

Article

Families and households statistics explained

This explainer outlines families and households definitions, classifications, uses and users of the data, common queries, and other sources of household estimates.

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1 . Introduction

Families and households data are widely used for many different purposes. The analysis of families and households can be a complex area and in addition to the Families and Households publication, there are a range of other publications that also report estimates of households.

The purpose of this explainer is to:

- outline some of the definitions that we use in this release
- explain how different types of households and families are classified in our statistics
- detail how the data are used
- address some common questions that are asked about the data
- identify what other sources of household estimates exist for users.

We have also provided a [glossary of important terms](#).

2 . Families and households – Definitions

In the [Families and Households publication](#), we use the following definitions-

A “family” is:

a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who lives at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent.

“Dependent children” are:

those living with their parent(s) who are either

- aged under 16 years, or
- aged 16 to 18 years

and who are in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 years who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household.

“Non-dependent children” are:

those living with their parent(s) and who are either

- aged 19 years or over, or
- aged 16 to 18 years

and who are not in full-time education and have no spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.

A “household” is:

(current definition, from 2011): one person living alone, or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room or dining area. A household can consist of a single family, more than one family or no families in the case of a group of unrelated people.

(previous definition, from 1996 to 2010): a person living alone, or a group of people living at the same address who have the address as their only or main residence and either share one main meal a day or share living accommodation (or both).

A helpful way to think of the relationship between families and households is to consider families as a subset or portion of a household, as more than one family can live in a household.

Another term commonly associated with families and households is “dwellings”. A dwelling refers to:

a self-contained unit of accommodation where all of the rooms (including kitchen, bathroom and toilet) in a household’s accommodation are behind a single door that only the household can use. Households are therefore a subset of a dwelling as more than one household can be resident in a dwelling. Estimates of dwellings are not covered in the Families and Households publication.

Estimates of numbers and types of families and households, which are published annually in the [Families and Households Statistical publication](#), are produced using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The “Labour Force Survey” (LFS) is:

a study of employment circumstances in the UK used to provide information on the UK labour market. Therefore, its primary function is not to provide information on demographics such as families and households. As such, the definitions used to describe families and households are constrained by the LFS; so, a lot of the complexities of family and household formation cannot be explored. For example, families are constrained by the fact that they must all reside at the same address.

It is important to note the difference between the definitions of “family unit” in the LFS and “family”. A “family unit” is:

either a single person; a married or cohabiting couple; a married or cohabiting couple and their never-married children who have no children of their own living with them; or a lone parent with such children.

Therefore, a single person can be categorised as a family unit, but they are not considered a family. Family units are not reported on in the Families and Households publication.

In some situations where there may be less straightforward relationships in a household, the Household Reference Person (HRP) is used to determine the lead family.

A “Household Reference Person” (HRP) is:

(current definition, post-2001): the householder, who is the household member who owns the accommodation; is legally responsible for the rent; or occupies the accommodation as reward of their employment, or through some relationship to its owner who is not a member of the household. If there are joint householders, the one with the highest income is the HRP. If their income is the same, then the eldest one is the HRP.

(previous definition, Head of Household to pre-2001): in a household where there is one adult only, that adult is the head of their household (HoH). If there are two adults of the opposite sex living together as a married or cohabiting couple, the husband or male partner is the HoH. Otherwise, the oldest male householder, or the husband or male partner of the oldest female householder, is the HoH. Otherwise, the oldest female householder is the HoH.

The definition for the HRP is a LFS definition. Please note that this definition differs slightly from the HRP definition used in the [2011 Census](#).

3 . What would my household be classified as?

Household formation can be complex and there may be many living arrangements for which it is not immediately obvious where they might fit into the main categories used in the [Families and Households datasets](#). The following scenarios feature some common circumstances and explain how these are captured in these tables.

“I live on my own”

Adults aged 16 years and over who live alone are included in our statistics in the category, “one-person households”, which we split by sex and broad age groups: 16 to 24 years, 25 to 44 years, 45 to 64 years, 65 to 74 years and 75 years and over.

