

Statistical bulletin

# Births by parents' characteristics in England and Wales: 2016

Annual live births 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).



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# 1 . Main points

- In 2016, 54% of all live births in England and Wales were to mothers aged 30 and over; 68% of fathers were aged 30 and over.
- The average age of all fathers increased to 33.3 years in 2016, from 33.2 years in 2015; for mothers the average age rose to 30.4 years, from 30.3 years in 2015.
- The average age of first-time mothers increased to 28.8 years in 2016, from 28.6 years in 2015.
- In 2016, 84% of babies were registered by parents who were married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting, remaining unchanged from 2003 onwards.
- In 2016, 41% of live births were first births, 35% were second births and 23% were third or subsequent births.

## 2 . Statistician's comment

"Our data show that the overwhelming majority of births are registered jointly by two parents. Over the last 30 years, the percentage of babies born to parents who are married or in a civil partnership has decreased notably from 79% in 1986 to 52% in 2016. Despite this, the percentage of babies born to parents who were either married, in a civil partnership or living together, has only declined slightly from 89% in 1986 to 84% in 2016; a consequence of cohabitation becoming more popular as an alternative or precursor to marriage. Furthermore, there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of babies registered by parents who are not married or in a civil partnership and who live at different addresses; the percentage of babies solely registered by the mother has decreased since 1998 (5.2% in 2016 down from 7.9% in 1998)."

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 birth statistics:

- birth statistics represent births that occurred in England and Wales in the calendar year, but include a very small number of late registrations from the previous year
- figures are compiled from information supplied when births are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement

## 4 . Average ages of mothers and fathers have continued to rise

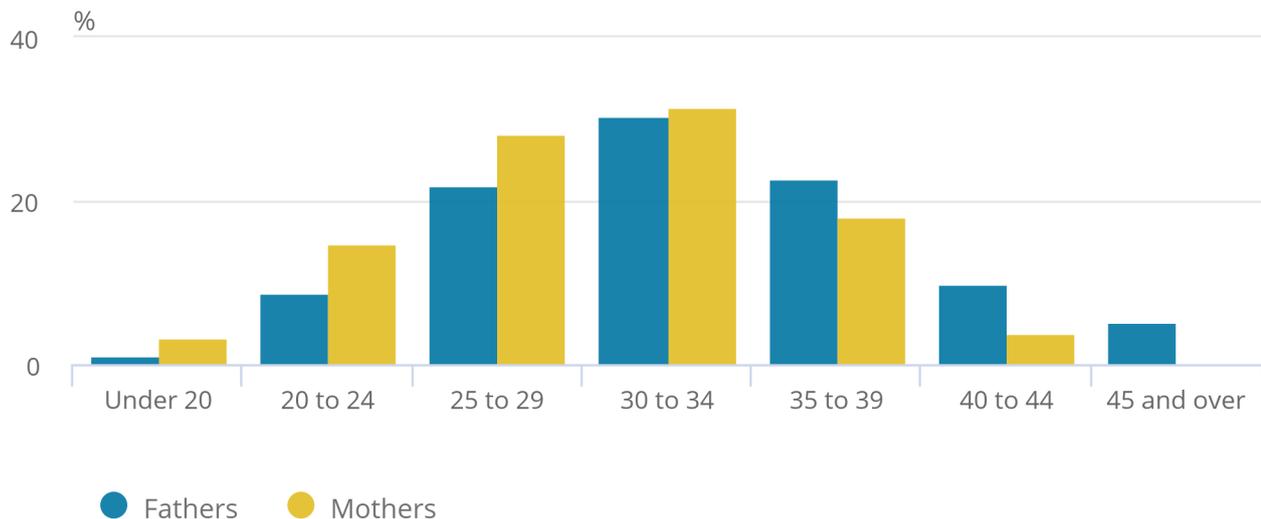
In 2016, of all babies born in England and Wales, 68% had fathers aged 30 and over (Figure 2); sole registered births, where the father's information is not available, have been excluded. Over the last two decades the percentage of fathers aged 30 and over has increased from 59% in 1996 and 66% in 2006. In contrast, 54% of mothers in 2016 were aged 30 and over, up from 41% in 1996 and 48% in 2006.

**Figure 1: Live births by age group of mother and father, 2016**

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum due to rounding.
2. For fathers, the percentages have been calculated excluding births that were registered solely by the mother and the father's information was not recorded.

Measures of male fertility ([Table 11](#)) show that fertility rates have been highest for men aged 30 to 34 years since 1993; fertility rates for women are also highest at ages 30 to 34 years but only since 2004. Compared with 2006, fertility rates for men in 2016 are lower at ages under 35 years, higher at ages 35 to 59 years and unchanged at ages 60 and over. A similar change has also taken place among women; fertility rates in 2016 were lower for women aged under 25 years, but higher at older ages compared with 2006. Rising fertility rates at older ages have affected the average age of mothers and fathers.

