

Statistical bulletin

# Divorces in England and Wales: 2015

Dissolutions and annulments of marriage by previous marital status, sex, age, fact proven and to whom granted.



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# 1 . Main points

- There were 101,055 divorces of opposite sex couples in 2015, a decrease of 9.1% compared with 2014 and a decline of 34% from a recent peak in 2003.
- There were 22 divorces of same sex couples in 2015; marriages and divorces of same sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014.
- The male divorce rate for opposite sex couples in 2015 decreased to 8.5 men divorcing per 1,000 married males; 8.6% lower than 2014 and 37% lower than a recent peak in the divorce rate in 2004.
- The female divorce rate for opposite sex couples in 2015 decreased to 8.5 women divorcing per 1,000 married females; 8.6% lower than 2014 and 36% lower than 2004.
- The divorce rate among opposite sex couples was highest among both men and women aged 40 to 44.

## 2 . Statistician's comment

"The number of divorces of opposite sex couples decreased by 9.1% in 2015, compared with 2014, and divorce rates declined across all age groups. Following the introduction of marriages of same sex couples in March 2014, the first divorces of same sex couples took place in 2015, with 12 female and 10 male couples divorcing."

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 divorce statistics:

- divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service during the divorce process
- figures represent both divorces and annulments that took place in England and Wales; [annulments](#) are where the marriage was not legally valid in the first place.
- divorce statistics do not include married couples who separate but do not divorce
- divorces where the marriage took place abroad are included provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales
- marriages of same sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014, the first divorces recorded between same sex couples were in 2015

## 4 . Divorces of opposite sex couples continue to decline

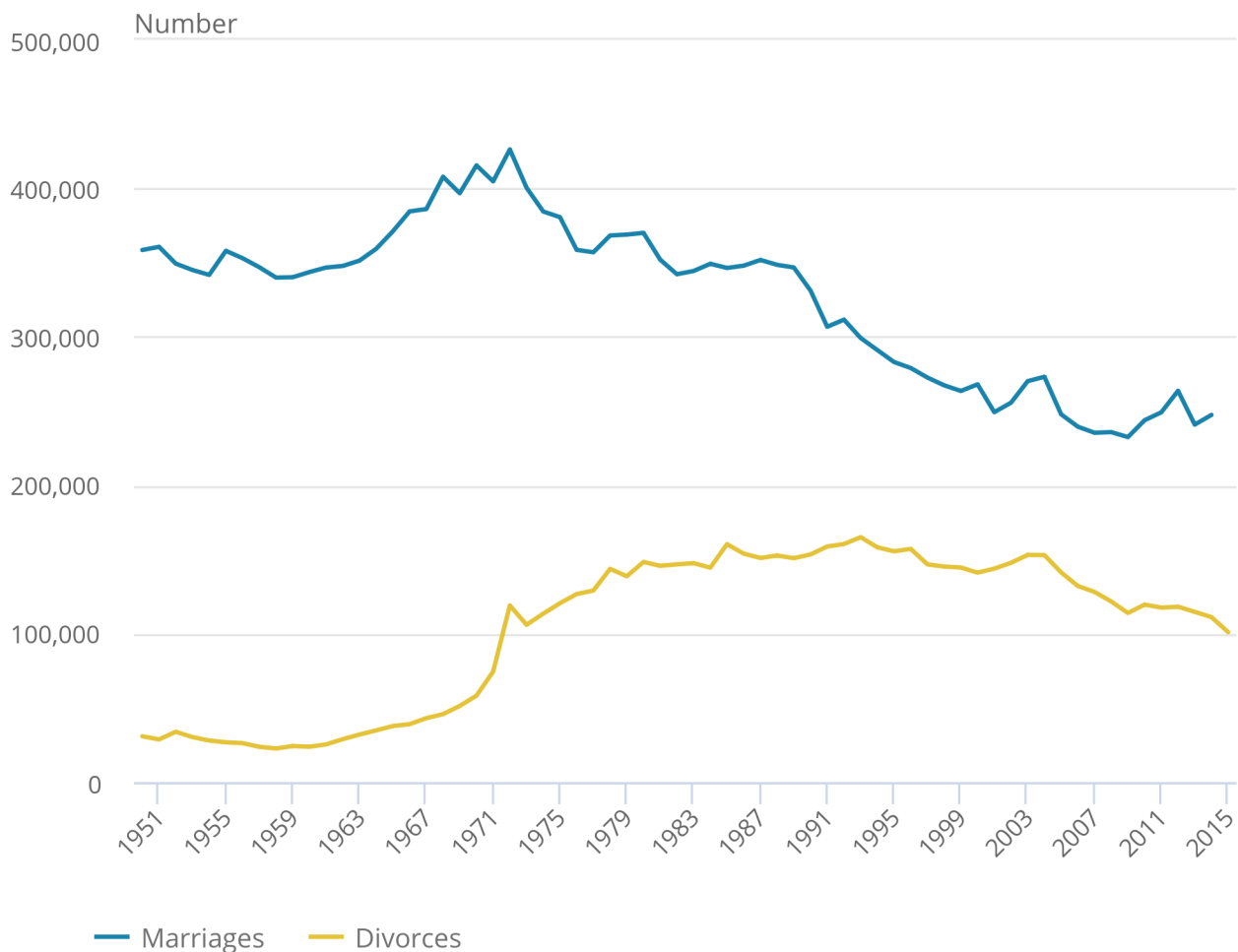
In 2015, the number of divorces of opposite sex couples in England and Wales decreased by 9.1% to 101,055 compared with 111,169 in 2014.

**Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces of opposite sex couples, 1950 to 2015**

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

**Source: Office for National Statistics**

The fall in divorces between 2003 and 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](#). Following a small rise in the number of divorces in 2009, there was a period of relative stability between 2010 and 2012, divorces continued to decline between 2013 and 2015.

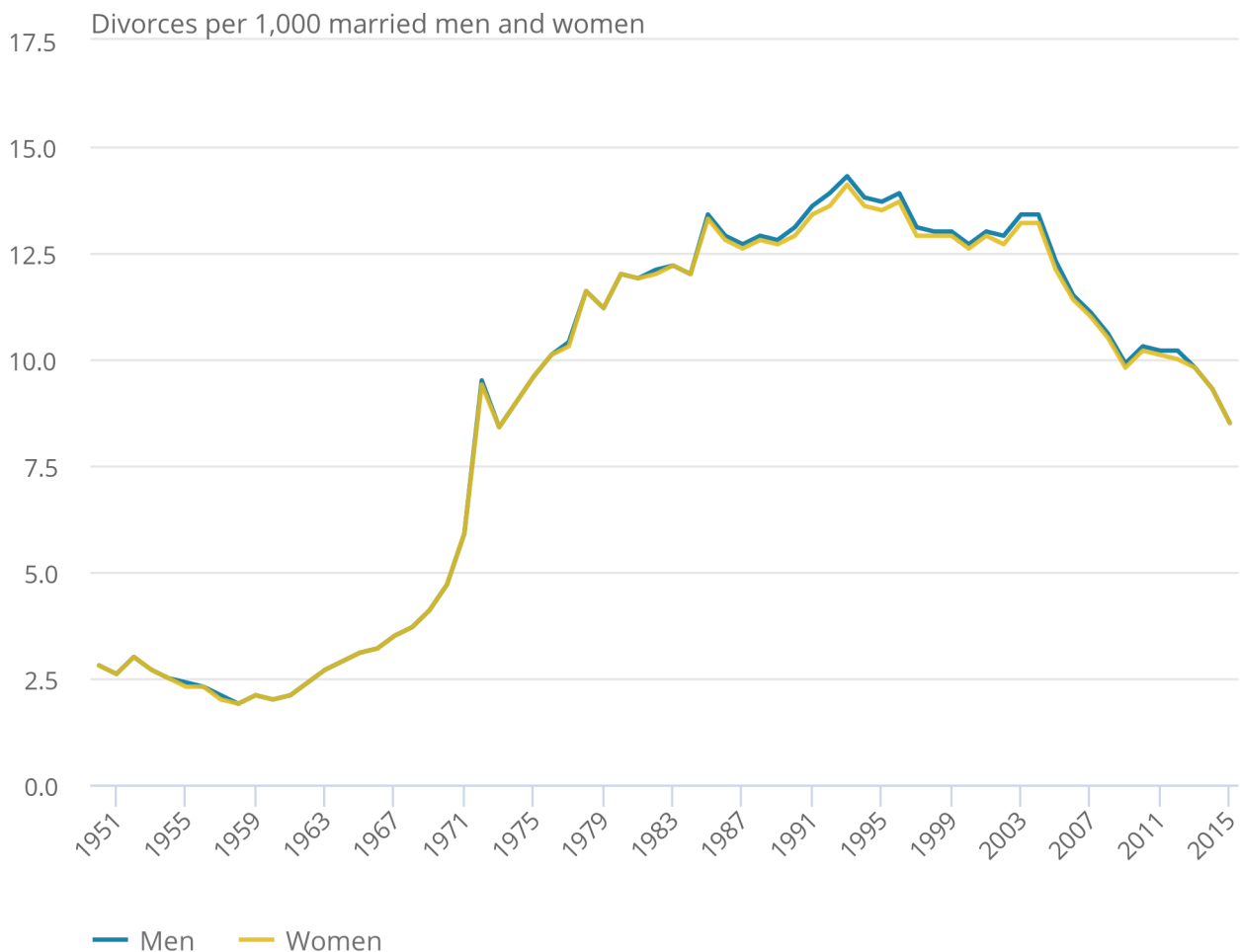
In 2015, the number of divorces of opposite sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 and over (divorce rates) also decreased for both men and women, compared with 2014 (Figure 2). Divorce rates take account of changes in the size of the married adult population which affects the number of divorces (information about how divorce rates are calculated is available in the Quality and methodology section, point 8).

