

Divorces in England and Wales, 2013



Coverage: **England and Wales**

Date: **23 November 2015**

Geographical Area: **Country**

Theme: **Population**

Main points

- There were 114,720 divorces in England and Wales in 2013, a decrease of 2.9% since 2012, when there were 118,140 divorces.
- In 2013, there were 9.8 men divorcing per thousand married males and 9.8 women divorcing per thousand married females. A decrease of 27% for men and 26% for women compared with 2003. Background note 3 has more information about divorce rates.
- The number of divorces in 2013 was highest among men and women aged 40 to 44.
- For those married in 1968, 20% of marriages had ended in divorce by the 15th wedding anniversary whereas for those married in 1998, almost a third of marriages (32%) had ended by this time.

Background

This bulletin presents annual statistics on divorces that took place in England and Wales in 2013, following court orders. The statistics do not include divorces to couples usually resident in England and Wales that took place abroad. Divorces of same sex couples are not included since the first marriages of same sex couples did not take place until 29 March 2014.

A marriage may be either dissolved, following a petition for divorce and the granting of a decree absolute, or annulled, following a petition for nullity and the awarding of a decree of nullity. In this release, the term divorce includes both decrees absolute and decrees of nullity.

Divorce statistics are analysed by sex, age and marital status before marriage, duration of marriage, age at divorce, the number and age of children involved, and the grounds for divorce.

This is the first time we have released 2013 divorce statistics for England and Wales. The annual divorce statistics publication is usually published around 12 to 13 months after the end of the reference period. The release of 2013 statistics was delayed to enable new and revised population estimates by marital status to be used in the calculation of divorce rates; there is more information in background note 2. Also changing to the receipt of electronic divorce data required more time to be spent on detailed quality assurance; there is more information in background note 1.

