Families and households, UK quality and methods guide

What the families and households statistics cover, how we produce them, and their quality and comparability. Includes definitions and latest, past and upcoming changes.

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1 . Overview

This guide provides quality and methods information for our families and households statistical article series.

We produce annual statistics on families and households in the UK. These include estimates of the number of people living in families and households, presence of children and estimates of those living alone (by age group and sex). The estimates are created from the household dataset of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The LFS does not cover those living in communal establishments, such as care homes, prisons or military barracks. Students living in halls of residence (whose parents live in the UK) are not sampled at their term-time address but are included through proxy interviews if their parents' addresses are sampled. NHS accommodations are treated as private addresses and are sampled as such.

As with any set of survey-based statistics, these were produced using a sample and would vary were another sample taken in its place.

These are accredited official statistics.

2 . Latest changes to quality and methods

In April 2026, we restructured to a quality and methods guide in a bid to provide more transparent information to users. This also included merging information from our Families and households statistics explained article. We made no important changes to quality and methods.

For more information on these latest changes, as well as any past and upcoming changes, go to Changes and their effects on comparability over time.

3 . What the statistics cover

We present statistics on families and households in the UK in seven separate datasets:

- Families and households
- Young adults living with their parents
- Families by family type, regions of England and Great Britain constituent countries
- People in families by family type and presence of children, regions of England and Great Britain constituent countries
- Households by type of household and family, regions of England and Great Britain constituent countries
- People in households by type of household and family, regions of England and Great Britain constituent countries
- Households by household size, regions of England and Great Britain constituent countries

Breakdowns in the datasets

The datasets include breakdowns by the different forms of family and household.

Family and household categories

- married couple family
- civil partner couple family
- opposite-sex cohabiting couple family
- same-sex cohabiting couple family
- lone-parent family
- lone-mother family
- lone-father family
- all families
- no children
- dependent children
- non-dependent children
- one-person households
- two or more unrelated adults
- one-family households
- multi-family households
- all households

Data periods vary between datasets. Data are published on an annual basis with the latest data being for the 2025 data year. Statistics for married people are further broken down into opposite-sex and same-sex. Age groupings are provided where possible.

In addition to the main data tables, we have published estimates of young adults living with their parents.

4 . Where the data come from

The data come from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The LFS is a quarterly social survey covering private households in the UK. The resident population includes those who regard the sample address as their main address or have lived there for more than six consecutive months. It captures people living at sampled addresses and does not record any relationships outside of that household.

It does not sample those living in communal establishments. People in NHS accommodation are sampled. Students in halls of residence whose parents live in the UK are included through proxy interviews with their parents.

LFS datasets are produced on a quarterly basis each year (January to March, April to June, July to September and October to December). Our Families and households in the UK statistical bulletins use the April to June quarter each year as this includes the mid-year point, which is 30 June.

The Labour Force Survey user guide: Volume 8 recommends the use of the household dataset for family and household statistics. This differs from the person-level dataset in that it ensures that the weight given to each member of the same household is the same.

5 . How we produce the statistics

Weighted estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) are calculated for each year, and for each family and household type.

Typically, reweighting of the LFS happens every time new population estimates and projections are published, or revisions are made to the population estimates back-series. Estimates for 2020 and 2021 were reweighted in our Families and households in the UK: 2022 bulletin.

For more information on weighting of the LFS, see our Impact of reweighting on Labour Force Survey key indicators article.