**Figure 2: Rate of divorce among opposite sex couples, 1950 to 2015**

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

**Source: Office for National Statistics**

Changes in behavior and attitudes to divorce are considered to be an important factor behind the increase in divorce rates between the 1960s and the early 1990s. Also, the Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation – this caused a large increase in divorce rates in 1972.

Changes in attitudes to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or prior to marriage, particularly at younger ages, are likely to have been a factor affecting the decrease in divorce rates since 2003; [levels of cohabitation](#) increased over this period while the married population declined. [Age at marriage is also considered to be closely linked to the risk of divorce](#) with those marrying in their teens and early twenties being at greater risk of divorce; our marriage statistics show that the [average age at marriage](#) has increased steadily since 1970 for both men and women.

## 5 . The first divorces of same sex couples took place in 2015

In 2015, there were 12 divorces among female couples and 10 divorces among male couples in England and Wales. Marriages of same sex couples has only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014.

The average (mean) age at divorce for same sex couples who divorced in 2015, was 42.1 years for men and 33.7 years for women.

Unreasonable behaviour was the most common grounds for divorce among same sex couples, accounting for 77%. Unreasonable behaviour within same sex couples can include having a sexual relationship with someone else. [Adultery](#) can only legally be committed between two persons of opposite sex.

The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for same sex couples who divorced in 2015 was 4.6 years for men and 1.6 years for women. Although marriages of same sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014, it was legal for same sex couples to marry in certain other countries prior to this date, for example [the Netherlands](#). Divorces relating to marriages which took place abroad are included in our figures, provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales. Additionally, same sex couples have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage since 10 December 2014; if a civil partnership has been converted into a marriage, the duration of marriage is based on the date the civil partnership was formed rather than the date on which the civil partnership was converted into a marriage.

## 6 . Unreasonable behaviour is the most common grounds for opposite sex couples divorcing

The majority of divorces of opposite sex couples in 2015 where a decree absolute was granted, were petitioned by the wife (62%). The most common grounds for divorce was unreasonable behaviour with 37% of all husbands and 52% of all wives petitioning for divorce on these grounds. For decrees of nullity it needs to be proven that the marriage was either not valid in the first place, or was [defective](#).

Unreasonable behaviour has consistently been the most common ground for wives petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s; previous to this, the ground was named "cruelty". Unreasonable behaviour has only been the most common ground for husbands petitioning since 2006; in the 1980s and 1990s adultery was generally the most common ground for husbands petitioning while between 1999 and 2005 it was separation (2 years and consent).