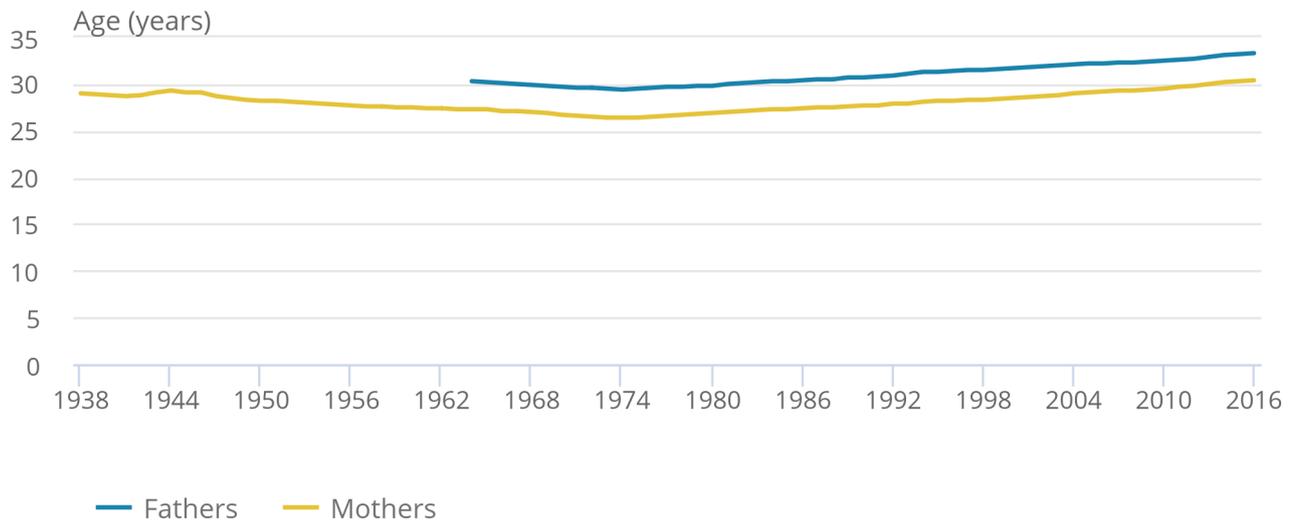
The average (standardised mean) age of all fathers of babies born in England and Wales in 2016 was 33.3 years, up slightly from 33.2 years in 2015. A small rise was also recorded in the average age of mothers, at 30.4 years in 2016 up from 30.3 years in 2015. Since 1964, changes in the average age of fathers have mirrored changes in the average age of mothers, with the average age being around three years higher for fathers than mothers (Figure 2); a long-term rise has been recorded since 1975 in the average ages of mothers and fathers reflecting trends to delay childbearing to later ages.

**Figure 2: Average age of mothers and fathers at the birth of their child, 1938 to 2016**

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Standardised means (averages) have been used to eliminate the impact of any changes in the distribution of the population by age. More information is available in the Quality and methodology section.
2. Fathers' information is not available electronically prior to 1964.

The average age of women having a first birth in 2016 was 28.8 years, compared with 28.6 years in 2015 and 27.3 years in 2006. Changes in the average age of first-time mothers since 1940 are similar to those recorded for the average age of all mothers.

