

Statistical bulletin

Marriages in England and Wales: 2018

Number of marriages that took place in England and Wales analysed by age, sex, previous marital status and civil or religious ceremony.



Contact:
Kanak Ghosh
Health.data@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)1329 444110

Release date:
10 August 2021

Next release:
March to April 2022 (provisional)

Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Statistician's comment](#)
3. [Numbers and rates](#)
4. [Age at marriage](#)
5. [Type of ceremony](#)
6. [Marriage conversions](#)
7. [Other characteristics](#)
8. [Marriages in England and Wales data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Measuring the data](#)
11. [Strengths and limitations](#)
12. [Related links](#)

1 . Main points

- There were 234,795 marriages in England and Wales in 2018; a decrease of 3.3% compared with 2017 and the lowest since 2009.
- Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2018 were the lowest on record, with 20.1 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 18.6 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women.
- In 2018, there were 6,925 marriages between same-sex couples, with 57.2% between female couples; a further 803 same-sex couples converted their civil partnership into a marriage.
- Around one fifth (21.1%) of opposite-sex marriages in 2018 were religious ceremonies, the lowest on record; in contrast, religious ceremonies accounted for only 0.9% of same-sex marriages.
- In 2018, the average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples was 38.1 years for men and 35.8 years for women; for same-sex couples the average ages at marriage were 40.4 years and 36.9 years respectively.

2 . Statistician's comment

"Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples were the lowest on record in 2018, while the total number of marriages fell for the third consecutive year in a row. This continues the gradual long-term decline in both numbers and rates since the early 1970s. Despite this overall decline, more people are choosing to get married at older ages, particularly those aged 65 and over.

"This is the fifth year since same-sex marriages have been possible and around one in thirty-five marriages are now among same-sex couples".

Kanak Ghosh, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics

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

3 . Numbers and rates

Number of marriages

There were 234,795 marriages in England and Wales in 2018, which is a decrease of 3.3% compared with 2017, and the lowest number since 2009 (232,443 marriages). This decrease was driven by a 11.4% fall in the number of religious marriages and a 1.0% fall in civil marriages.

Marriages of opposite-sex couples accounted for the majority (97.1%) of marriages in 2018, with 227,870 opposite-sex marriages registered. This is a decrease of 3.4% compared with 2017.

In 2018, there were 6,925 same-sex marriages, which is a similar number to the previous year (6,932 marriages). 57.2% of these were between female couples.

Marriage rates

Marriage rates take into account the changes in the size of the unmarried adult population as well as the number of marriages. Therefore, they provide a better indication of changing trends.

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples have fallen to the lowest on record for both men and women. In 2018, there were 20.1 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 18.6 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women aged 16 years and over, representing decreases of 5.2% for men and 4.6% for women compared with 2017.

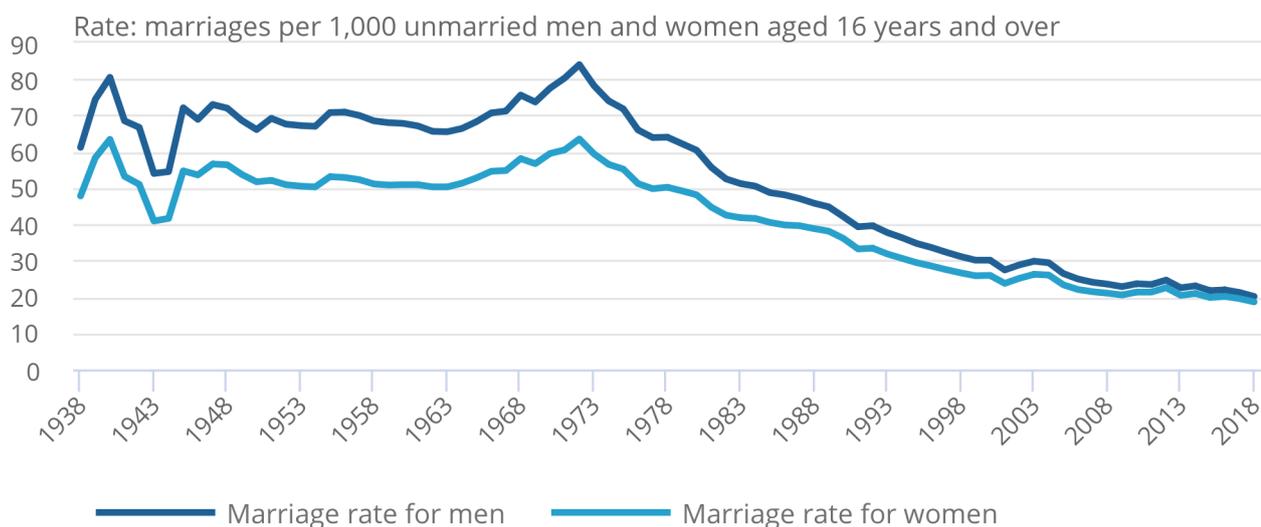
There has been a gradual long-term decline in both the number of marriages and marriage rates since the early 1970s (Figure 1). Since 1972, the number of opposite-sex marriages has decreased by 46.5%, while marriage rates have fallen by more than three-quarters for men (76.1%) and by 70.7% for women.