## 7 . At what age are opposite sex couples getting divorced?

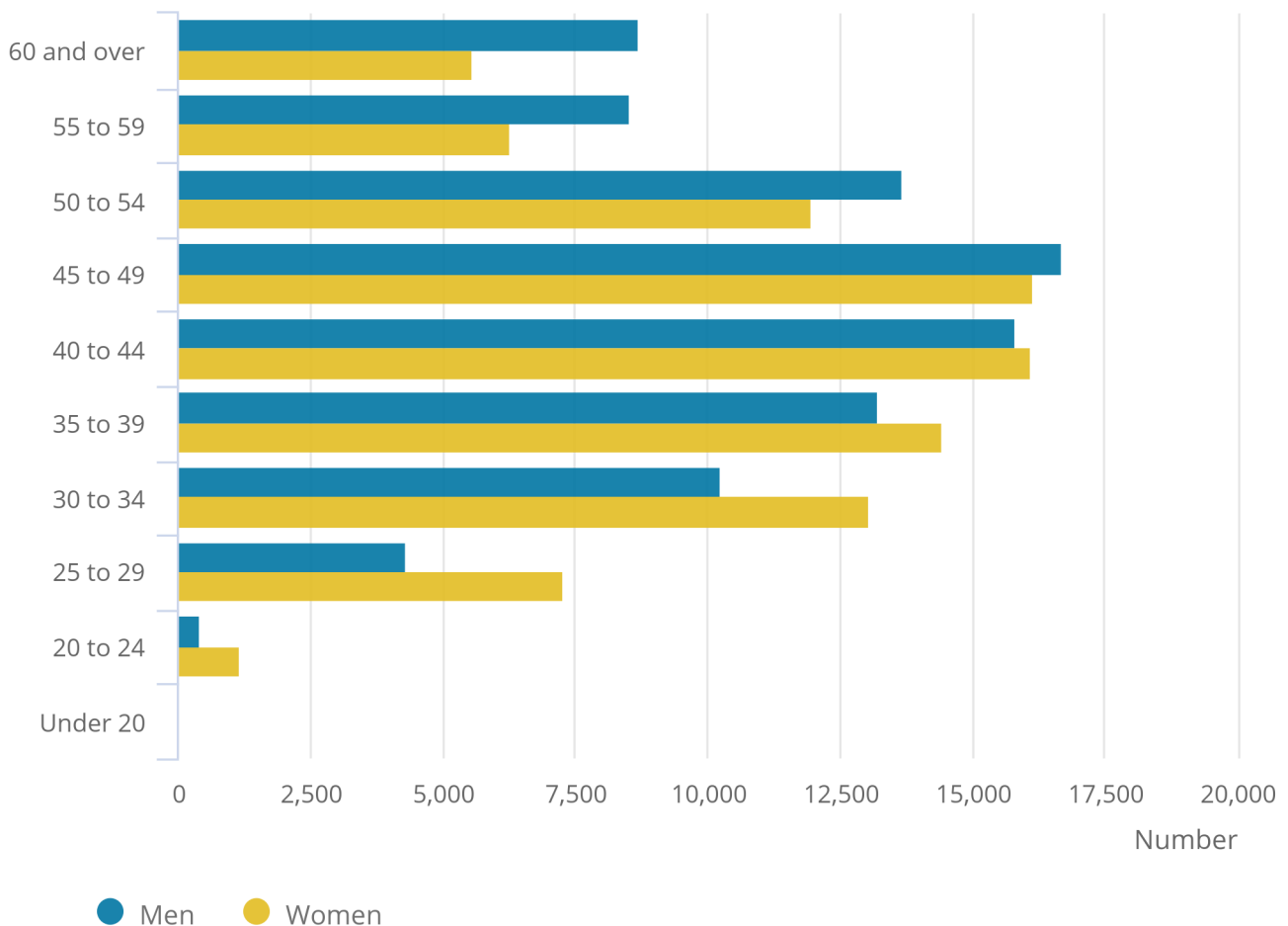
Among opposite sex couples in 2015, more women than men divorced below the age of 45; at older ages more men than women divorced (Figure 3). This pattern is unchanged from 2014, and reflects the fact that on average men marry women who are younger than themselves.

**Figure 3: Divorces of opposite sex couples, age of men and women divorcing, 2015**

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Source: Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