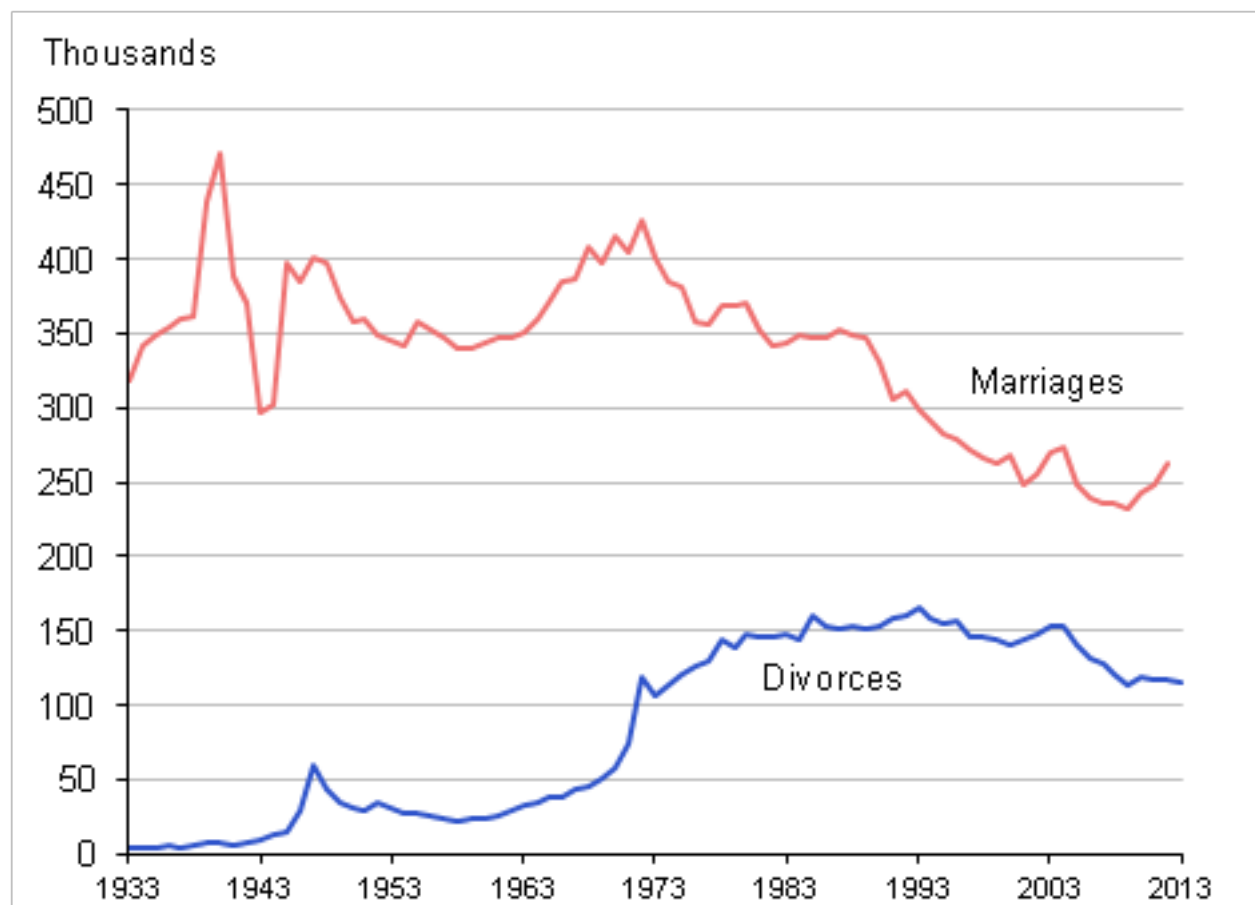
Number of divorces

In 2013, the number of divorces in England and Wales decreased by 2.9% to 114,720 compared with 118,140 in 2012. Following a decline in the number of divorces between 2003 and 2009 (from 153,065 to 113,949) there was a 4.9% increase in divorces in 2010. The number of divorces then remained relatively stable until 2012, fluctuating just below the number recorded in 2010, before falling again in 2013.

The fall in divorces to 2009 is consistent with a decline in the number of marriages over the same period. The decrease in marriages may be due to the increasing number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than enter into marriage ([Cohabitation and Marriage in Britain since the 1970s \(283.5 Kb Pdf\)](#)). Since 2009 the number of marriages has increased each year, while the number of divorces has fluctuated.

Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces, 1933 to 2013

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Marriage figures for 2012 are provisional

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(28.5 Kb)

Figure 1 shows the changing trend in the number of divorces since 1933, as well as changes in the number of marriages. The number of divorces generally increased between 1933 and the early 1990s as a result of changes in behaviour and attitudes. The large increase in the late 1940s (following the end of the Second World War) is considered to be attributable to women's increased participation in the labour force which meant couples were no longer as financially dependent on each other. The large increase observed during the 1970s was associated with the Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