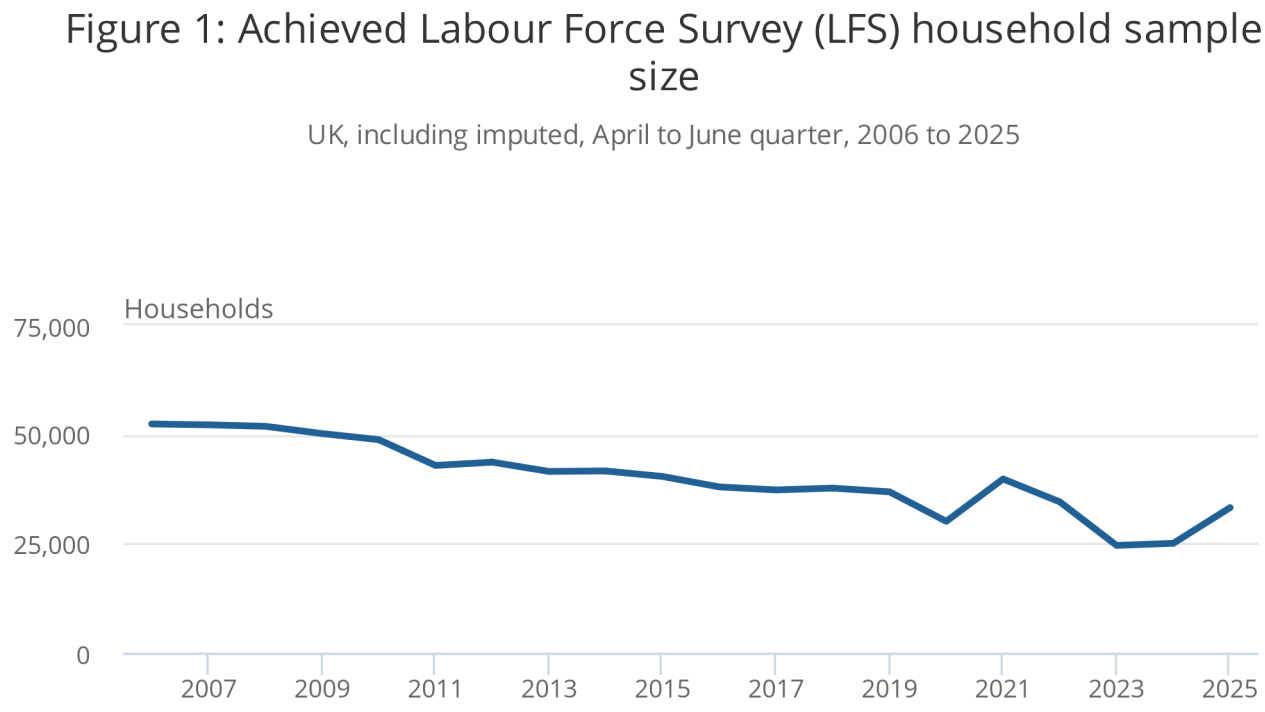
The families and households' estimates are subject to sampling variation. For some smaller groups like civil partner couple families, estimates are considered less precise. Estimates based on sample sizes of fewer than three are suppressed in published tables. Tables have been designed to minimise the need for suppression by combining similar groups, such as no children, with non-dependent children or age groups.

Estimates are presented with confidence intervals as a measure of accuracy and an indication of the size of the coefficient of variation (CV) as a measure of robustness.

Response rates (a proportion of how many interviews were achieved as a proportion of those eligible for the survey) have declined in recent years. Low response rates or achieved sample sizes are an important factor in understanding uncertainty of these statistics. However, following implementation of the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan, achieved sample sizes are improving. For more information, see our Labour Force Survey performance and quality monitoring reports.

Figure 1: Achieved Labour Force Survey (LFS) household sample size

UK, including imputed, April to June quarter, 2006 to 2025



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

How families are classified

Our definition of a family is constrained by the fact that a family must all reside at the same address, so the categorisation of some families may not reflect how we might naturally view family relationships.

The following examples feature some common circumstances and explain how these are captured in the statistics.

A person "away from home"

This could be for several different reasons. Examples may include:

- a child currently away from home
- married, but spouse currently lives away
- a family member attending university, a military deployment, imprisonment or in hospital

The six-month rule is used to decide whether to include the individual, in the family (and the household). If the length of absence exceeds six months, then we would not include this person as part of a family or a household. If it is less, then they would be captured by proxy interview.

Relationships where the partner lives at a different address

The partner is not included at the sampled address and may be captured in a sample at their own address.

Foster child living in the family

In the LFS, foster children, and other children who live with someone other than their parents (an older sibling, for example), are treated as being a separate one-person family unit within the household. The foster child maintains their dependent status but is given their own "head of family" reference, separate from the head of household's family reference. This ensures these children are counted as dependants within the household, but not dependants of the head of household's family.

As a result, in the household dataset, foster children are not included in the family they are living with. They are also not classed as families in their own right, so should not appear in the families' tables. In these cases, the household type is based on the family the foster child lives with.

How households are classified

The following examples feature some common circumstances and explain how these are captured in the statistics.

Living alone

Adults aged 16 years and over who live alone are included in our statistics in the category "one-person households", which we split by sex and broad age groups.