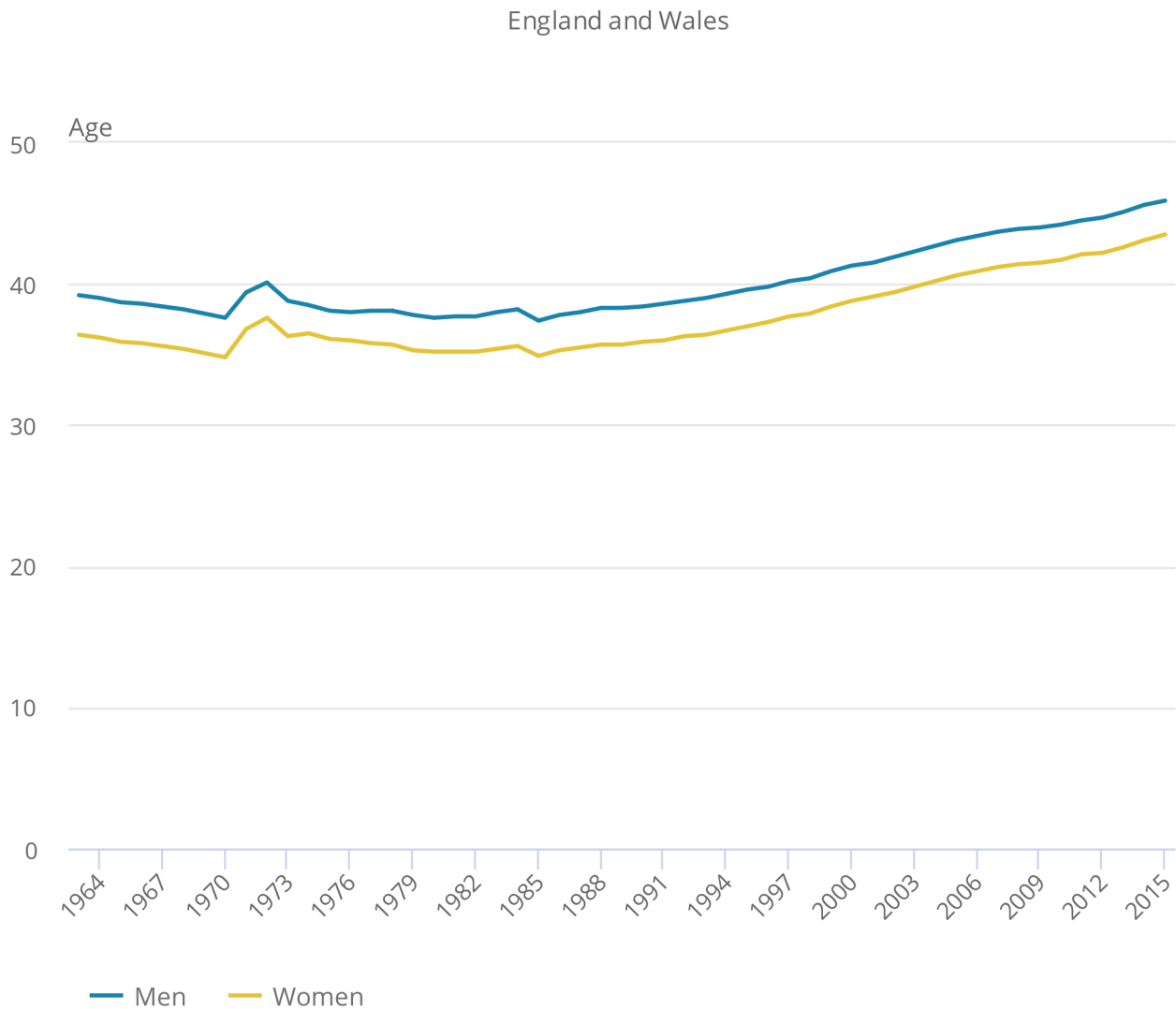
1. Figures by age will not sum to the total number of divorces because 9% of records have no age stated for the husband and 9% of records have no age stated for the wife.

The average (mean) age at divorce for opposite sex couples in 2015 was 45.9 years for men and 43.5 years for women. The average age at divorce has increased every year between 1985 and 2015, rising by over 8 years for both men and women (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Divorces of opposite sex couples, average (mean) age at divorce for men and women, 1963 to 2015**

England and Wales

Figure 4: Divorces of opposite sex couples, average (mean) age at divorce for men and women, 1963 to 2015



Source: Office for National Statistics

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Average age at divorce is only available back to 1963.

When considering changes in the number of divorces of opposite sex couples by age for men and women, it is important to also take account of the size of the married population, since any changes in this will affect the number of divorces. In 2015, the number of men and women divorcing per 1,000 married men or women (divorce rate) decreased in all age groups, compared with 2014 (Figure 5 and 6).

