

Article

Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020 and Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 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.

Contact:
Peter Synowiec
health.data@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)1329 444110

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Correction

9 August 2021 14:00

We have corrected an error in section 3 under the heading Stillbirths. The previous version stated that there were 618 stillbirths in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2021, just three fewer than in Quarter 1 2020. However, it should read 'three more than in Quarter 1 2020'.

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1 . Main points

- There were 615,557 live births in 2020 and 146,574 in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2021, both a decrease of 3.9% vs. 2019 and Quarter 1 2020; this follows the trend observed in recent years.
- In December 2020, January and February 2021, the fertility rates for each month decreased while the fertility rate in March 2021 increased.
- The total fertility rate in 2020 was an estimated 1.58 children per woman and 1.53 in Quarter 1 2021; this is in line with the recent trend of a decreasing total fertility rate each year since 2012 (at 1.93).
- There were 2,429 stillbirths in 2020 (167 fewer than 2019) and 618 stillbirths in Quarter 1 2021 (three more than Quarter 1 2020).
- Stillbirth rates between March 2020 and March 2021 were, for most months, below the five-year average.

Statistician's comment

“In the months of December 2020 and January 2021 we saw relatively steep decreases in monthly fertility rates, when compared with the same months a year ago, 8.1% and 10.2% respectively. Live births occurring in these months relate to live births that would have mostly been conceived during the first lockdown in 2020, suggesting there was no baby boom as a result of the restrictions first put in place for COVID-19.

“We saw a 1.7% increase in the monthly fertility rate in March 2021 when compared with March 2020, which mostly translate to live births conceived when lockdown restrictions were beginning to be eased in summer 2020.”

Peter Synowiec, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics.

Follow Vital Statistics Outputs Branch on Twitter [@SarahCaul_ONS](https://twitter.com/SarahCaul_ONS)

This bulletin uses NHS births notifications data in England and Wales to provide more timely estimates of births during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. For more information please see [Section 6: Data quality and sources](#).

2 . Number of live births and fertility rates

Based on birth notification data, there were 151,104 live births that occurred in Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) of 2020 in England and Wales which brings the total number of live births in 2020 to 615,557. With 3.9% fewer live births than in 2019 (640,635) it was the fifth annual decrease in a row.

This downward trend continued in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) of 2021, there were 146,574 live births in England and Wales; a decrease of 3.9% compared with the same period in 2020 and a 18.6% decrease since the most recent peak in 2012.

In our [provisional births release](#) analysing births occurring between January and September 2020, we estimated the total fertility rate (TFR) was 1.60 children per woman. For all births occurring in 2020, the TFR was 1.58 children per woman. The decrease compared with our original estimate was driven by a fall in live births in December 2020.

Based on births occurring in the first quarter of 2021, we estimate the TFR to be 1.53 children per woman. This continues a downward trend in the TFR (Figure 1). As the 2021 TFR is only based on one quarter of births data, we will continue to monitor changes throughout the year.

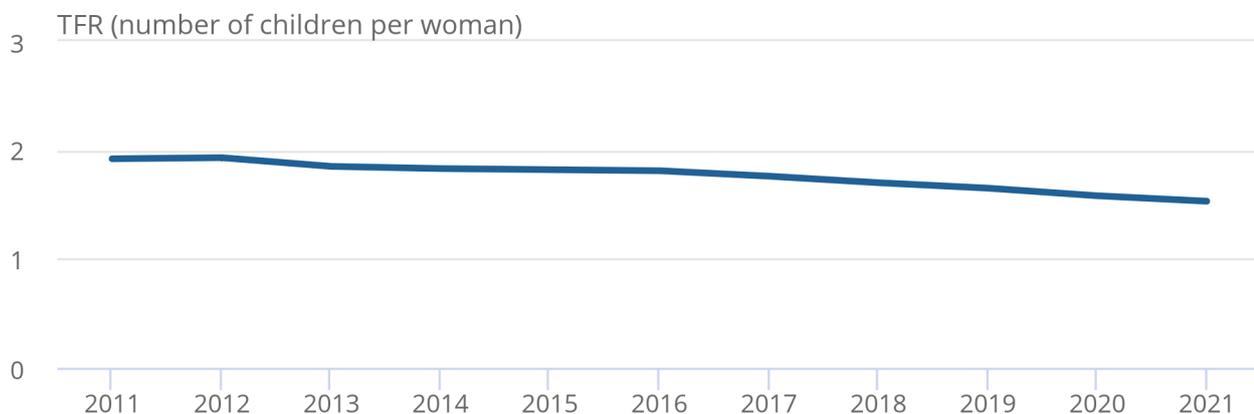
Although not directly comparable to our [final annual birth statistics](#) these provisional TFRs could suggest we will see the lowest TFR ever recorded once final 2020 data are compiled later this year.