“I live with my partner and child but also with my parents”

People described in this category would be considered to be living in a “multi-family household”. These contain two or more families, and so the example of living with a partner and a child but with parents would fall into this category. Here we would have more than one family: the person, their partner and the child would form one family, and the parents (grand-parents of the child) would form the other family. This household would contain two families and would therefore be classed as a multi-family household. Families in multi-family households may be:

- unrelated (for example, two unrelated couples sharing a house)
- related and multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus children and elderly parents; or married couple plus their teenage daughter and her child)
- related but not multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus son and girlfriend; or two brothers and their partners sharing a house)

If the situation was with just one parent (that is, a couple and their child who lived with one parent (for example, a grandparent of the child), then the classification of this household would depend on the Household Reference Person (HRP) (see Section 2 “Families and households – Definitions”).

“I live in a house share”

Many young adults live in what they describe as a “house share” or “flat share”. This is not a concept we use in our official household statistics. The closest category of household type we do use is households containing “two or more unrelated adults”.

“Two or more unrelated adults” households do not contain either a couple or a parent with their child. Typically, such households may consist of a group of friends or students but could consist of two siblings or cousins, for example.

However, in some instances those living in “house shares” or “flat shares” might be captured as a “multi-family household” (defined earlier) if there is a couple in the household or if someone lives with their child as they are considered to have formed their own family.

“I am an adult living with my parents”

If you live with your parent, grandparent, step-parent or foster parent(s) (along with any other siblings), you will likely be captured in a married or cohabiting couple household or lone parent household with either dependent children (if at least one of your siblings is a dependent child living in the household) or in a household with non-dependent children (if all other siblings are also non-dependent children living in the household).

However, if you live with your partner at your or their parent’s address and/or you live with your child(ren), then you would be considered to have formed your own family and therefore the household would be classified as a “multi-family household”.

“I am a lodger living with a family”

Lodgers are not counted as their own family and are included in the category that best describes the household (for example, the family they are living with). This means that when counting people within households, lodgers might be included in, for instance, “couple, no children, others”, because that lodger lives with a couple who do not have children.

“I live in a communal establishment”

A communal establishment is an establishment providing managed residential accommodation. “Managed” in this context means full- or part-time supervision of the accommodation. According to the [2011 Census](#), communal establishments include:

- sheltered accommodation units (including homeless temporary shelter)
- hotels
- guest houses
- B&Bs
- inns
- pubs
- all accommodation provided solely for students (during term-time)

Communal establishments, bar a couple of exceptions, are not included in the families and household statistics. This is because the vast majority of communal establishments (for example, prisons, hospitals, hotel complexes and retirement homes) are not selected to participate in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) as these are not considered to be private addresses.

The exceptions are those who live in NHS accommodation and those residing in university halls of residence. NHS accommodations are sampled as they are treated as private addresses, those living in university halls are included at their parental address.

4 . What would my family be classified as?

Family structures and living arrangements can be complex. There may be many circumstances for which it is not immediately obvious where they might fit into the main categories used in the [Families and Households datasets](#). As our definition of a family is also constrained by the fact that a family must all reside at the same address, the categorisation of some families may not reflect how we might naturally view family relationships.

The following scenarios feature some common circumstances and explain how these are captured in these tables.

“My child is currently away from home”

If we come across a situation where a respondent tells us their child is away from home, then we would decide whether to include them as part of the family (and household) using the six-month rule.

A person could be “away from home” for a number of different reasons (for example, attending university, a military deployment, imprisonment or in hospital); if the length of absence exceeds six months, then we would not include this person as part of a family or a household. If it is less, then they would be captured by proxy interview, but it would be dependent on where the person considers their main address to be. This would mean that this particular household could appear in our statistics as either having children (that is, a couple or lone parent with dependent or non-dependent children) or not having children (that is, a couple without children).