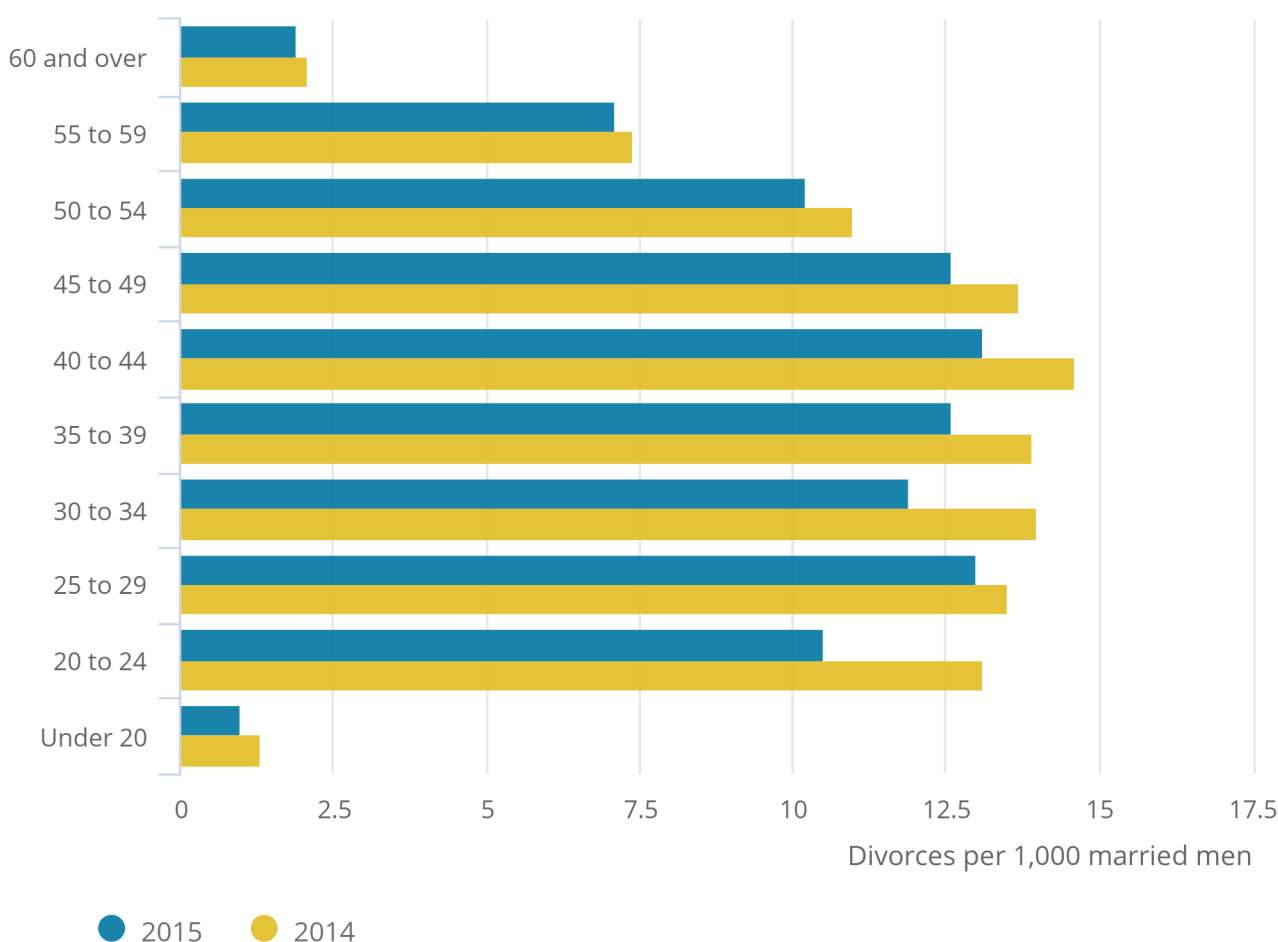
The percentage decline in divorce rates in 2015 compared with 2014, was greatest for both men and women aged under 45; rates for each age group decreased by 8% or more, except for men aged 25 to 29 where rates decreased by 3.7%. The percentage decline in divorce rates for men and women aged 45 and over was slightly smaller (8% or less for each age group) except for men aged 60 and over where divorce rates decreased by 9.5%.

**Figure 5: Divorces of opposite sex couples: rates by age for men, 2014 and 2015**

England and Wales

Figure 5: Divorces of opposite sex couples: rates by age for men, 2014 and 2015

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Source: Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. In 2015, 9% of records had no age stated for the husband, in 2014 the figure was 8%; rates by age have been calculated excluding these records.