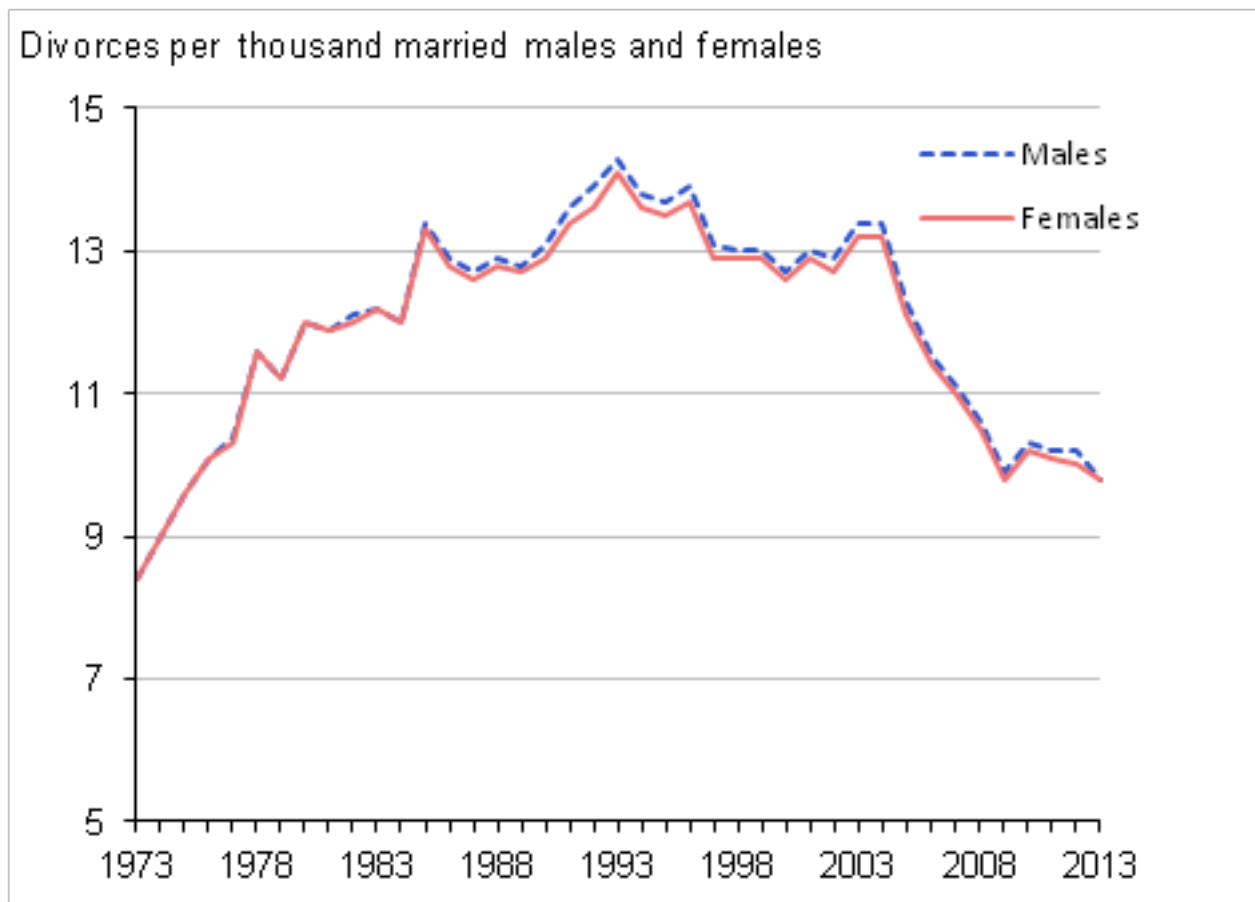
Divorce rates

In 2013, there were 9.8 men divorcing per thousand married males and 9.8 women divorcing per thousand married females. This represents a decrease of 27% for men and 26% for women compared with 2003 when divorce rates were 13.4 for men and 13.2 for women. Background note 3 contains information about how divorce rates are calculated.

Changes in the size of the adult population who are married, and therefore able to divorce, will affect both the number of divorces and the divorce rate. In 2013, divorce rates fell compared with 2012 due to a 2.9% fall in the number of divorces and a small rise (0.7%) in the size of the adult married population.

Figure 2: Divorce rates by sex, 1973 to 2013

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Population estimates by marital status for the years 2002 to 2010 have been revised and published in July 2015 alongside new population estimates by marital status for the years 2011 to 2014. Divorce rates for 2002 to 2012 have therefore been recalculated and may differ from previously published figures. Background note 2 has more information.

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Male and female divorce rates have generally decreased since 2004, with the exception of 2010 when both male and female rates increased (Figure 2). Divorces rates in 2013 are similar to those in the mid 1970s. The increase in 2010 could have been associated with the economic climate following the recession in 2008 to 2009. There are 2 competing theories about the effect of an economic downturn on the number of partnerships dissolving.

One theory suggests that recession could contribute to a rise in partnership break-ups because of increased financial strain, changes in employment and related lifestyle changes. Social research in Britain ([Recession Britain](#)) has shown that unemployment and downturns in the housing market may be associated with family instability. In addition some individuals may believe they will get a more favourable divorce settlement if their income is currently low.

In contrast, an alternative theory suggests that partnerships would be less likely to dissolve in an unfavourable economic climate because of an increase in family solidarity during difficult times and the need to postpone marital break-ups until the economy, and the value of their home improves ([The state of our unions, marriage in America 2009, Money and Marriage](#)). Any impact of the recession on divorce is likely to vary across different sectors of society ([‘Til recession do us part: booms busts and divorce in the United States](#)).