Figure 1: Marriage rates have generally fallen since their peak in 1972

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1938 to 2018

Figure 1: Marriage rates have generally fallen since their peak in 1972

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1938 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - Marriages in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The marriage rate shows the number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and women aged 16 years and over.

This long-term decline is a likely consequence of increasing numbers of men and women delaying marriage, or couples choosing to cohabit rather than marry, either as a precursor to marriage or as an alternative.

Marriage rates for same-sex couples have remained broadly the same for both men and women since the introduction of same-sex marriages in 2014 and can be found in the [accompanying dataset to this bulletin](#).

4 . Age at marriage

Among opposite-sex couples in 2018, more women than men married at younger ages (aged under 30 years) and more men than women married at older ages (aged 30 years and over) (Figure 2). This pattern reflects that, on average, men tend to form relationships with women younger than themselves.

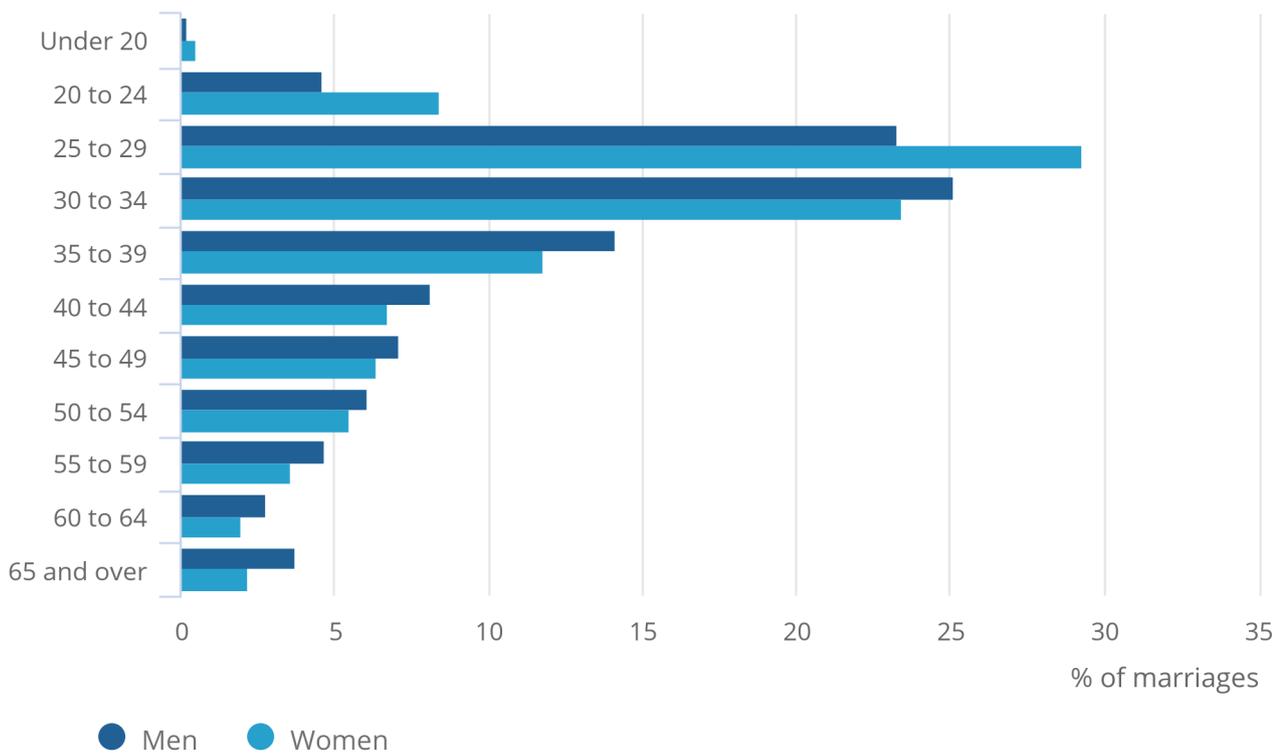
Among same-sex couples, more women than men married at ages under 50 years, whereas more men married at ages 50 years and over.