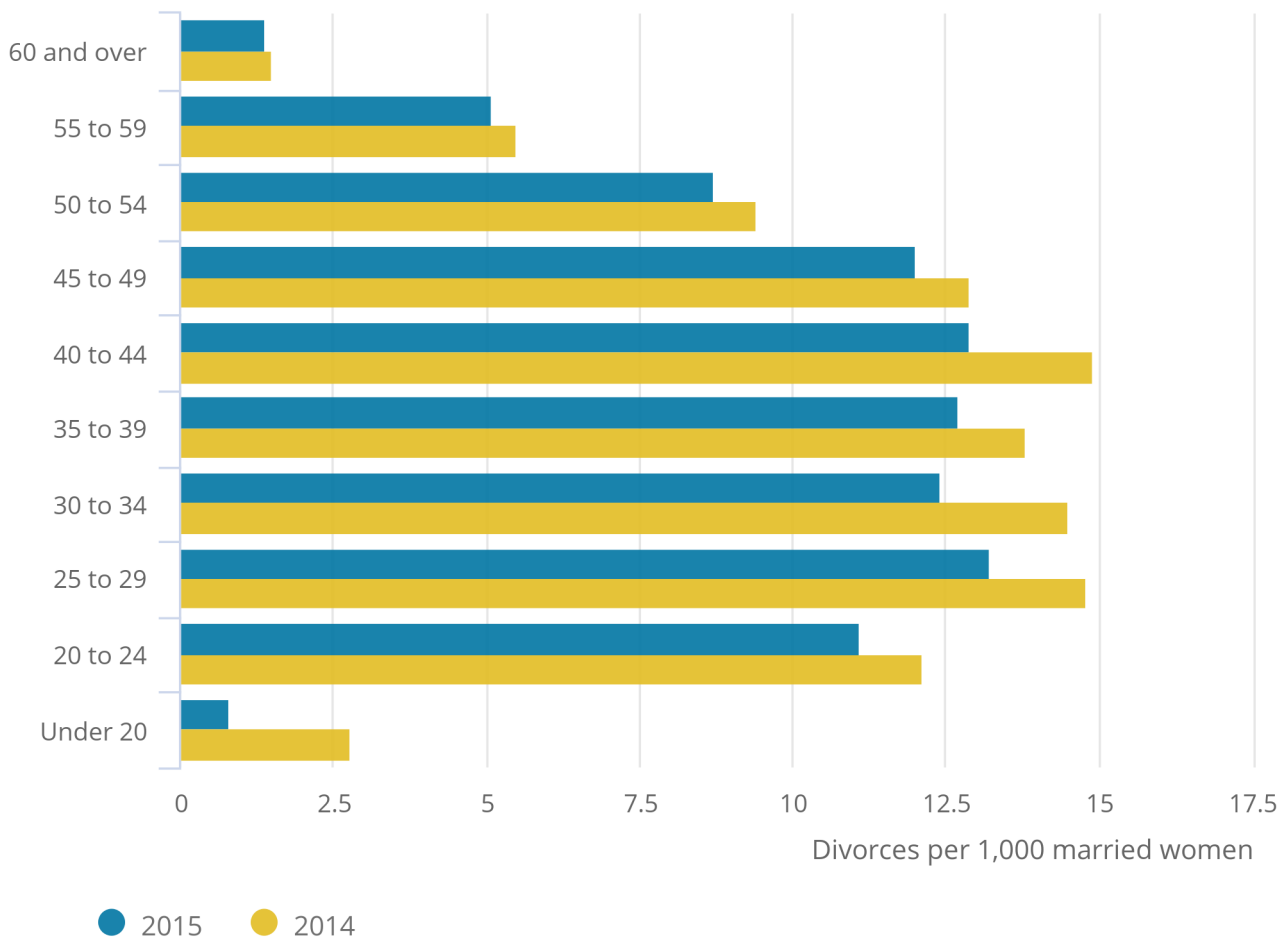


**Figure 6: Divorces of opposite sex couples: rates by age for women, 2014 and 2015**

England and Wales

Figure 6: Divorces of opposite sex couples: rates by age for women, 2014 and 2015

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Source: Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. In 2014 and 2015, 9% of records had no age stated for the wife; rates by age have been calculated excluding these records.

## **8 . How long do marriages of opposite sex couples last?**

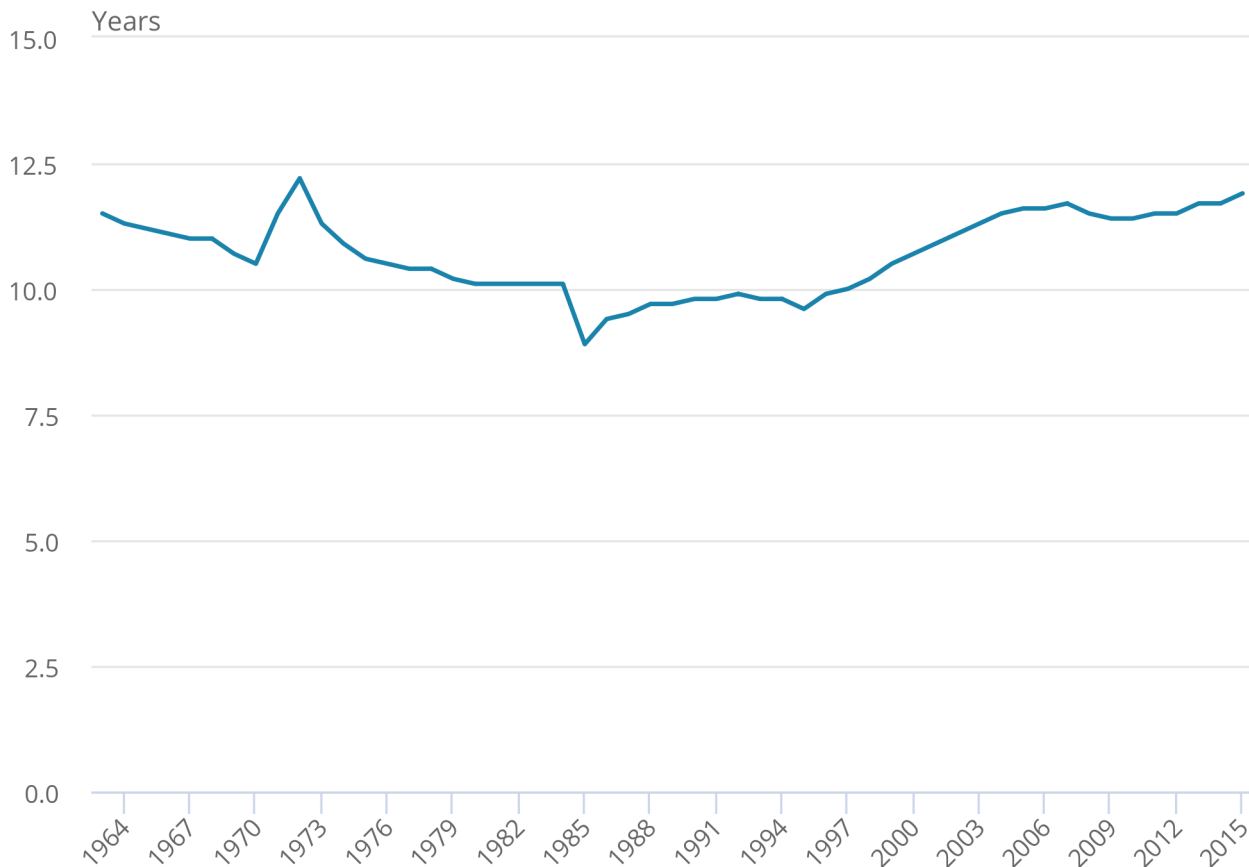
The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for divorces granted to opposite sex couples in 2015 was 11.9 years, increasing slightly from 11.7 in 2013 and 2014. There has been a very gradual increase in the median duration of marriages which end in divorce since 2009 when it was 11.4 years. Over the last 50 years, the median duration has remained relatively stable fluctuating between 8.9 years and 12.2 years (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Median duration of marriage for opposite sex couples, 1963 to 2015**

