

Statistical bulletin

Marriages in England and Wales: 2015

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



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1 . Main points

- There were 239,020 marriages between opposite-sex couples in 2015, a decrease of 3.4% from 2014 when there 247,372 marriages, and 0.8% lower than in 2013.
- Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2015 were the lowest on record, with 21.7 marriages per thousand unmarried men and 19.8 marriages per thousand unmarried women.
- Compared with 2005, marriage rates for opposite-sex couples marrying in 2015 were lower at all ages, except for men aged 65 and over and women aged 55 and over where marriage rates increased.
- In 2015 there were 6,493 marriages between same-sex couples, 56% were between female couples; a further 9,156 same-sex couples converted their civil partnership into a marriage.
- In 2015, civil ceremonies among opposite-sex couples decreased by 1.6%, while religious ceremonies decreased by 8.0% compared with 2014.
- Same-sex couples mostly solemnised their marriages in civil ceremonies; there were only 44 religious ceremonies accounting for 0.7% of all marriages of same-sex couples.
- In 2015, of all individuals marrying a same-sex partner, 85% were forming their first legally recognised partnership compared with 76% for opposite-sex couples.

2 . Statistician's comment

"Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples are now at their lowest level on record following a gradual long-term decline since the early 1970s. The number of marriages between opposite-sex couples decreased by 3.4% in 2015, compared with 2014.

"Despite this overall decline, marriages at older ages rose; the number of weddings increased for men aged 50 and over and women aged 35 to 39 years and 45 and over.

"This is the first full year for which marriages were available for same-sex couples and they accounted for 2.6% of all marriages."

Nicola Haines, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics Follow Vital Statistics Outputs Branch on Twitter [@StatsLiz](#)

3 . Things you need to know about this release

- 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.

4 . Marriages between opposite-sex couples decreased and resultant marriage rates were the lowest on record

There were 239,020 marriages between opposite-sex couples in England and Wales in 2015, a 3.4% decrease compared with 2014; civil marriages declined by 1.6% while religious marriages declined by 8.0%. There was a gradual long-term decline in the number of marriages between 1972 and 2009. Between 2010 and 2012, marriages then rose slightly each year before declining in 2013. Although there was a small increase in marriage numbers in 2014, the declining trend continued in 2015 (Figure 1a). The number of marriages in 2015 was 0.8% lower than in 2013, representing the lowest number of marriages in a calendar year since 2009.

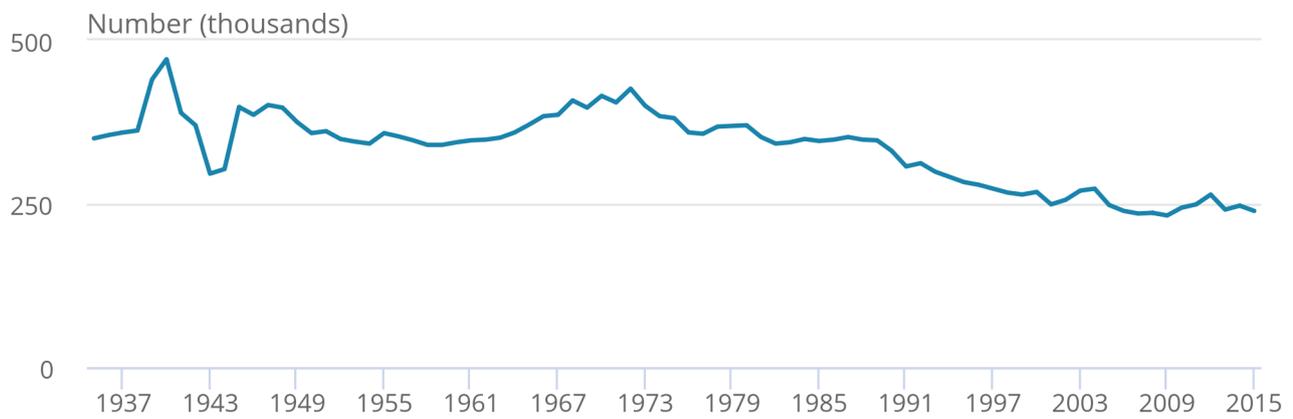
It is possible that couples may have delayed marrying in 2013 to avoid the unlucky number 13, resulting in the increase in marriage numbers seen the following year in 2014. More information on the long-term decline in marriages and marriage rates between 1972 and 2009 is available in [Marriages in England and Wales: 2013](#); factors that may have influenced the increase in marriages and the overall marriage rates from 2010 to 2012 are also outlined.

Figure 1a: Number of marriages between opposite-sex couples, 1935 to 2015

England and Wales

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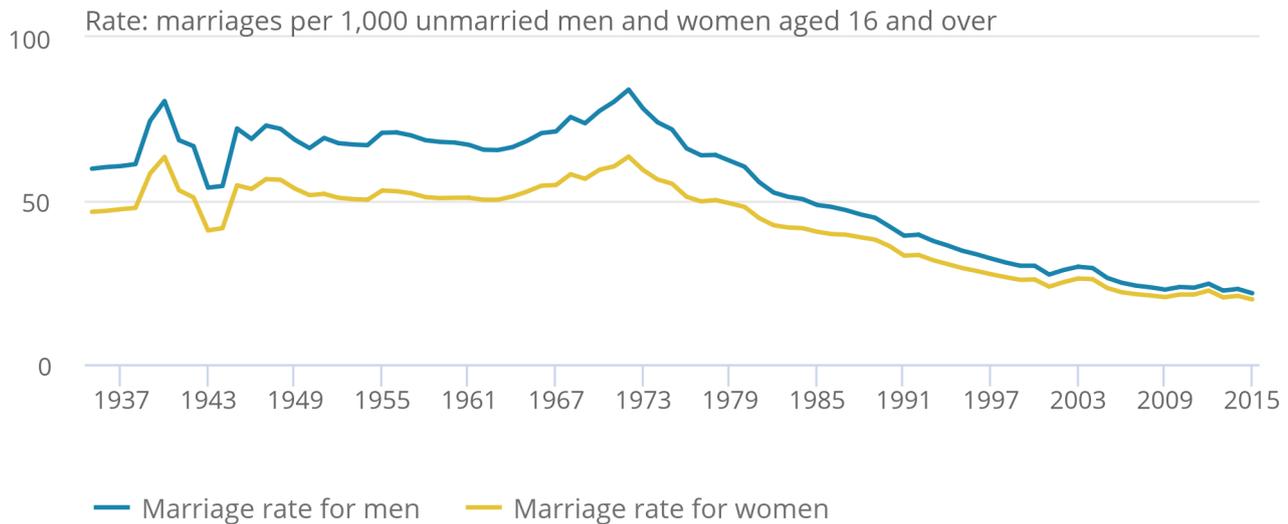
Source: Office for National Statistics

Figure 1b: Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, 1935 to 2015

England and Wales

Figure 1b: Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, 1935 to 2015

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The certificate of approval scheme under the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004 came into effect on 1 February 2005, to prevent the use of marriage to circumvent UK immigration control (“sham marriages”). This scheme was abolished on 9 May 2011.
2. The marriage rate shows the number of marriages per thousand unmarried men and women aged 16 and over.

Marriage rates provide a better indication of trends than simply looking at the number of marriages. This is because they take account of changes in the size of the unmarried adult population, as well as the number of marriages. Marriage rates show the number of marriages per thousand unmarried men and women aged 16 and over.

Marriage rates gradually declined between 1972 and 2009 but have since fluctuated slightly (Figure 1b). Marriage rates for both men and women in 2015 represent the lowest on record (figures available back to 1862); in 2015, there were 21.7 marriages per thousand unmarried men and 19.8 marriages per thousand unmarried women, representing decreases of 5.7% for men and 5.3% for women compared with 2014.

The percentage of men and women who have ever married has been declining over recent decades along with the percentage of men and women who have ever remarried. A more detailed explanation of these trends is available alongside the [data](#).

5 . More females than males married a partner of the same sex

A total of 6,493 marriages were formed between same-sex couples in 2015. Of these, 44% (2,860) were between male couples and 56% (3,633) were between female couples (Figure 2). In contrast, our latest [statistics on civil partnerships](#) show that in 2016, 68% of same-sex couples forming a civil partnership were male.

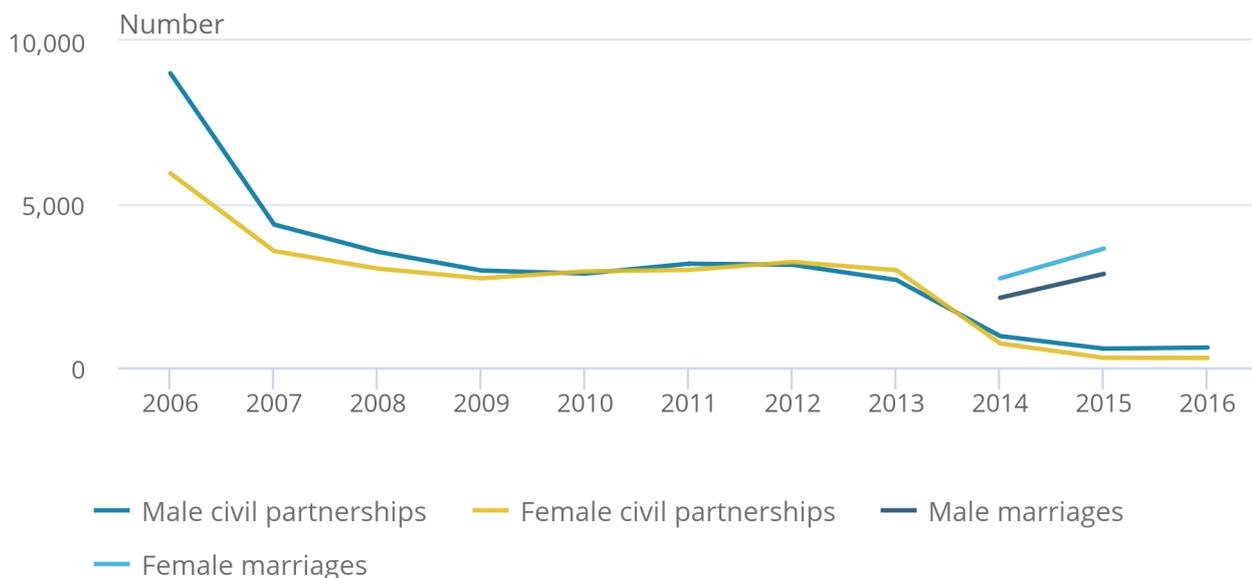
Marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible since 29 March 2014 and consequently, 2015 represents the first full year of data.

Figure 2: Number of marriages of same-sex couples 2014 to 2015 and civil partnerships, 2006 to 2016

England and Wales

Figure 2: Number of marriages of same-sex couples 2014 to 2015 and civil partnerships, 2006 to 2016

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Following the introduction of the [Civil Partnership Act 2004](#), the first day that couples could normally form a civil partnership was 21 December 2005 in England and Wales. Civil partnerships remain available to same-sex couples following the introduction of marriages for same-sex couples.
2. An announcement was made in December 2013 that marriages of same-sex couples could be formed in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

6 . Religious ceremonies continued to decline in popularity

Religious ceremonies accounted for 26% of marriages between opposite-sex couples and 0.7% of marriages between same-sex couples in 2015. Only 44 same-sex couples married through religious ceremonies in 2015; not all religious organisations conduct marriages of same-sex couples.

The percentage of opposite-sex couples marrying through religious ceremonies has decreased steadily over time. In 1900, religious ceremonies accounted for 85% of all marriages, by 1980 this had fallen to 50%. Since 1992, civil marriages have increasingly outnumbered religious marriages every year.

Most civil marriages take place in approved premises (buildings such as hotels, historic buildings and stately homes licensed for civil marriages); in 2015, of all civil marriages, 89% of opposite-sex couples and 88% of same-sex couples married in approved premises. Civil marriages not held in approved premises are conducted in a register office.

There has been a continual increase in the percentage of opposite-sex couples marrying in approved premises, coinciding with a rise in the number of approved premises available since their introduction in 1995.

7 . Same-sex male couples were most likely to be forming their first legally recognised partnership

In 2015, of all men and women marrying a partner of the opposite-sex, 75% of men and 76% of women were marrying for the first time. In comparison, 89% of men and 82% of women marrying a partner of the same-sex were forming their first legally recognised partnership – they had never previously married or been in a civil partnership.

Two-thirds (67%) of marriages between opposite-sex couples in 2015 were the first marriage for both partners, unchanged since 2012; this percentage has increased steadily from a recent low of 58% in 2000. Among same-sex couples, 80% of marriages between males and 69% between females were the first legally recognised partnership for both partners.

8 . The average age at marriage continued to rise

Among opposite-sex couples, more women than men married at ages under 30; at ages 30 and over, more men married. This pattern, which has been recorded since 1997, 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 45; at ages 45 and over, more men married. In 2013, prior to the introduction of marriages for same-sex couples, more women than men entered a civil partnership at ages under 40, while at ages 40 and over, more men formed a civil partnership.

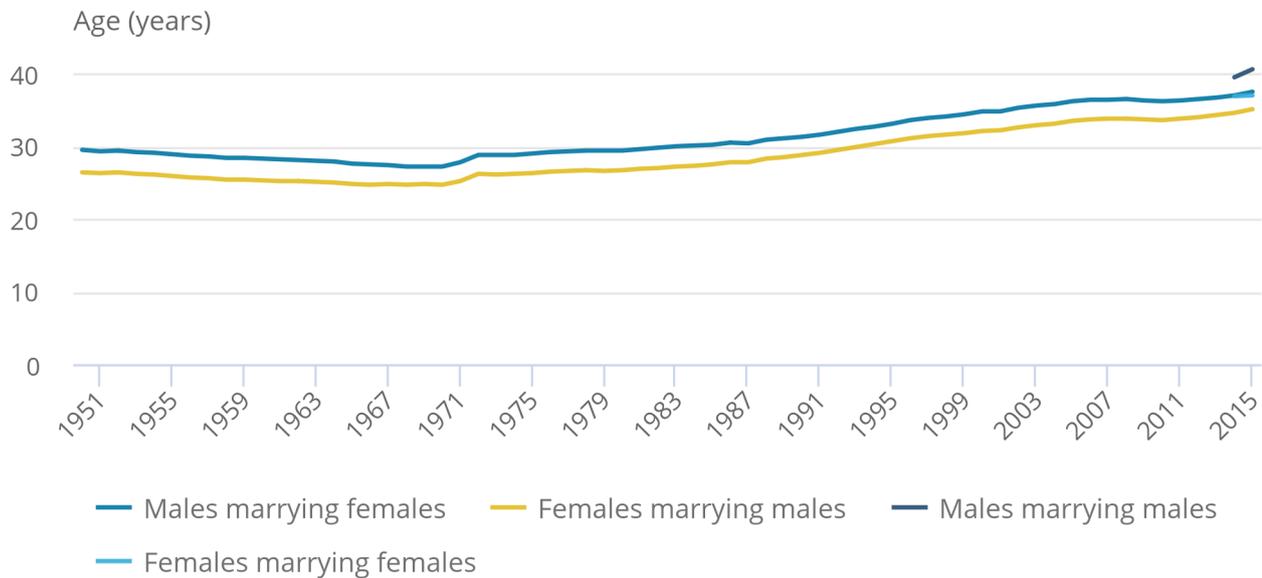
For marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average (mean) age for men marrying in 2015 was 37.5 years, while for women it was 35.1 years. This represents a slight increase compared with 2014 (37.0 years for men and 34.6 years for women) and continues the overall rise recorded since the 1970s. The average age at marriage for same-sex couples in 2015 was slightly higher at 40.6 years for men and 37.0 years for women.

Figure 3: Average age at marriage for men and women, 1950 to 2015

England and Wales

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England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

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

9 . Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples decreased except at older ages

Marriage rates provide a better indication of trends than simply looking at the number of marriages; this is because they take account of the size of the unmarried population, which will affect the number of marriages.

Marriage rates by age are available for opposite-sex and same-sex couples in [Tables 9a and 9b](#) respectively.

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples marrying in 2015 were lower at all ages compared with 2005, except for men aged 65 and over and women aged 55 and over, where marriage rates increased.

When comparing marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2015 with 2014, rates were generally lower; increased rates were only recorded for men aged 50 to 54 and 60 to 64 years and for women aged 50 and over.

In general, marriage rates among older people have been increasing over recent years and falling at younger ages. For more information see [Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#). Men and women aged under 20 have recorded the largest percentage decrease in marriage rates since 2005 (56% for men and 66% for women).

This is the first full year for which marriage rates are available for marriages of same-sex couples. In 2015, marriage rates for same-sex couples were higher among women than men at ages 20 to 39 years; while at ages 50 and over, rates were higher among men. For marriages of opposite-sex couples, a similar pattern exists, however, rates for women were higher at ages under 35 while at older ages, rates were higher among men.

10 . Slightly more females than males converted their civil partnership into a marriage

Following the introduction of the [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#), 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; consequently, 2015 represents the first full year of data.

During 2015, there were 9,156 couples who converted their existing civil partnership into a marriage. Of these conversions, 48% were between male couples while 52% were between female couples.

11 . Links to related statistics

For more detailed marriage statistics see our datasets, which provide a long time series, or our [explorable datasets](#), which provide detailed marriage statistics for 2001 to 2015.

The number of marriages and the marriage rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital statistics: population and health reference tables](#).

[Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#) was published in July 2017 and discusses the pattern of changing relationships at older ages.

[Provisional figures on marriages of same-sex couples and the number of couples converting their civil partnership into a marriage](#) were published in October 2015.

[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.

Further statistics on [divorces](#), [civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available.

Special extracts and tabulations of marriage 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 or telephone: +44 (0)1329 444110. [User requested data](#) will be made publicly available.

12 . Quality and methodology

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

It is currently only possible to publish final annual marriage statistics around 26 months after the end of the reference year. This is due to delays in the submission of marriage entries by the clergy and authorised persons. It is estimated that each year around 4% of religious marriage returns remain outstanding one year after the end of the reference period (this is based on marriage records received at ONS); this directly affects the timing of statistical outputs. This may be due to a number of factors such as the closure of a building or change of incumbent.

An electronic system has been introduced to track returns from every building in which marriages may be solemnised. This provides data that enables the General Register Office (GRO) to identify potential outstanding returns and take targeted action via the local registrar. In addition, GRO has also improved communications with all denominations via a regular newsletter covering a range of topics including the importance of providing the timely return of copies of marriage records.

Marriage statistics are published once we consider the annual dataset is acceptably complete. Marriage records received after our annual dataset is taken are not included in published figures. Table 1 in our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) shows that the difference between the number of marriages stored on our database, and the number included in our publications each year, has been less than 0.4% since 2002. Although this means some marriages are not included in the statistics, it is a compromise that must be taken to publish as timely data as possible. We hope to improve the timeliness of marriage statistics in future years. We continue to work with GRO, monitoring the receipt of marriage registrations and sending out reminders where delays are identified.

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.

The [Marriages 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 of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data

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

Marriage statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in the [Marriages Quality and Methodology Information](#) report.

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

The mean (average) 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.