Figure 1: Total fertility rate (TFR) continued to decrease in 2021

TFR, England and Wales, 2011 to Quarter 1 2021

Figure 1: Total fertility rate (TFR) continued to decrease in 2021

TFR, England and Wales, 2011 to Quarter 1 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Provisional births in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The total fertility rate is the average number of live children that a group of women would bear if they experienced the age-specific fertility rates of the calendar year throughout their childbearing lifespan.
2. Fertility rates for years 2011 to 2020 have been calculated using all births that occurred in each year. Fertility rates for 2021 have been adjusted to compensate for only having data for the first quarter at the time of release. Information about the adjustment method used is available in section 10 of our [Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020](#) article.

When compared with the same months in previous years, monthly fertility rates in December 2020, January and February 2021 continued to decline with steeper decreases being seen in December 2020 (8.1%) and January 2021 (10.2%) in line with the decrease in numbers of births for these months (Figure 2). Live births occurring in these months will relate mostly to live births that were conceived in the first lockdown.

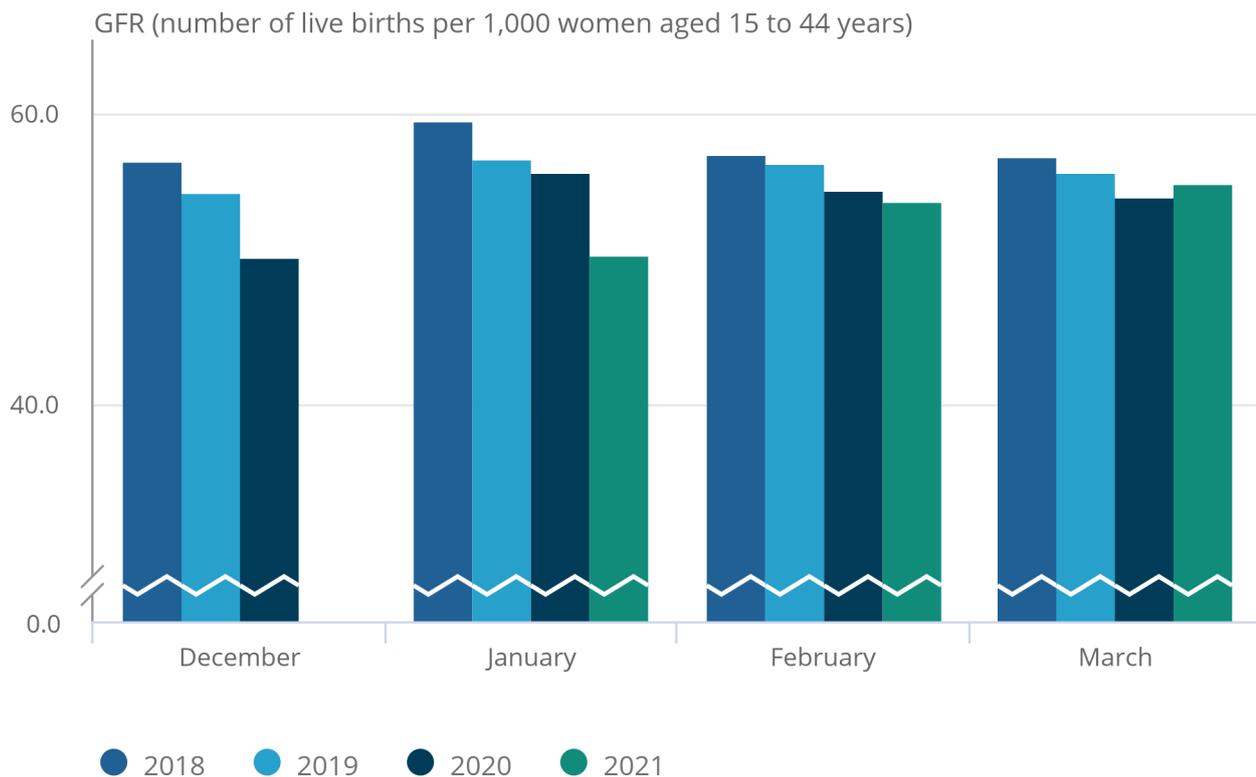
In contrast, the fertility rate in March 2021 increased by 1.7% when compared with March 2020, this was the first increase since March 2016. This period relates to live births that were likely to be conceived in June 2020 when lockdown restrictions were beginning to be eased.