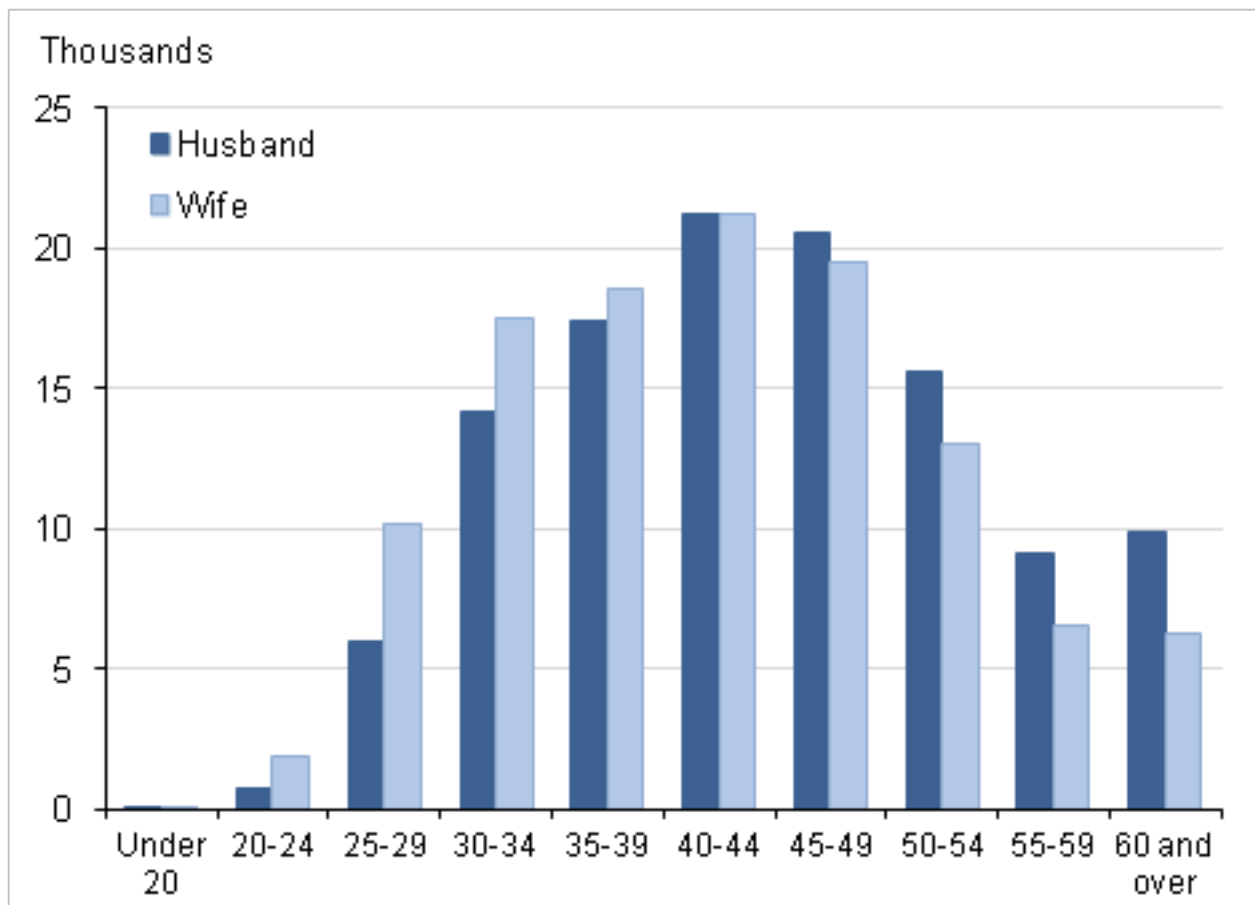
It is too early to say whether recent trends in divorce represent small fluctuations resulting from divorce rates nearing some form of stabilisation. The higher divorce rates between 2010 and 2012 compared with 2009 and 2013 could be consistent with the theory that recession is associated with an increased risk of divorce, but with a delayed impact ([The state of our unions, marriage in America 2009, Money and Marriage](#)). This perhaps reflects a couple's wait for an economic recovery to lift the value of their assets or the time lag between separation and obtaining a decree absolute. A similar trend can be seen during the previous recession in 1990 to 1992, where divorce rates increased more markedly in 1993 than during the recession itself.

Age at divorce

At younger ages there were more women than men divorcing; however, at older ages there were more men than women divorcing (Figure 3). This pattern reflects the differences seen in age at marriage of men and women; the most recent [marriages statistics](#) available show that the provisional mean age for men marrying in 2012 was 36.5 years compared with 34.0 for women. In 2012, the number of divorces was highest among men and women aged 40 to 44.

Figure 3: Number of divorces by age at divorce, 2013

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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(24.5 Kb)

Compared with 2003, divorce rates in England and Wales are higher in 2013 for men and women aged 50 and over and for men aged under 20. At all other ages divorce rates decreased. Divorce rates for those aged under 20 are based on very small numbers of divorces so are often subject to random fluctuations and consequently are less robust.

Women in their late 20s had the highest divorce rate of all female age groups, with 16.8 females divorcing per thousand married women aged 25 to 29 in 2013. This continues the general pattern seen over the last 2 decades.