## 5. The percentage of births registered solely by the mother is at its lowest level since 1980

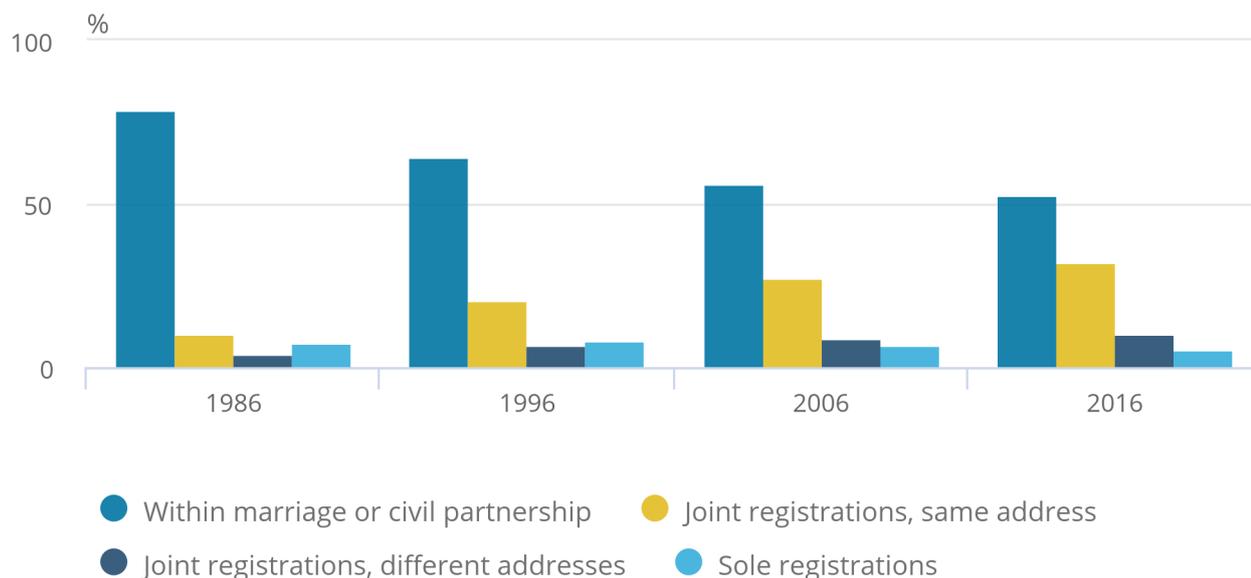
Marriage or civil partnership remains the most common family setting for births in England and Wales as a whole, despite the steady fall in the percentage of births registered to married couples since the 1960s.

**Figure 3: Live births by type of registration, 1986, 1996, 2006 and 2016**

England and Wales

Figure 3: Live births by type of registration, 1986, 1996, 2006 and 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum due to rounding.
2. Information about whether a couple jointly registering a birth were living at the same address is only available back to 1986.

Births outside marriage or civil partnership can be registered jointly by both the mother and father or second parent, or solely by the mother. Where the birth is jointly registered and the parents give the same address, it can be inferred that they are cohabiting (couples who are not married but living together). The percentage of births registered to cohabiting parents has increased in recent years (Figure 3) with 32% of all births being registered to cohabiting parents in 2016, compared with 28% in 2006, 21% in 1996 and 10% in 1986 (the first year these figures were available). This trend is consistent with increases in the number of couples cohabiting rather than entering into marriage or civil partnership (see the [Families and households](#) statistical bulletin for more information on trends in living arrangements of families).

Overall, 84% of births in 2016 were to parents who were married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting. Of the remainder, a further 10% of births were registered jointly by parents living at separate addresses, while only 5.2% were registered by the mother alone. The percentage of births registered solely by the mother is at its lowest level since it was 5.1% in 1980. Since 1998, the percentage of sole registered births has fallen gradually from 7.9%.

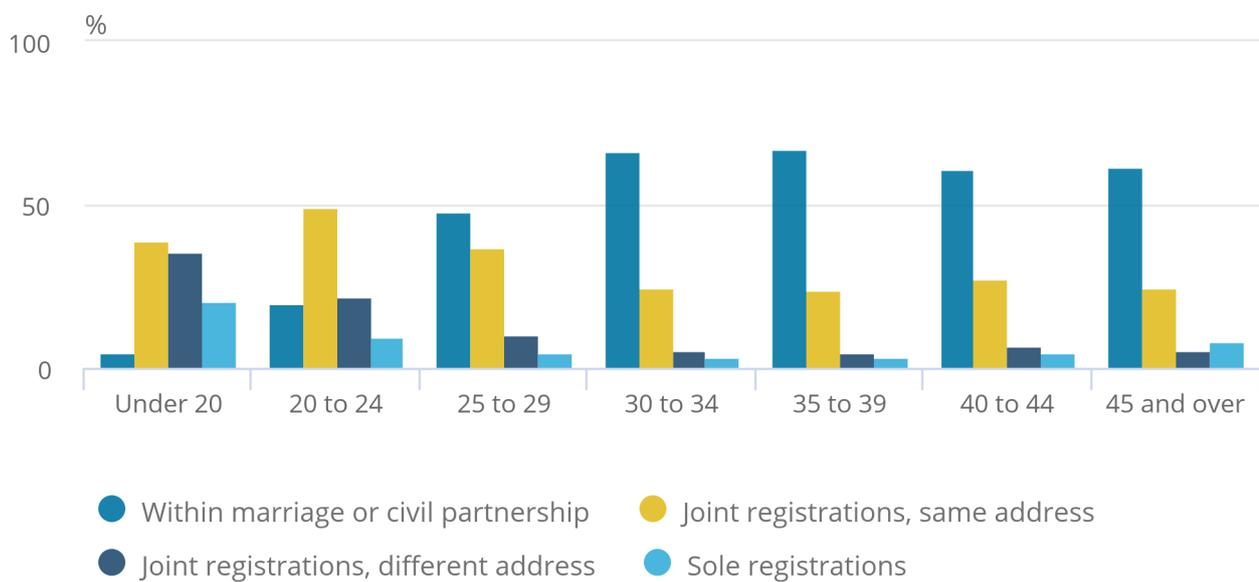
In 2016, over half (52%) of births occurred within marriage or civil partnership; this percentage varied considerably by age of mother. Only 4.8% of women aged under 20 years who gave birth in 2016 were married or in a civil partnership. In contrast, at ages 30 to 34 years and 35 to 39 years the majority of women giving birth (67%) were either married or in a civil partnership; the highest percentage across all the age groups. In 2016, the percentage of births occurring within marriage or civil partnership was lower across all age groups compared with 2006.