“I am married, but my spouse does not currently live with me”

If we encounter a situation where a married couple who are together are not living together, then we would interview the resident of the selected address but would not include their spouse at the same address. If the spouse is said to be living in a private address elsewhere, then they have an opportunity to be captured at this address if it is sampled and so could be included twice if interviewed at both addresses.

If the spouse is found to be living at a selected address, but they are away for more than six months, then they are not included as part of the household. If they are away for less than six months, then they are considered to be living at the selected address and can be included in the household by way of a proxy interview.

“I have a foster child living in my family”

In the Labour Force Survey (LFS), foster children, and other children who live with someone other than their parents (an older sibling or a grandparent, for example), are treated as being a separate (one-person) family unit and are classed as the head of their own family. Families of this type are most likely to be multi-family households, consisting of two or more families.

5 . What data are used to produce the families and households estimates?

ONS families and household estimates are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS is a large-scale household survey that is conducted by the ONS that samples up to 160,000 private addresses per year across England, Wales and Scotland. The Northern Ireland LFS is run by the [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(NISRA\)](#).

The survey only captures details of persons living at sampled addresses and does not record any relationships outside of a household. This affects people who are “living apart together” and non-resident parents. It also only records permanent “usual residents” who reside at a selected address; guests or visitors who live elsewhere are not included as part of a selected household.

6 . How are families and households data used?

There are a number of policy issues relating to families and households, including:

- affordability and demand for housing
- rights for cohabiting couples
- school education for children on different types of families
- service provisions for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) communities

Here are some examples of recent uses of the families and households estimates:

- the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) used the estimates in their report on [Troubled Families](#), a UK government initiative to help families with a history of domestic issues turn their lives around
- the UK government used the estimates in their publication on [Measuring Child Poverty](#), which laid out plans to better measure the extent of child poverty in the UK
- a charity for lone parents (Gingerbread) used the statistics to ascertain the [number of lone parents in the UK](#)

7 . Different sources of household estimates

We publish estimates of numbers and types of households annually in the [Families and Households Statistical bulletins](#) using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Currently, the ONS has other published household estimates that can be obtained from the [2011 Census](#), from [household projections](#) and from further back in time, from the [General Household Survey \(which later became the General Lifestyle Survey\)](#), which ran from 1971 to 2011.

Other sources outside of the ONS are the [English Housing Survey](#) (EHS), a survey carried out in England with a sample of 13,000 households per year, and the [Scottish House Condition Survey](#) (SHCS), a Scottish housing survey with a sample of about 3,000 per year. These are carried out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Scottish Government, respectively.

For more information on these alternative sources, please use the links provided.

Research outputs

We are transforming the way we produce population and household statistics by using a range of new and existing data sources to meet the needs of our users. We have set ambitious targets to put administrative data at the core of our evidence on population and household statistics. The ambition is to deliver a fully transformed statistics system by 2023. Transforming the current system to one led by administrative data offers the opportunity to provide more frequent statistics and at more detailed levels of geography.

[Previous Research Outputs](#) from the Administrative Data Census Project have demonstrated our progress towards achieving our ambition for household and family statistics.

Household projections

In addition to household estimates, the ONS and the statistical agencies of each of the devolved administrations (Welsh Government, National Records of Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) produce [household projections for each of the four countries of the UK](#). Household projections provide statistics on the potential future number of households for 25 years into the future from the base year. They show the household numbers that would result if the assumptions based on previous demographic trends in population and household formation were to be realised in practice.

For England and Wales, the methodology used to produce household projections is also applied to mid-year population estimates to produce historical household estimates. For Northern Ireland, historical household estimates are not published, although they could be produced using the same methodology based on population estimates rather than population projections. Scotland publish [household estimates](#) that are based on Council Tax data.

These projections do not attempt to predict the impact of future government or local policies, changing economic circumstances or other factors that may influence household growth, such as the number of houses built. Household projections are not a prediction or forecast of how many houses should be built in the future. Instead, they show how many additional households would form if the population of England keeps growing as it did in past years. Therefore, household projections should be used as a starting point for calculating the future housing needs of a local area.

Sources of families data

These statistics are the only available estimates of the numbers of families and people in families. Other family-related data, such as relationships and family characteristics, may be available from other sources (for example [Understanding Society](#), which is a UK longitudinal study that has been running since 2008).

The ONS produces other data relating to families including [marriages](#), [civil partnerships](#), [divorces](#), and [population estimates by marital status and living arrangements](#), which has data for living arrangements of people aged 16 years and over. Statistics on [family sizes](#) are also available.

8 . Changes to marriages and civil partnerships in the UK

Civil partnerships in the UK are a form of civil union granted under the Civil Partnership Act 2004, allowing same-sex couples to obtain essentially the same rights and responsibilities as civil marriage. Civil partners are entitled to:

- the same property rights as married couples
- the same exemption as married couples on inheritance tax
- social security and pension benefits
- the ability to obtain parental responsibility for a partner's children
- the ability to obtain parental responsibility for reasonable maintenance of one's partner and their children, tenancy rights, full life insurance recognition, next of kin rights in hospitals, and others

There is a formal process for dissolving civil partnerships akin to divorce.

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales from 13 March 2014 and from 16 December 2014 in Scotland. Same-sex marriage is not performed or recognised in Northern Ireland, but legislation requiring the UK Government to extend same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland (if the Northern Ireland Assembly is not resumed before 21 October 2019) has passed Parliament and will come into effect on 13 January 2020. The Act also granted those in civil partnerships the ability to convert their partnership into a marriage. Civil partnerships continue to remain available to same-sex couples.

In England and Wales, the government is committed to changing the law by 31 December 2019 to allow opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships. An open [consultation](#) was published by the Government Equalities Office on 10 July 2019, seeking views on the future of conversion rights (that is, whether opposite-sex married couples should have the opportunity to convert their relationship to a civil partnership). In Scotland, legislation on opposite-sex civil partnerships is to be introduced in Parliament in Autumn 2019.

There is no such thing as a common law marriage in the UK. This means that cohabiting couples do not have the same legal rights as married couples. [The Cohabitation Rights Bill](#), which addresses the rights of cohabiting couples, is in the early stages of passing through Parliament.

9 . Common families and households queries

“Can I obtain families and households data at a subnational level?”

It is possible for us to produce some data at a lower geographic level, depending on the quality. Estimates, especially at local authority level, are likely to be subject to sample size issues, meaning we may not be able to publish some figures. We do not publish any estimates based on samples less than 3.

Please email pop.info@ons.gov.uk or use the feedback tools provided for each table in the accompanying datasets to request data not currently provided. Please note requests for additional data are likely to be charged in line with our [charging policy](#).

“I need data on families and households prior to 1996, is there anywhere I can get this?”

The Families and Households estimates in this publication cover the period from 1996 to 2018. The [General Lifestyle Survey](#) is an alternative source of household statistics, which provides data from the period 1971 to 2011.

Labour Force Survey (LFS) data pre-1996 is also available from the [UK Data Archive](#), which has data going back as far as 1973.

“I want some different families and households data that is not published here, what can I do?”

Please email pop.info@ons.gov.uk to request additional Families and Households data not currently provided. Your feedback is important to us to help ensure our publication meets your needs. We may be able to provide you with an ad hoc data table to meet your request.

Additional data from the LFS is available to download from the [UK Data Archive](#). As well as the main survey, several sub-sample and derived datasets are also produced, including longitudinal series and a Eurostat version of the dataset. Quarterly data is available back to 1992, but annual datasets are available back to 1973, when the survey began.

“What is the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and where do these data come from?”

The data are produced using the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS is a household survey of people in the UK. Its primary purpose is to provide information on the UK labour market, but it includes data on a variety of other variables such as family types and household types. The LFS covers people in private households, NHS accommodation and students in halls of residence whose parents live in the UK. People who live in other communal establishments, such as prisons, are not included.

The LFS household dataset is used for this publication. The household dataset differs from the person-level dataset in the way that the weighting is applied to the sample. Weighting of the datasets ensures that the estimates are representative of the whole population. Each person in the sample has a weight, which is the number of people that person represents.

The household dataset has the additional constraint that weighting factors are the same for all members of the household. This means that, for example in the household dataset, estimates of men and women living together in opposite-sex couples are the same. The person-level dataset, which is more commonly used for information on the labour market, includes only individual weights, which usually differ between members of the same household. The design of the household dataset is such that it gives the best estimate of families and households, as well as people in families and households.

The LFS household datasets are produced twice a year (one for the April to June quarter, and one for the October to December quarter). The Families and Households publication uses the April to June quarter each year.

More information on the definitions used in the LFS is available in the [LFS User Guide](#).

“Why is the data reweighted and what is the impact of this?”

The LFS reweighting process uses the most up-to-date population estimates as part of the LFS weighting. Reweighting consists of recalibrating historical data to newly available population estimates.

Typically, reweighting of the LFS happens every time new population estimates are published or revisions are made to the mid-year estimates back-series. In the 2018 publication of Families and Households, data for 2012 to 2017 inclusive have been reweighted following revisions to the mid-year estimates for those specific years. The estimates for these years will differ slightly from previous publications.

In terms of impact, the biggest percentage change seen in the 2018 publication as a result of the reweighting was the number of civil partner couple families, which increased by 1.2% in 2016. A [dataset](#) assessing the impact of the reweighting on the estimates for these years has been published alongside this release.

“What is the ‘young adults living with their parents’ dataset?”

In addition to the main data tables, we have published estimates of those aged 15 to 34 years who are living with their parents (including totals for those aged 15 to 34 years and 20 to 34 years) alongside our Families and Households publication since the 2015 release. This is because they use the same data source (that is, the LFS) and are a frequently requested dataset.

The data for 2012 to 2017 have been reweighted in line with the other Families and Households data so estimates for these years, published in the 2018 release, may not match previously published estimates.

Once a person either lives with a partner or has a child, they are considered to have formed their own family and are no longer counted as being part of their parents’ family even if they still live in the same household. Therefore, such people are not deemed as living with their parents here. Students aged 16 years and over living in halls of residence or other private accommodation during term-time and living with their parents outside term-time are also counted as not living with their parents.

10 . Glossary

“One-person household”

A household that contains just one person. One person living on their own is classed as a family unit in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) but is not classed as a family in the families and households statistics (see Section 2 “Families and households – Definitions” for “family” and “family unit”).

“Two or more unrelated adults household”

A household with more than two people who are made up from different families (that is, they do not contain either a couple or a parent with their child). Examples of this type could be students or friends living together but could also consist of two siblings sharing a house.

“One-family households”

A household consisting of both couple households and lone parent households. Households where there is one family and one individual (for example, a married couple with their daughter and a lodger, or a married couple with one elderly parent) are also classified as one-family households.

“Couple with no children”

Either a married (opposite- or same-sex), civil partnered or cohabiting couple with no children living with them.

“Couple with one or more dependent children”

Either a married (opposite- or same-sex), civil partnered or cohabiting couple with children who are aged under 16 years or who are aged 16 to 18 year and in full-time education. These households can also contain non-dependent children as some households in this category contain a mix of both.

“Couple with non-dependent children only”

Either a married (opposite- or same-sex), civil partnered or cohabiting couple with children aged 19 years or over, or aged 16 to 18 years who are not in full-time education or who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.

“Lone parent with dependent children”

A household with a single male or female parent with children under 16 years or aged 16 to 18 years and in full-time education. Some of these households may contain non-dependent children too.

“Lone parent with non-dependent children”

A household with a single male or female parent with children aged 19 years or over, or children who are aged 16 to 18 years but are not in any full-time education or who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.

“Multi-family household”

Households that consist of two or more families. The families can be unrelated (for example, two unrelated couples sharing a house); related and multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus children and elderly parents, or married couple plus their teenage daughter and her child); or related but not multi-generational (for example, cohabiting couple plus son and girlfriend, or two brothers and their partners sharing a house).