People living alone are not classed as a family so are excluded from any tables that report on the estimated number of families or people living in families.

Multi-family households

This encompasses households that include individuals who are:

- unrelated, for example, two unrelated couples sharing a house
- related and multi-generational, for example, cohabiting couple plus children and elderly parents; or married couple plus their daughter and her child
- related but not multi-generational, for example, cohabiting couple plus son and girlfriend; or two brothers and their partners sharing a house

If there is a couple in the household, or if someone lives with their child, they are considered to have formed their own family, and where there are two or more families, this is referred to as a multi-family household.

Living with a partner and child but also parents

Here we would have more than one family: the person, their partner and the child would form one family. The parents (grandparents of the child) would form the other family. This household would contain two families and would be classed as a "multi-family household".

Living with a partner and child but also one parent

If a couple and their dependent child live with one parent (a grandparent of the child) who is not living with a partner, then the classification of this household would be a one-family household containing a couple with dependent children.

In this scenario, the grandparent does not form their own family, so the household is included in the category that best describes the household structure (based on the family present in the household). This is the case even if the grandparent is the household reference person.

Adult(s) living with parents

An adult living with a parent, grandparent or step-parent(s), along with any siblings is likely to be captured in a married or cohabiting couple household or lone-parent household with either dependent children, or in a household with non-dependent children.

However, if an adult lives with their partner and/or their child(ren) at their parent's address, the adult is considered to have formed their own family and therefore the household would be classed as a "multi-family household".

Living in a house share

Many young adults live in what they describe as a "house share" or "flat share" – these would be captured in the category households containing "two or more unrelated adults".

If there is a couple in the household, or if someone lives with their child, they are considered to have formed their own family. This means that some instances of those living in "house shares" or "flat shares" might be captured as "other household types".

Lodger living with a family

Lodgers who have no spouse, partner or child living in the household are not counted as their own family and are included in the category that best describes the household.

6 . Quality of the statistics

Statistical designation

The Office for Statistics Regulation independently reviewed the families and households accredited official statistics in September 2011. They comply with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value inthe Code of Practice for Statistics and should be labelled "accredited official statistics".

How we quality assure the data and statistics

First, the Social Surveys Division carries out validation checks as part of the production of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) dataset.

We then carry out validation checks when we receive the dataset, and apply edit rules:

- lone parents do not have a partner in the household
- no one aged under 16 years is married or living in a couple; this will be updated to reflect the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022
- nobody is in a civil partnership before 2005
- children are not heads of families
- same-sex marriage flag has been applied correctly

If our validation checks fail, these cases are referred to the Social Surveys Division within the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for validation and correction.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths

- These data provide users with valuable insight into the changing patterns of families and households back to 1996.
- The survey estimates are taken from the LFS, which provides estimates used for labour market, economic statistics, and family and household statistics.
- The use of household survey estimates means that families' statistics are adaptive to changes in legislation relating to legal partnership status (for example, the introduction of civil partnerships and same-sex marriages); however, small sample sizes may mean that it takes a number of years before it is possible to produce robust estimates at lower geographies or by other demographic characteristics such as age.
- Confidence intervals and an indication of the size of the coefficient of variation are presented around the survey component of the estimates to give users an indication of the reliability and robustness of the estimates.

Limitations

- Because of the design of the LFS, resulting data do not include the approximately 2% of the population living in communal establishments; this can affect coverage of the statistics.
- The LFS is a study of employment circumstances in the UK, used to provide information on the UK labour market; therefore, its primary function is not to provide information on demographics such as families and households.
- The definitions used to describe families and households are constrained by the LFS, and therefore, a lot of complexities of family and household formation cannot be explored (for example, families are constrained by the fact that they must all reside at the same address).
- Some demographic groups, such as older people and those in same-sex unions, have small sample sizes within the LFS, so, estimates and trends are not always robust enough for meaningful commentary.
- Estimates from a sample survey vary according to the specific characteristics of the respondents that have been sampled; some inferences can be made as to the characteristics of non-respondents and whether non-response has the impact on the quality of the survey results.
- The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the data collection and weighting of the LFS. More information is available:

Coronavirus and its impact on the LFS

Measuring the labour market during the pandemic

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on UK population

The impact of the change in weighting on main LFS indicators published in October 2020

The GOV.UK statistics release calendar provides up to 12 months' notice of release dates. In the event of a change to the pre-announced release schedule, public attention will be drawn to the change and the reasons for it explained fully at the same time, as set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

European Statistical System quality dimensions

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has developed guidelines for measuring statistical quality based on the five European Statistical System (ESS) quality dimensions. These are:

- relevance
- accuracy and reliability
- timelessness and punctuality
- comparability and coherence
- accessibility and clarity

We have integrated these considerations into the guide.