**Figure 4: Live births by type of registration and mother's age group, 2016**

England and Wales

Figure 4: Live births by type of registration and mother's age group, 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

In 2016, births to mothers aged under 25 years were most likely to be jointly registered by cohabiting parents, while for women aged 25 and over, marriage or civil partnership was the most common family setting for births, followed by cohabitation (Figure 4). The percentage of births that were either jointly registered by parents living at different addresses or solely registered by the mother was higher among women aged under 25 years than older mothers.

## 6 . Most births in 2016 were to mothers who already had at least one child

In 2016, of all live births, 41% were first births, whereas 58% were to mothers who had given birth to at least one previous child (on a small number of birth registrations the number of previous children live-born to the mother is not stated).

More detailed statistics on family size can be found in our [Childbearing for women born in different years release](#), which includes data tables on:

- average number of live-born children by age and year of birth of woman
- proportion of women who have had at least one live birth, by age and year of birth of woman; the proportion of women who have not had children is also available
- percentage distribution of women of childbearing age by number of live-born children, by age and year of birth of woman

## 7 . Mothers tend to be younger in households employed in intermediate and routine occupations

In 2016, households employed in intermediate and routine occupations as defined by the [National Statistics Socio-economic Classification](#) (NS-SEC) had an average (mean) age of mother at birth between 21.5 and 30.0 years depending on NS-SEC class. For households employed in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations, the average age of mother was slightly higher, between 31.7 and 33.5 years.

Higher percentages of babies are born with low birthweight (under 2,500g) in households employed in intermediate and routine occupations (between 6.7% and 8.3% of live births, depending on NS-SEC class). For households employed in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations, between 5.1% and 6.1% of live births were of low birthweight. Percentages have been calculated excluding births where the birthweight was not stated.

## 8 . Links to related statistics

For more detailed data on [Births by parents' characteristics](#), please see our datasets. The dataset also contains information on the other birth statistics packages released throughout the year and provides links to these; see the [GOV.UK release calendar](#) for information on planned publication dates.

The number of births, birth rates and mean age of mother for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital statistics: population and health reference tables](#), international comparisons of live birth rates are also available.

Special extracts and tabulations of birth 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](mailto:vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk) or telephone on +44 (0)1329 444110. [User requested data](#) will be made publicly available.

## 9 . Quality and methodology

This publication provides statistics on live births in England and Wales by characteristics of the parents.

Some of the main summary figures have been published previously. This is however, the first time that birth statistics for 2016 have been published on:

- age of father (including age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs) for men)
- type of registration (within marriage, joint, sole) by age of mother
- mean age of mother by birth order
- median interval between births
- number of previous live-born children
- National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) of household as defined by occupation

Birth statistics are used for planning maternity services, to inform policy decisions and resource allocation, for example, deciding numbers of school places required. They also enable the analysis of social and demographic trends.

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

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

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

There is a large degree of comparability in birth statistics between UK countries. However, there are some differences, although these are believed to have a negligible effect on the comparability of the statistics. These differences are outlined in our [Quality and Methodology Information](#) for births.

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

The standardised average (mean) age of father and mother has been used to eliminate the effect of any changes in the distribution of the population by age; this enables trends over time to be analysed. Standardised means are calculated using rates per 1,000 male or female population by single year of age.

Information on the occupation of each parent is coded for only a sample of 1 in 10 live births. Combining this with the employment status, a code for socio-economic classification may be derived. A combined method is used for reporting National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) for birth statistics (using the most advantaged NS-SEC of either parent and creating a household level classification). The combined method means that sole registered births where information on the father is not available are included in published birth statistics by NS-SEC. Our [User Guide to Birth Statistics](#) provides further information on NS-SEC. The [three-class version](#) has been used to report figures in this bulletin.

Due to small numbers, births registered to a same-sex couple in a marriage or civil partnership (1,011 in 2016) are included with marital births, while births registered to a same-sex couple outside a marriage or civil partnership (393 in 2016) are included with births outside marriage or civil partnership. Same-sex female couples have been able to register the birth of a child as mother and second parent since 1 September 2009.