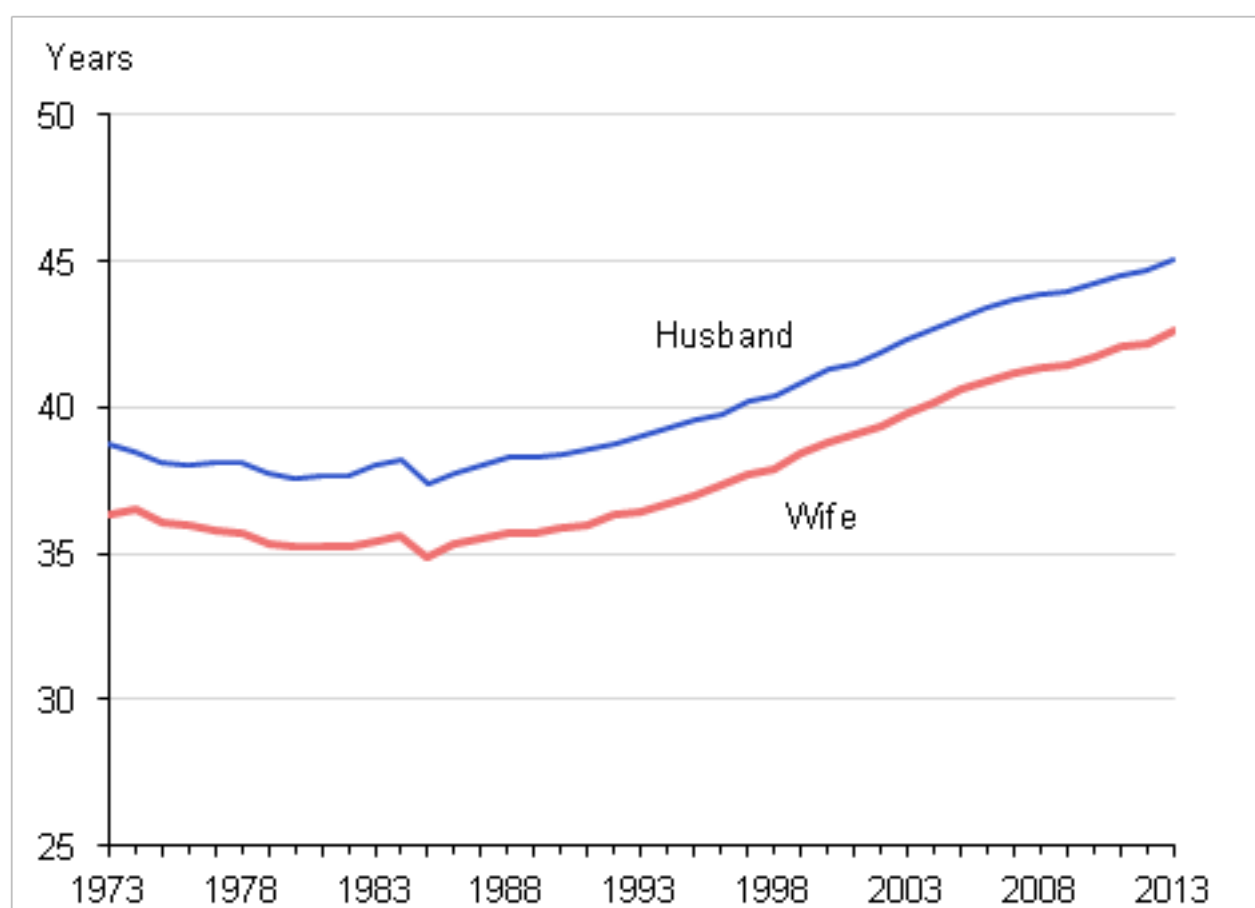
Men in their late 30s and early 40s had the highest divorce rates of all male age groups in 2013, with 16.7 males divorcing per thousand married men aged 35 to 39 and 40 to 44 respectively. Looking back over the last 2 decades, the male divorce rate was highest for those aged 25 to 29 until 2000; after which the highest divorce rate has been recorded across different age groups ranging from the early 20s up to the late 40s, with a trend towards the older ages in the most recent years.

The average (mean) age at divorce increased slightly for both men and women in 2013 (Figure 4). The average age for men divorcing was 45.1 years in 2013, rising from 44.7 years in 2012. For women the average age at divorce was 42.6 years in 2013, increasing from 42.2 years in 2012.

The average age at divorce generally declined for both males and females during the mid to late 1970s and generally remained stable in the early 1980s. Since 1985 the average ages at divorce for men and women have increased, rising by 7.7 years for both men and women. This trend is consistent with increases in the average age at marriage. The difference between the average age of husband and wife at divorce has remained relatively unchanged over the last 4 decades, with a difference of around 2.5 years, except for the years 1974 to 1976 when it was 2.0 years.

Figure 4: Average (mean) age at divorce of husband and wife, 1973 to 2013

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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(28 Kb)

Duration of marriage

The median duration of marriage (the median is the mid-point of the distribution, background note 6 has further details) for divorces granted in 2013 was 11.7 years, increasing from 11.5 in 2012 and 11.3 in 2003.

The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act replaced the discretionary time bar (minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce) of 3 years by an absolute time bar of 1 year. No petition can now be filed within the first year of marriage. The median duration of marriage for divorces granted in 1984 was 10.1 years. Following the change in legislation the median duration of marriage fell to 8.9 years for divorces granted in 1985. Since this change, the median duration between marriage and divorce increased steadily up to 2005, but has remained relatively stable since.