England and Wales

Figure 7: Median duration of marriage for opposite sex couples,  
1963 to 2015

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

**Source: Office for National Statistics**

**Notes:**

1. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act replaced the minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce from 3 years to 1 year, resulting in a fall in the median duration of marriage in 1985.

## 9 . What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has generally increased for those marrying between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. For example 22% of marriages in 1970 had ended by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 33% of marriages in 1995 had ended after the same period of time. For those marrying since 2000, there is some evidence of decreases in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce. The proportion of men and women who had ever divorced has also declined over recent decades.

The cumulative percentages of marriages which end in divorce increase more rapidly in the first 10 years of marriage than the 10 years after that. Once the 20th wedding anniversary is reached, the cumulative percentages increase less rapidly.

[What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) shows that the estimated percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage.

More explanations of these trends are available alongside the data.

## 10 . Links to related statistics

For more detailed divorce statistics see our [datasets](#) which provide a long time series, or our [explorable dataset](#) which provide detailed divorce statistics for 2009 to 2015.

The number of divorces and the divorce rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference tables](#).

Further statistics on [marriages](#), [civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available on our website. We also have [explorable datasets](#) for marriages.

Special extracts and tabulations of divorces 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 ([vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk) or telephone: +44 (0)1329 444110). User requested data will be published onto [our website](#).

## 11 . What's changed in this release?

Following the [Children and Families Act 2014](#), couples divorcing are no longer required to provide information on children as part of the divorce process. From the data we receive it is not possible to determine whether a couple were childless or whether they chose not to provide information on children.

Analyses show that the average number of children per couple has declined notably since 2013 – a likely consequence of many couples choosing not to provide children information. Consequently children information is no longer included within our divorces datasets published alongside this bulletin; figures based on incomplete data would be misleading.

## 12 . Quality and methodology

This is the first time that divorce statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2015; the release provides final annual data.

1. We aim to publish annual divorce statistics around 12 to 13 months after the end of the reference period. The release of 2015 statistics was delayed due to data processing changes required given our move to receiving data electronically instead of paper forms, from the 2013 data year; this required more time to be spent on detailed quality assurance. From 2016 we have been receiving monthly datasets rather than annual – this will enable more timely future publications.
2. Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes.
3. The [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information](#) document contains important information on:
  - the strengths and limitations of the data
  - the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data, how it compares with related data
  - uses and users
  - how the output was created
4. Our [User Guide to Divorce Statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces and includes a glossary of terms.
5. Divorce statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information](#).
6. The [Revisions policy for population statistics \(including divorce statistics\)](#) is available on our website.
7. 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 male and female population by age and marital status.
8. Divorce rates have been calculated in this release for opposite sex couples. The rates have been calculated by dividing
  - the number of males or females, married in opposite sex couples, who divorce in a particular year, by
  - the estimated number of married males or females aged 16 and over in that year ( [population estimates by marital status](#) ).

While the actual number of males and females in opposite sex couples getting divorced in a particular year is equal, the number of married males and females can differ because one 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.