Figure 2: More women than men married at younger ages while more men than women married at older ages for opposite-sex marriages

Percentage of marriages of opposite-sex couples by age of men and women, England and Wales, 2018

Figure 2: More women than men married at younger ages while more men than women married at older ages for opposite-sex marriages

Percentage of marriages of opposite-sex couples by age of men and women, England and Wales, 2018



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

Marriage rates by age

For opposite-sex marriages in 2018, the number of men and women marrying per 1,000 unmarried men and women (marriage rate) decreased or remained unchanged for all age groups compared with 2017. A similar pattern was also seen for most age groups for same-sex marriages.

Marriage rates have generally been decreasing among younger ages for both men and women, and increasing at older ages. Since 2008, men and women aged under 20 years have recorded the largest percentage of decreases in marriage rates (57.1% for men and 62.5% for women).

In comparison, marriage rates for those aged 65 years and over have increased the most over the last decade. For more information see the article [Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#).

Average age at marriage

In 2018, the average (mean) age at marriage for opposite-sex couples was 38.1 years for men and 35.8 years for women, continuing the overall rise in average age recorded since the 1970s (Figure 3). The average age at marriage for same-sex couples in 2018 was slightly higher at 40.4 years for men and 36.9 years for women.

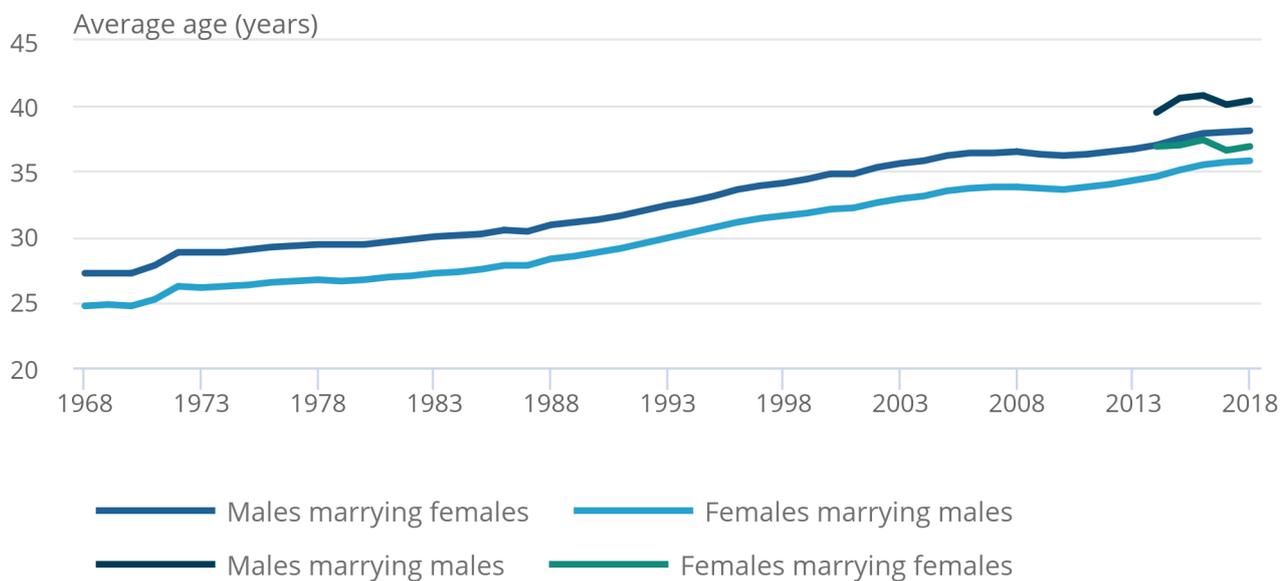
These changes are discussed further in the blog [Married by 30? You're now in the minority](#).

Figure 3: The average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples has steadily increased since the early 1970s

Average (mean) age at marriage by sex, England and Wales, 1968 to 2018

Figure 3: The average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples has steadily increased since the early 1970s

Average (mean) age at marriage by sex, England and Wales, 1968 to 2018



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

Notes:

1. The first marriages of same-sex couples took place in England and Wales on 29 March 2014.
2. The average (mean) age has been calculated by excluding a very small number of records where the age of the party was not stated.

Proportion of men and women ever married

The percentage of men and women who have ever married or remarried has been declining over recent decades. A detailed analysis and explanation of these trends is available in tables 12 and 13 of the [accompanying dataset to this bulletin](#).

5 . Type of ceremony

Religious ceremonies accounted for about one in five (21.1%) opposite-sex marriages in 2018 (the lowest on record) and 0.9% of same-sex marriages. Only 63 same-sex couples had a religious ceremony in 2018; however, not all religious organisations conduct marriages of same-sex couples.

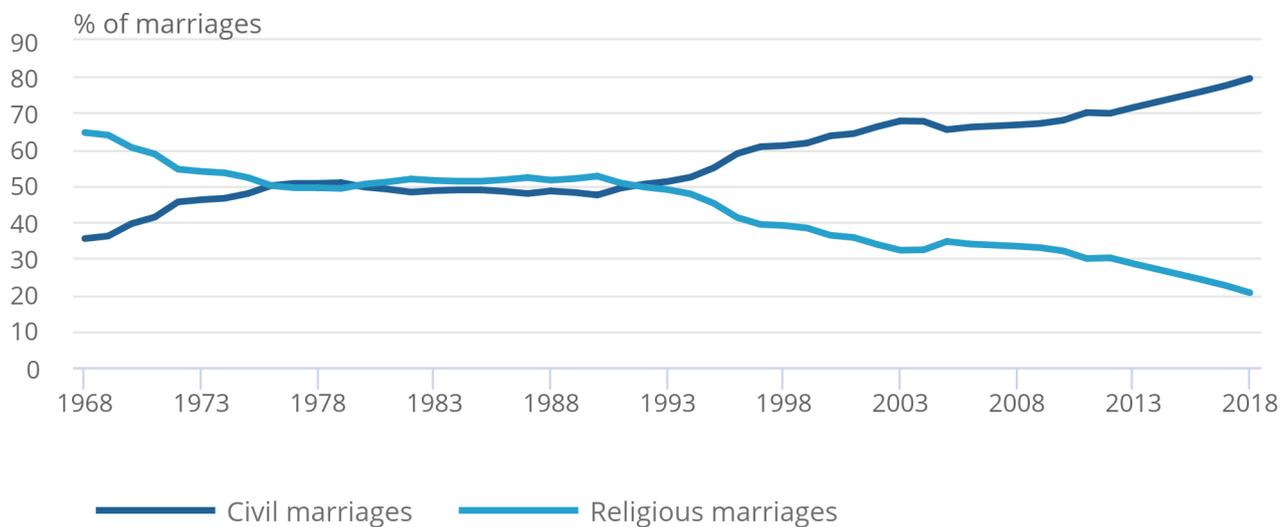
The popularity of religious marriages has decreased steadily over time. In 1900, religious ceremonies accounted for 84.7% of all marriages; by 1980 this had fallen to 50.4%. Since 1992, civil marriages have increasingly outnumbered religious marriages every year (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992

Percentage of civil and religious ceremonies, England and Wales, 1968 to 2018

Figure 4: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992

Percentage of civil and religious ceremonies, England and Wales, 1968 to 2018



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

Notes:

1. Figures for 2014 to 2018 include opposite-sex and same-sex marriages.
2. Marriages of same-sex couples have been possible in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

6 . Marriage conversions

Same-sex civil partners have been able to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage from 10 December 2014.

In 2018, there were 803 same-sex civil partnerships converted into a marriage, 25.1% fewer than in 2017. Male couples are more likely to convert their civil partnership into a marriage (57.3% of all conversions in 2018 were between male couples).

7 . Other characteristics

The [accompanying dataset to this bulletin](#) provides further marriages data by denomination, previous partnership status, age, day and month of marriage, cohabitation status, date of marriage and area of occurrence.

