divorce statistics was altered from UK to England and Wales only from the 2014 data year onwards following a consultation exercise in February 2015. This has led to more timely final statistics for England and Wales. Summary figures for the UK continue to be published in our [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages dataset](#).
- In October 2013, we undertook a user consultation exercise on [User requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same sex couples](#). The purpose of the consultation was to understand the user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same-sex couples. The [response to the user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same sex couples consultation \(PDF, 102KB\)](#), was published in April 2014.
- Summary tables have been extended to provide statistics on divorces of same-sex couples from the 2015 data year, following the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples on 29 March 2014.
- Provision of detailed statistics for divorces of opposite-sex couples are available in an [explorable Divorces of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales dataset](#) for the 2009 data year onwards.

Comparability

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

Divorce statistics tell us the number of divorces that take place during a particular year. They are not directly comparable with estimates from census or household surveys on the overall number of divorcees in the population.

Accuracy

From the 2020 data year onwards, information about the age and previous marital status is not available as it is no longer collected during the divorce and civil partnership dissolution process by HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS).

Calculation of rates

Divorce rates have been calculated using the total married population (both opposite-sex and same-sex couples) from our [Population estimates by marital status bulletin](#). This approach allows analysis of changes over time.

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. This is 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 may be different for a particular year.

10 . Related links

[Divorce statistics for Scotland](#)

Publication | Released 28 April 2022

Statistics on civil law cases in the Scottish courts together with other related information, such as statistics from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey.

[Divorce statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Webpage | Released 21 September 2022

Divorce statistics for Northern Ireland based on decree absolute data provided by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS).

[Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#)

Article | Released 18 July 2017

This article discusses the pattern of changing relationships at older ages in England and Wales and why older people are getting married and divorced in greater numbers.

[Divorce statistics for Europe](#)

Article | Released 13 May 2022

This article presents developments that have taken place in relation to family formation and dissolution through an analysis of marriage and divorce indicators for the EU-27 countries.

11 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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