Marital status before marriage

In 2013, 19% of men and women divorcing had their previous marriage end in divorce. These percentages have almost doubled since 1980 when the comparable figures were 10%.

In 2013, 71% of divorces were to couples where both parties were in their first marriage, while the remaining 29% were to couples where at least one of the parties had been divorced or widowed previously.

The percentage of couples divorcing where the marriage was the first for both parties generally declined from the early 1970s to 2006 and then increased to 2013. Over the same period however, the percentage of divorces where at least one of the parties had been previously divorced or widowed gradually increased to 31% in 2006 and then decreased to 2013.

Fact proven at divorce

In 2013, of all decrees granted to one partner (rather than jointly to both), 65% were granted to the wife. In over half (54%) of the cases where the divorce was granted to the wife, the husband's behaviour was the fact proven (background note 7 has details). Of the divorces granted to the husband, the most common facts proven were the wife's behaviour (38% of cases) and 2 years separation with consent (31% of cases). Very few decrees (less than 0.01%) were granted jointly to the husband and wife.

Children of divorced couples

Almost half (48%) of couples divorcing in 2013 had at least 1 child aged under 16 living in the family. There were 94,864 children aged under 16 who were in families where the parents divorced in 2013, a decrease of 38% from 2003 when there were 153,088 children. Over a fifth (21%) of the children in 2013 were under 5 and 64% were under 11. In 2013 there was an average of 1.71 children aged under 16 per divorcing couple with 1 or more children aged under 16. This compares with 1.83 in

2003. These changes may reflect the increasing proportion of children born to cohabiting, rather than married couples ([Births by parents' characteristics](#)).

Percentage of marriages ending in divorce

The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has generally increased for those marrying between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. For example, 20% of marriages in 1968 had ended in divorce by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 32% of marriages in 1998 had ended after the same period of time. However, for the most recent cohorts, those marrying since 2000, there is some evidence of decreases in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce.

In 2011, it was estimated that 42% of all marriages end in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage). This period measure of the percentage of marriages ending in divorce in a particular year is different to the cohort measures based on year of marriage. The period measure takes divorce rates at all years of marriage for a calendar year and provides a single figure summarising the proportion of marriages ending in divorce. Such analyses are produced on an ad hoc basis and have not been updated for this publication. [What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) provides further statistics on the percentage of marriages that end in divorce, including the probability of getting divorced by the next wedding anniversary.

[Compared with figures from 2005 \(244.2 Kb Pdf\)](#), the percentage of marriages which end in divorce decreased from 45% in 2005 to 42% in 2010. This may be related to the following 2 factors:

- the age at first marriage has been increasing, and previous research has shown that those marrying at older ages have a lower risk of divorce
- cohabitation has increased in recent years; it is often a precursor to marriage and may act to filter out weaker relationships from progressing to marriage ([Cohabitation and Marriage in Britain since the 1970s \(283.5 Kb Pdf\)](#))

Divorces in the UK

In 2013, there were 126,716 divorces in the UK, a decrease of 2.9% compared with 130,473 divorces in 2012.

In Scotland, the number of divorces decreased by 3.0% in 2013 from 9,889 divorces in 2012 to 9,593 in 2013. In Northern Ireland, the number of divorces decreased by 1.7% in 2013, from 2,444 divorces in 2012 to 2,403 divorces in 2013.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Population and Health Reference tables](#).

Civil partnership dissolutions

The number of civil partnership dissolutions in England and Wales increased by 20% to 974 dissolutions in 2013. The rising number of dissolutions is in part a consequence of the increasing number of civil partners living in the UK, although in a few years the number of dissolutions is likely

to fall due to the introduction of marriages of same sex couples from March 2014 and the provision for same sex couples to convert an existing civil partnership to a marriage from December 2014.

Comparisons between civil partnership dissolutions and divorce statistics can be found in the article, [Civil Partnerships five years on](#), which was published in Population Trends in Autumn 2011.

Further statistics on [civil partnership dissolutions](#) including figures for 2014, are available on our website.

Users of divorce statistics

We use divorce statistics to:

- report on social and demographic trends
- perform further analyses, for example comparing trends in divorce with civil partnership dissolutions

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is one of the main users of divorce statistics and is responsible for policy and legislation on divorces. We analyse and publish demographic information collected by HM Courts and Tribunals Services (HMCTS) and MoJ relies on these analyses to inform policy decisions, financial decisions and workload decisions.