8 . Marriages in England and Wales data

[Marriages in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 10 August 2021

Annual statistics on the number of marriages that took place in England and Wales analysed by age, sex, previous marital status and civil or religious ceremony.

9 . Glossary

Civil marriage

A civil marriage can take place at a register office or other buildings approved for civil marriage. Both partners must personally give a formal notice of their intention to marry or form a civil partnership to the superintendent registrar of the district(s) where they have resided for the previous seven days.

Religious marriage

Religious marriages can take place in Church of England or Church in Wales premises, as well as in other buildings registered for marriage that are certified as a place of worship. Religious marriages also include marriages solemnised according to the rites of the Society of Friends and those professing the Jewish religion.

Solemnised marriage

A marriage legally occurs upon solemnisation at a ceremony, either religious or civil, and must follow the completion of legal preliminaries.

General Register Office (GRO)

The GRO (part of the Identity and Passport Service since 1 April 2008 and renamed Her Majesty's Passport Office on 13 May 2013) is responsible for ensuring the registration of all births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships that have occurred in England and Wales and for maintaining a central archive.

Single men or women

Persons who have never been married or formed a civil partnership.

10 . Measuring the data

This is the first time that final marriage statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2018. The release provides final annual data.

- Marriage statistics are derived from information recorded when marriages are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement.
- Figures represent civil and religious marriages that took place in England and Wales only.
- Marriages to residents of England and Wales that took place abroad are not included, while marriages that took place in England and Wales to non-residents are included.
- Marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014.
- Same-sex couples in a civil partnership have been able to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage, if they so desired, from 10 December 2014; these are not included in the marriage statistics but are reported separately.
- 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 population by age, sex and marital status.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Marriages Quality and Methodology Information report](#).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Nina Mill and Faiza Mohammad for their valued contribution to this bulletin.

11 . Strengths and limitations

Our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to marriages and includes a more detailed glossary of terms.

Marriage statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes, most recently the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples.

National Statistics status for Marriages 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.

Date of [most recent full assessment: November 2013](#)

Most recent [compliance check which confirms National Statistics status: November 2013](#)

Improvements since last review:

- summary tables have been extended to provide statistics for marriages of same-sex couples and conversions of same-sex civil partnerships

Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The data in this release relates to calendar year 2018 and are therefore unaffected by the pandemic. Figures for 2020 will not be released until 2023 when we will first report on the impact of the pandemic on marriages rates.

Timeliness of Marriages in England and Wales data

It is currently only possible to publish final annual marriage statistics around 26 months after the end of the reference year due to delays in the submission of religious marriage entries by the clergy and authorised persons. It is estimated that each year around 4% of religious marriage returns received at the Office for National Statistics remain outstanding one year after the reference period. This may be due to factors such as the closure of a building or change of incumbent. Marriage statistics are published once we consider the annual dataset is acceptably complete.

The introduction of the [Marriages, Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registration Etc.\) Act 2019](#) (which came into force on 4 May 2021) is expected to reduce the delay in submission of religious marriage entries and therefore improve the timeliness of publishing future marriage statistics.

Comparability

Marriage statistics are comparable between countries within the UK. More information on comparability is contained in the [Marriages in England and Wales QMI](#).

12 . Related links

[Explorable datasets for marriages in England and Wales](#)

Webpage | Released 10 August 2021

Datasets providing detailed marriage statistics by age group, marital status, type of marriage, type of ceremony and area of occurrence for 2001 to 2018 are available on Nomis.

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

Article | 18 July 2017

This article discusses changing relationship patterns at older ages in England and Wales, and why older people are getting married and divorced in greater numbers.

[Marriage statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Webpage | 16 December 2020

Annual marriage statistics for Northern Ireland for 2018 and earlier years by age, marital status, type of marriage and local government district.

[Marriage statistics for Scotland](#)

Webpage | 29 June 2021

Annual marriage and civil partnership statistics for Scotland for 2018 and earlier years by council area and country of residence of parties.

[Population estimates by marital status and living arrangement: 2019](#)

Bulletin | 17 July 2020

Annual estimates of population by legal marital status and cohabitation status by age and sex for England and Wales.

[Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#)

Bulletin | 14 January 2021

Annual UK and constituent country figures for births, deaths, marriages, divorces, civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions for the latest years available.