7 . Changes and their effects on comparability over time

Over the years, we have changed how we produce families and households' statistics. Sometimes this is to improve the statistics, and sometimes it is because of external changes such as changes to policy, or to legal definitions.

Changes can sometimes affect comparability of the statistics over time.

Latest changes

In April 2026, we restructured to a quality and methods guide in a bid to provide more transparent information to users. This also included merging information from our Families and households statistics explained article. We have made no important changes to quality and methods.

We have also started to make adjustments to our quality assurance processes following the introduction of the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022.

Past changes

These changes are themed and ordered by date, with the most recent first.

Marital status definitions

Further to provisions set out in the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Civil Partnership (Opposite-sex Couples) Regulations 2019, opposite-sex couples in England and Wales became eligible to form a civil partnership from 31 December 2019.

From 2020 onwards, estimates of civil partnership couple families and households will include both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

Separate estimates for families and households containing couples in opposite-sex civil partnerships and same-sex civil partnerships, respectively, will not be available until sample sizes for opposite-sex civil partnerships become large enough to produce robust estimates.

Consideration will be given as to how best to incorporate opposite-sex civil partnerships in the future, dependent on the number of opposite-sex civil partners sampled as part of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Geography

While breakdowns are provided for the countries of Great Britain, these statistics for Wales and Scotland are there for comparison purposes only. The official statistics for these areas are available from the Welsh Government and National Records of Scotland, respectively.

Following a request from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), we no longer produce comparator series for families and households' statistics from the LFS. We last published comparators for families in Northern Ireland in our 2021 data release and households in Northern Ireland in our 2020 data release.

Since our 2019 release, a subset of tables has been produced for UK countries and English regions.

To request data that are not currently provided, please email pop.info@ons.gov.uk or use the feedback tools provided for each table in the accompanying datasets. Please note that data requests are subject to quality checks, which means not all requests can be provided and requests may be charged in line with our charging policy.

Supporting documentation

Our Household estimates and projections across the UK user guide provides information on the different household estimates available across the UK and when to use them.

Table updates

In response to our user requests, for the 2020 release, we expanded Table 5 to include household size of six and seven people or more for years 2015 onwards; before this, there was only a category for families made up of six or more people.

In November 2019, we added feedback links to our datasets so users can more easily let us know which tables are useful and what else they would like.

For our release in November 2016, we added a breakdown of married couple families into opposite-sex and same-sex (Table 9).

In the November 2015 release, we started including estimates of young adults living with their parents, in a dataset.

Measures of uncertainty

Confidence intervals and coefficients of variation were included from July 2016 onwards.

Upcoming changes

These changes are ordered by date, with the most immediate first.

Change in legislation

As the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 fully comes into force and eligibility rules affecting the statistics change (by 2025 it will not be feasible for anyone under the age of 18 years to be married or civil partnered), our quality assurance procedures will be updated to reflect these changes.

Reweighting following census rebasing

During 2026 and into early 2027, following the 2021 Census rebasing of mid-year population estimates, the LFS will be reweighted back to 2012. Families and household statistics will be revised once the weightings have been processed and incorporated into LFS data.

Change in data source

As part of the work to transform the LFS, we are expecting to move our survey data source to the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS). Updates on progress towards implementation of the TLFS can be found in our Labour market transformation – update on progress and plans articles.

Before this happens, an analysis will be conducted to ensure that it is a suitable data source to continue producing these statistics. Other data sources will also be investigated alongside this work.

8 . Comparability and coherence with other statistics producers

Different sources of household estimates include:

- census data
- administrative: registration data, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) benefits data
- survey: English Housing Survey (EHS)

Currently, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has other published household estimates that can be obtained from Census 2021 and previous censuses, from our Household projections bulletin and from further back in time, from our General Household Survey (which later became the General Lifestyle Survey), which ran from 1971 to 2011.

The Census 2021 figures on households and families in England and Wales are likely to differ for several reasons:

- for the census, data refer to a point in time, while for the survey, data are accumulated over a three-month period
- the census is self-completed, while the survey is interviewer-led
- the census covers almost all of the population with only a small amount of estimation, while the survey is weighted from a sample to be representative

Some common themes have emerged from previous analysis into the differences between data sources, such as lower estimates of one-person households in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) compared with other non-survey sources, because of non-contact with one-person households in surveys.

Surveys also generally provided higher estimates of civil partners than registration data, for a variety of possible reasons, including people who have formed a civil partnership outside the UK, either before or after civil partnerships became legal in the UK in 2005. However, in general, estimates were found to be similar to the other sources, given the quite different collection methods.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had affected the data collection and weighting methodology of the LFS. Weighted survey data results from this period are also likely to be changed once the full rebasing of the population for the UK has been completed.

Our Admin-based household estimates for local authorities in England and Wales article uses administrative sources to estimate households. For most local authorities in England and Wales (303 of 318), admin-based household estimates were within 5.0% of Census 2021. At the national level, our admin-based household estimates were similar to our survey-based estimates, when compared with census.

Our Subnational dwelling stock by tenure estimates England article uses a model-based method to produce estimates of tenure for households and dwellings for local authority (LA) areas in England in 2022 and 2023, using a combination of Census 2021 estimates, administrative data and survey data. This dataset is primarily a source of LA-level data and therefore is not directly comparable with the Families and Households Survey data.

Comparisons with other UK countries

Welsh Government

The Welsh Government's (WG) household estimates are not comparable with ours because of the following differences:

- ONS estimates are based on survey data from the LFS, while WG estimates are based on a combination of ONS produced mid-year population estimates and census data
- ONS estimates include information on families and breakdowns of household by family type but do not include LA data, while WG estimates include the number of households at LA level

National Records of Scotland

National Records of Scotland's (NRS) Households and Dwellings in Scotland are not comparable with ours because of the following differences:

- ONS estimates are based on survey data from the LFS, while NRS estimates are based on Council Tax data
- ONS estimates include information on families and breakdowns of household by family type but do not include local authority data, while NRS estimates include the number of households at Scottish Council level but do not include families data or breakdowns of household by family type

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) Household Projections are not comparable with ours because of the following differences:

- ONS estimates are based on survey data from the LFS and are estimates, while NISRA estimates are based on census data and population projections, and are projections rather than estimates
- ONS estimates include information on families and breakdowns of household by family type but do not include local authority data, while NISRA projections include Local Government Districts data but do not include family measures

More information on the comparability of these statistics can be found in our Household estimates and projections across the UK user guide.

9 . Users and uses of these statistics

A range of organisations and government departments use our families and households statistics to inform services and policies. For example, the estimates:

- are used to feed into other accredited official statistics such as consumer price inflation (CPI)
- have a number of uses, both direct and indirect, informing policy decisions at a national level

Users include:

- policy makers
- politicians and MPs
- journalists and the media
- the private sector
- students, academics and researchers
- charities
- members of the public

10 . Definitions

Family

A family is a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who lives at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent.

Household

From 2011 onwards, a household is defined as one person living alone, or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room or dining area. A household can consist of a single family, more than one family or no families in the case of a group of unrelated people.

For 1996 to 2010, a household is defined as a person living alone, or a group of people living at the same address who have the address as their only or main residence and either share one main meal a day or share living accommodation (or both).

To measure the impact of the introduction of the new household definition, we developed a set of questions to be asked by interviewers for each address they visited. Overall, only two addresses out of 2,188 productive cases (fewer than 0.1% of interviewed households) would change classification under the new household definition.

A helpful way to think of the relationship between families and households is to consider families as a subset or portion of a household, as more than one family can live in a household, with or without other individuals.

Dependent children

are those living in families and are either:

- aged under 16 years
- aged 16 to 18 years and are in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 years who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household

Non-dependent children

are those living with their parent(s) and are either:

- aged 19 years or over and have no spouse, partner or child living in the household
- aged 16 to 18 years and are not in full-time education and have no spouse, partner or child living in the household
- non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children

One-person household

A household that contains just one person. One person living on their own is classed as a family unit in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) but is not classed as a family in the families and households' statistics. One-person households are represented in the household datasets but will not feature in the families' dataset.

Two or more unrelated adults' household

A household with two or more people, none of whom are living as part of a family (that is, they do not contain either a couple or a parent with their child). Examples could be students or friends living together but could also consist of two siblings sharing a house.