In 2014, David Cameron brought all [relationship support policy](#) under the remit of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). At the same time, he also made every government department accountable for the impact of their policies on the family. [DWP is investing £20 million on relationship support](#) to ensure family stability and to reduce the risk of relationship breakdown. To measure the success of this work, statistics on marriage, civil partnership and divorce will need to be monitored over time.

DWP also uses divorce data to feed into dynamic simulation models covering pension-age populations to model pensioner incomes, as well as entitlement to state pensions and pension-age benefits. This involves modelling whole life courses, including the formation of partnerships (marriage, civil partnership and cohabitation) and dissolution of the same partnerships. This is for the costing of state pension and benefits provision and to assess the adequacy of incomes in retirement. The projections used rely on the associated historic data.

Organisations such as Eurostat use our divorce statistics for comparison purposes and organisations in the voluntary sector may use our divorce statistics to support campaigns. These organisations often pass on our divorce statistics to their own users.

Lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law use divorce data to comment on trends in case law and predict likely future trends in legal business. Academics and researchers use divorce data for research into family change, and assessing the implications on care, housing and finances in later life. The media also has a high level of interest in divorces, especially the recent trend for older people to divorce.

Changes to the way in which divorce statistics are published

We are proposing to change the way we publish divorce data from the 2014 data year onwards. We plan to publish a selection of summary tables which will provide a significant time series for comparison. Alongside these summary tables we plan to publish an explorable dataset which can be used to obtain more detailed divorce statistics for a particular calendar year.

Currently 18 tables are published for the annual divorces release. We plan to discontinue some of these tables as the explorable datasets and summary tables will provide most of the information published currently and will provide more detailed data than currently published for certain characteristics. A similar approach is being used to disseminate marriage statistics.

The explorable datasets have been designed in a way to ensure that the confidentiality of individuals is protected while meeting user requirements for detailed data. Future work will involve the creation of explorable datasets for marriages of same sex couples and divorces of same sex couples.

The proposed explorable dataset which we hope will be published from the 2014 data year onwards can be found below. The dataset will provide detailed statistics on divorces of opposite sex couples in England and Wales and will include:

- year of occurrence
- husband's age group: under 20, 20 to 24, 25 to 29, 30 to 34, 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 and over
- wife's age group: under 20, 20 to 24, 25 to 29, 30 to 34, 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 and over
- age difference between husband and wife (years): 0 to 4, 5 to 9, 10 to 14, 15 and over
- husband's marital status before marriage: single, divorced, widower
- wife's marital status before marriage: single, divorced, widow
- marriage duration (years) 0 to 4, 5 to 9, 10 to 14, 15 or more
- petitioner: husband, wife, both
- fact proven at divorce: adultery, behaviour, desertion, separation 2 years, separation 5 years, nullity, other
- are children involved: yes or no (this field will be available on any historic datasets published but is unlikely to be available for 2014 onwards; [The Children and Families Act 2014](#) streamlined court processes for divorce proceedings by removing the requirement for the court to consider whether it should exercise any of its powers under the Children Act 1989 (arrangements for children can be decided at any time through separate proceedings under the Children Act 1989). Following this change information on children of divorcing couples is no longer consistently collected during divorce proceedings, so we are unlikely to be able to provide statistics on children of divorcing couples within the explorable dataset)

For more information on the tables which will continue to be published and those which will be discontinued, please contact vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

Further information

More data on [divorces in England and Wales](#) are available on our website.

[ONS divorces metadata \(383.2 Kb Pdf\)](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces.

The [ONS divorces Quality and Methodology Information \(164.8 Kb Pdf\)](#) provides overview notes which pull together important qualitative information on the various dimensions of quality, as well as providing a summary of methods used to compile the output.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference tables](#).

We do not produce divorce statistics by area of residence. This is because divorce data provided to us by the courts does not contain information on the area of residence of the parties. Information on the location of the court is available from the Ministry of Justice in [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#), but this is not a good indicator of where the parties lived either before or after separation, as the 2 parties may choose the court they wish to use and courts are not evenly spread around England and Wales.

[Scottish Government](#) provide divorce statistics for Scotland. [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) provide divorce statistics for Northern Ireland.

Divorce statistics on case progression are available from the Ministry of Justice in [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#).

Further statistics on [marriages, civil partnership and civil partnership dissolutions](#) are available on our website, as are data on [families and households](#) which presents recent estimates of the number of families by type, people in families by type, and children in families by type. [Population estimates by marital status](#) provide the estimated population by age group, sex and marital status (single, married, civil partnered, divorced and widowed) for England and Wales.