Figure 2: Monthly fertility rates decreased each month except March 2021

General fertility rates (GFR) by month of occurrence for select months, England and Wales, 2018 to 2021

Figure 2: Monthly fertility rates decreased each month except March 2021

General fertility rates (GFR) by month of occurrence for select months, England and Wales, 2018 to 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Provisional births in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The general fertility rates (GFR) denote the number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years, calculated using mid-2019 population estimates and 2018-based population projections.
2. Monthly fertility rates have been calculated using adjusted monthly populations to estimate what the likely population would have been for each month. We use mid-year population estimates or a combination of mid-year population estimates and population projections. Information about the adjustment method used is available in section 10 of our [Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020](#) article.

3 . Stillbirths

In 2020, there were 2,429 stillbirths and the stillbirth rate was 3.9 per 1,000 births. During Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020, there were 592 stillbirths, a slight decrease from 606 stillbirths in Quarter 3 (Jul to Sep). The stillbirth rate has remained fairly stable over the last two quarters of 2020, increasing from 3.8 per 1,000 births in Quarter 3 2020 to 3.9 in Quarter 4 2020. Changes observed are in line with recent trends.

There were 618 stillbirths in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2021, just three more than in Quarter 1 2020. As a result, the stillbirth rate increased from 3.9 stillbirths per 1,000 total births in 2020 to 4.2 in 2021 so far. Split by month of occurrence since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began, stillbirth rates between March 2020 and March 2021 were below the five-year average; with the exceptions of November 2020 and January 2021 (Figure 3).

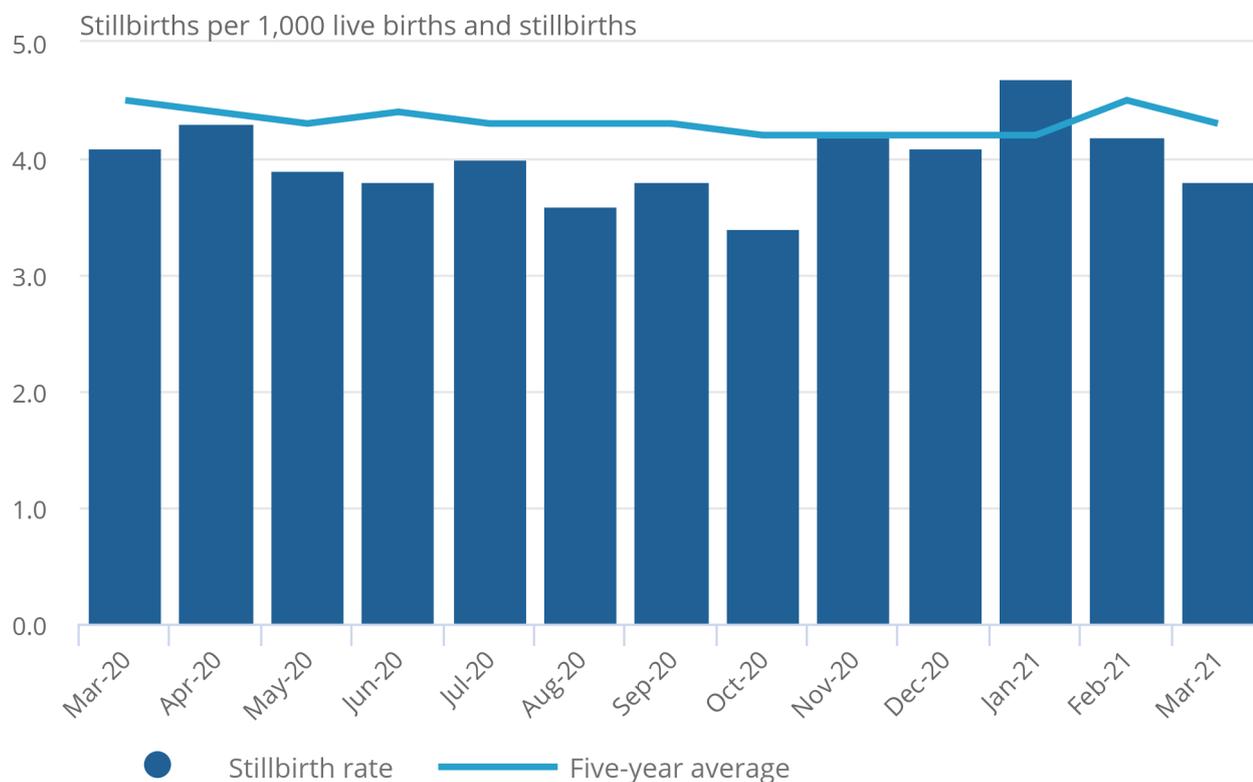
We note the relatively high stillbirth rate in January 2021 and that it coincides with the height of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in England and Wales. However, there are relatively low numbers of stillbirths each month, and the stillbirth rate in January is just within the plausible range that we might expect to see from random variation. For context, there were 226 stillbirths in January 2021, compared with 207 in January 2020.

Figure 3: Monthly stillbirth rates were below the five-year average for most months

Stillbirth rate by month of occurrence, England and Wales, March 2020 to March 2021

Figure 3: Monthly stillbirth rates were below the five-year average for most months

Stillbirth rate by month of occurrence, England and Wales, March 2020 to March 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Provisional births in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Based on stillbirths occurring in each month.
2. The stillbirth rate is defined as the number of stillbirths per 1,000 live births and stillbirths.
3. The five-year average is the average stillbirth rate for each month over the past five years.

In our [previous release](#), we explored other variables such as gestational age, birthweight or type of place of birth. We have explored these variables with the Quarter 1 2021 provisional data and found them to follow similar patterns. The data can be found in our downloadable data tables.

4 . Provisional births data

[Provisional births in England and Wales: Quarter 1 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 24 June 2021

Provisional figures for births occurring between January and March from 2011 to 2021 in England and Wales including live births by month, birthweight, gestational age, place of birth and stillbirths by month and gestational age.

[Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020](#)

Dataset | Released 24 June 2021

Provisional figures for births occurring annually in England and Wales including live births by month, birthweight, gestational age, place of birth and stillbirths by month and gestational age.

5 . Glossary

Live birth

A baby showing signs of life at birth is a live birth.

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.

Total fertility rate (TFR)

The TFR is the average number of live children a group of women would have if they experienced the age-specific fertility rates for the calendar year in question throughout their childbearing lifespan.

General fertility rate (GFR)

The number of live births in a year per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years. Measure of current fertility levels.

6 . Data sources and quality

Traditionally, our birth statistics for England and Wales are derived from information recorded when births are registered as part of the civil registration process.

Birth registrations in England and Wales have been delayed because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We are monitoring registrations regularly and are working to ensure that our final birth registration data are as complete as possible before publication.

In this release we have used NHS birth notification data to provide more timely estimates of births in England and Wales. The birth notification is a document completed by the doctor or midwife present at the birth.

The NHS birth notification figures presented are based on births that occurred between October 2020 and March 2021 and update the data to September 2020 released in December 2020. To make direct comparisons over time, we have compared these figures with birth notification figures for previous years. The statistics in this release are provisional and are not directly comparable with other releases which are derived using birth registrations.

For more information on data sources and quality, please see sections 2 and 10 of our [provisional births: 2020 release](#), which contains information on NHS birth notifications and our fertility rate adjustment methodology.

7 . Related links

[Provisional births in England and Wales: 2020](#)

Article | Released 7 December 2020

Live births by month, birthweight, gestational age, place of birth and stillbirths by month and gestational age.

[Births in England and Wales: 2019](#)

Bulletin | Released 22 July 2020

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

[Births by parents' country of birth, England and Wales: 2019](#)

Bulletin | Released 22 July 2020

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

[Birth characteristics in England and Wales: 2019](#)

Bulletin | Released 16 November 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.

[Births by parents' characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 16 November 2020

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).

[Baby names in England and Wales: 2019](#)

Bulletin | Released 26 August 2020

Most popular first names for baby boys and girls in 2019 using birth registration data.

[User guide to birth statistics](#)

Article | Released 16 November 2020

Supporting information for birth statistics, which present figures on births that occur and are then registered in England and Wales. Figures are based on information collected at birth registration.