One-family households

A household type consisting of both couple households (with or without children) and lone-parent households. Households where there is one family and one individual (for example, a married couple with their daughter and a lodger, or a married couple with one elderly parent) are also classified as one-family households.

Couple with no children

Either a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with no children living with them.

Couple with one or more dependent children

Either a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with children who are aged under 16 years or who are aged 16 to 18 years and in full-time education who do not have a partner or child living in the household. These households can also contain non-dependent children as some households in this category contain a mix of both.

Couple with non-dependent children only

Either a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with children aged 19 years or over, or aged 16 to 18 years who are not in full-time education or who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.

Lone parent with dependent children

A family with a single male or female parent living with children under 16 years or aged 16 to 18 years and in full-time education. Some of these families may contain non-dependent children too.

Note: Only the parent living with their children is included in the estimated number of lone-parent families and households.

Lone parent with non-dependent children only

A family with a single male or female parent living with children aged 19 years or over, or children who are aged 16 to 18 years but are not in any full-time education or who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.

Multi-family household

This is a household that consists of two or more families. The families can be:

- unrelated (for example, two unrelated couples sharing a house)
- related and multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus children and elderly parents, or married couple plus their daughter and her child)
- related but not multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus son and girlfriend, or two brothers and their partners sharing a house)

Communal establishment

An establishment providing managed residential accommodation. "Managed" in this context means full- or part-time supervision of the accommodation. According to Census 2021, communal establishments include:

- university halls of residence and boarding schools
- care homes, hospitals, hospices, and maternity units
- hotels, guest houses, hostels, and bed and breakfasts, all with residential accommodation for seven or more guests
- prisons and other secure facilities
- single living accommodation (SLA) in military bases
- staff accommodation
- religious establishments

The exceptions are NHS accommodations, which are treated as private addresses and are sampled as such. Those residing in university halls of residence, who have a parental home in the UK, are included at their parental address through proxy interviews with their parents.

Labour Force Survey

The main purpose of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is to provide information on the UK labour market, but it includes data on a variety of other variables, such as families and households. The survey does not cover the 2% of the population who live in communal establishments such as prisons and nursing homes.

Information on sampling, and quality and methodology information can be found in our Labour Force Survey (LFS) quality and methodology information (QMI).

The LFS uses a rotation system of five waves. Respondents are interviewed for five successive waves at three-monthly intervals, and 20% of the sample is replaced every quarter; data collection is conducted via face-to-face interview at Wave 1 and then followed up by telephone at further waves.

Each wave is interviewed in five successive quarters, so that in any one quarter, one wave will be receiving their first interview, one wave their second and so on, with one wave receiving their fifth and final interview. So, there is an 80% overlap in the samples for each successive quarter, and the samples for the sixth quarter and the first quarter have no common elements.

Information on achieved sample sizes can be found in our Labour Force Survey (LFS) performance and quality monitoring reports and users may also want to make reference to our Labour Force Survey (LFS) user guide.

Proxy interview

Where responses are provided on behalf of another resident in the household if that person is unavailable or unable to respond for themself.

Household reference person

Sometimes when publishing ad hoc analyses, we are interested in the characteristics of the household reference person (HRP) as a representative of the household.

After 2001, a "household reference person" is the household member who owns the accommodation; is legally responsible for the rent; or occupies the accommodation as reward of their employment, or through some relationship to its owner who is not a member of the household. If there are joint householders, the one with the highest income is the HRP. If their income is the same, then the eldest one is the HRP.

Until 2001, the previous definition "Head of Household" (HoH) was used. If there are two adults of the opposite sex living together as a married or cohabiting couple, the husband or male partner is the HoH. Otherwise, the oldest male householder, or the husband or male partner of the oldest female householder, is the HoH. Otherwise, the oldest female householder is the HoH.

The definition for the HRP is a LFS definition. Please note that this definition differs slightly from the HRP definition used in Census 2021.

11 . Related links

Families and households in the UK: 2025
Statistical bulletin | Released 17 April 2026
Estimates of families (with and without children) and household types, including people living alone in the UK in 2025.

Household estimates and projections across the UK: user guide
Methodology | Released 23 July 2025
Guidance for users about the coherence and comparability of data on household estimates and projections for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Labour Force Survey user guidance
Methodology | Released 29 January 2026
Guidance about the background and methodology of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

12 . Cite this page

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