Background notes

1. From the 2013 data year onwards, divorces data have been extracted from HM Courts and Tribunals Service's (HMCTS) FamilyMan case management system and sent to ONS electronically. Prior to the 2013 data year, ONS divorce statistics for England and Wales were derived from data provided on the D105 forms used to record decree absolutes. These paper forms were supplied to ONS for processing by the courts.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) also publishes a summary of divorce figures as part of their [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#). MoJ analyses divorce data electronically through the HMCTS FamilyMan system.

The number of divorces as indicated by ONS and MoJ statistics, while similar, do not match exactly. For example, in 2013 our total divorce figure was 114,720 compared with the published MoJ figure of 115,176, a difference of 456 (0.4%). From the 2013 data year, we have compiled divorce statistics from electronic extracts of divorces taken directly from the FamilyMan system used by the courts. This has helped to minimise the difference between the 2 sets of statistics,

however some differences remain because we do not count precisely the same cases. For example:

- our divorce figures include annulments while MoJ figures do not; the number of annulments in 2013 published by MoJ was 365
- since 2007 divorce figures published by MoJ have included dissolutions of civil partnerships, which are not included in our figures; the number of civil partnership dissolutions in 2013 published by us was 974. Further information on [civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions](#) can be found on our website

Using figures which are as comparable as possible (totals including annulments and civil partnership dissolutions), would result in figures of 115,694 and 115,541 being reported by us and MOJ respectively, a difference of only 153 (0.1%).

Prior to the 2013 data year, other differences also existed in the way data were collected and processed. These included:

- differences in the number of late divorce records excluded from both MoJ and our annual datasets
- differences in the process to remove duplicate records
- differences between the number of records entered onto the FamilyMan system and the number of paper records received by us from courts

In June 2012, together with MoJ we published a joint [statement on differences](#) between the figures that existed at the time and worked closely together to reconcile the 2 sets of statistics as far as possible.

2. We recently completed a [consultation](#) surrounding the population estimates by marital status. This resulted in a change in the methodology used to produce the estimates for England and Wales, for the years 2002 onwards. The new method involves using the marital status distribution from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and applying this to published population estimates (by 5 year age group and sex) for England and Wales. Annex B in the [consultation response document \(320 Kb Word document\)](#) provides more information on the new methodology. [Population estimates by marital status](#) for the years 2002 to 2010 have been revised and published in July 2015 alongside new population estimates by marital status for the years 2011 to 2014. As a result of the change in the methodology, divorce rates for England and Wales have been revised back to 2002 to reflect the revised population estimates by marital status; consequently figures may differ to those previously published.
3. The male divorce rate is calculated by dividing the number of males divorcing in a particular year by the estimated number of married males aged 16 and over in that same year (taken from mid-year population estimates by marital status). Likewise, the female divorce rate is calculated by dividing the number of females divorcing in a particular year by the estimated number of married females aged 16 and over in that same year. While the actual number of males and females getting divorced in a particular year is equal, the number of married males does not equal the number of married females because 1 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 can differ for a particular year.

4. Divorce statistics do not take into account married couples who separate, but do not divorce.
5. The average (mean) ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing age structure of the population.
6. The median duration of marriage at divorce 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 this distribution. The mean would be affected by the relatively small number of divorces which take place when duration of marriage exceeds 15 years.
7. Fact proven at divorce; a petitioner must prove 1 or more of 5 facts (adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, or separation, either with or without consent of the respondent) in order to establish the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage.
8. The Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971. The Act, subsequently consolidated in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, made it possible for the first time for divorce to be petitioned for on the couple's separation.
9. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act made 2 changes: The first replaced the discretionary time bar (minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce) of 3 years by an absolute time bar of 1 year; no petition can now be filed within the first year of marriage. The second change meant the Act no longer required courts to try to place the divorced spouses in the financial position they would have enjoyed had the marriage not broken down.
10. Special extracts and tabulations of divorce data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and agreement of costs, where appropriate). Such enquiries should be made to:

Vital Statistics Output Branch

Life Events and Population Sources Division

Office for National Statistics

Segensworth Road

Titchfield

Fareham

Hampshire PO15 5RR

Tel: 01329 444110

Email: vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk

11. The [ONS charging policy](#) is available on our website. In line with the [ONS approach to open data](#), all [ad hoc data requests](#) will be published on our website.
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Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

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Statistical contacts

Name	Phone	Department	Email
Elizabeth McLaren	+44 (0)1329 444110	Vital Statistics Outputs Branch	vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Issuing Body:

Office for National Statistics

Media Contact Details:

Telephone: 0845 604 1858
(8.30am-5.30pm Weekdays)

Emergency out of hours (limited service): 07867 906553

Email:

media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk