

Statistical bulletin

# Marriages in England and Wales: 2017

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 242,842 marriages in England and Wales in 2017, a decrease of 2.8% from 2016.
- Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2017 were the lowest on record, with 21.2 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 19.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women.
- Less than a quarter (22%) of all marriages in 2017 were religious ceremonies, the lowest percentage on record.
- In 2017, there were 6,932 marriages of same-sex couples of which 56% were between female couples; a further 1,072 couples converted their existing civil partnership into a marriage.
- Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of opposite-sex couples cohabited before getting married in 2017; this proportion was slightly higher for couples who had a civil ceremony (90%) compared with those who had a religious ceremony (81%).
- The average age at marriage of opposite-sex couples was 38.0 years for men and 35.7 years for women in 2017.

## Statistician's comment

“Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples are now at the lowest level on record. This continues a gradual long-term decline seen since the early 1970s, with numbers falling by a third over the past 40 years.

“The popularity of religious ceremonies also fell to historic lows for the second year running, with fewer than one in four couples choosing to get married through a religious ceremony”.

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

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# 2 . Numbers and rates

## Number of marriages

There were 242,842 marriages registered in England and Wales in 2017, a decrease of 2.8% compared with 2016 and 1.1% lower than 2015. The change between 2016 and 2017 was driven by a 9.5% decline in the number of religious marriages coupled with a 0.6% decline in the number of civil marriages.

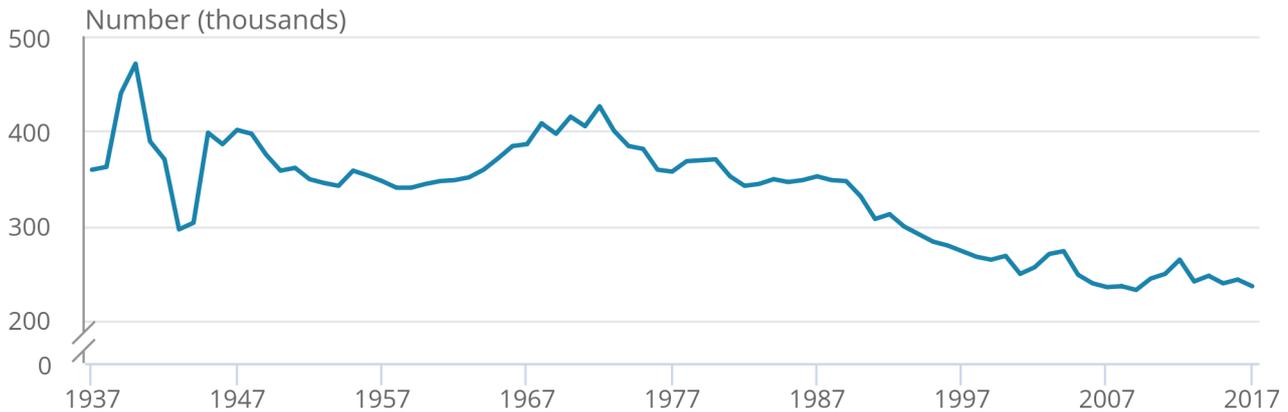
Marriages of opposite-sex couples accounted for the majority (97%) of marriages in 2017, with 235,910 opposite-sex marriages registered, a decrease of 2.8% compared with 2016. Since 1972, the number of opposite-sex marriages has decreased by 45% (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: There has been a gradual long-term decline in the number of marriages of opposite-sex couples since 1972**

Number of marriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1937 to 2017

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Number of marriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1937 to 2017



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

In 2017, there were 6,932 marriages formed between same-sex couples, a similar number to the previous year (7,019 marriages). Of these, 44% were between male couples and 56% were between female couples. These percentages have remained unchanged since the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples in March 2014.

In comparison, our latest statistics on same-sex civil partnerships show that in 2018, nearly two-thirds (65%) of civil partnerships were between male couples.

## Marriage rates

Marriage rates are the number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and women aged 16 years and over. They provide a better indication of trends than simply looking at the number of marriages because they also take account of changes in the size of the unmarried adult population, which can affect the number of marriages.

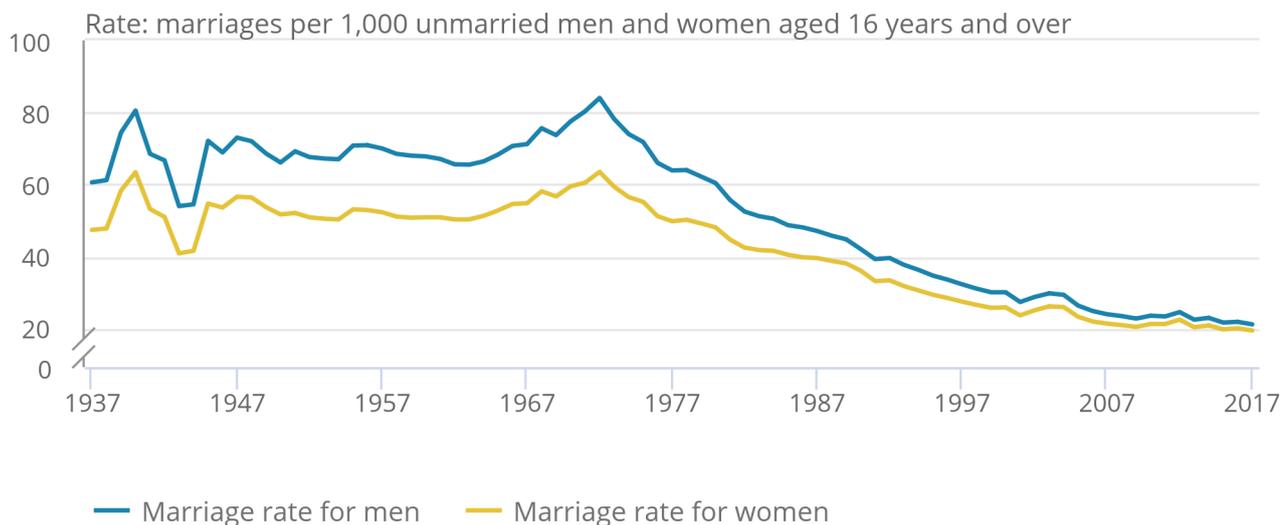
Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples have fallen to the lowest on record (since 1862) for both men and women. In 2017, there were 21.2 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 19.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women aged 16 years and over, representing decreases of 3.2% for men and 3.0% for women compared with 2016. This continues the overall long-term decline in marriage rates since the peak seen in 1972, although there have been small fluctuations over this period (Figure 2).

## Figure 2: Marriage rates have generally fallen since their peak in 1972

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1937 to 2017

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Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1937 to 2017



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

#### Notes:

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

Since 1972, the number of marriages of opposite-sex couples has decreased by 45% but marriage rates have fallen by three-quarters for men (75%) and by 69% for women.

This long-term decline in the number of marriages and marriage rates is a likely consequence of increasing numbers of men and women delaying marriage, or couples choosing to cohabit rather than marry, either as a precursor to marriage or as an alternative. More information about this is available in the release [Marriages in England and Wales: 2013](#).

## 3 . Age at marriage

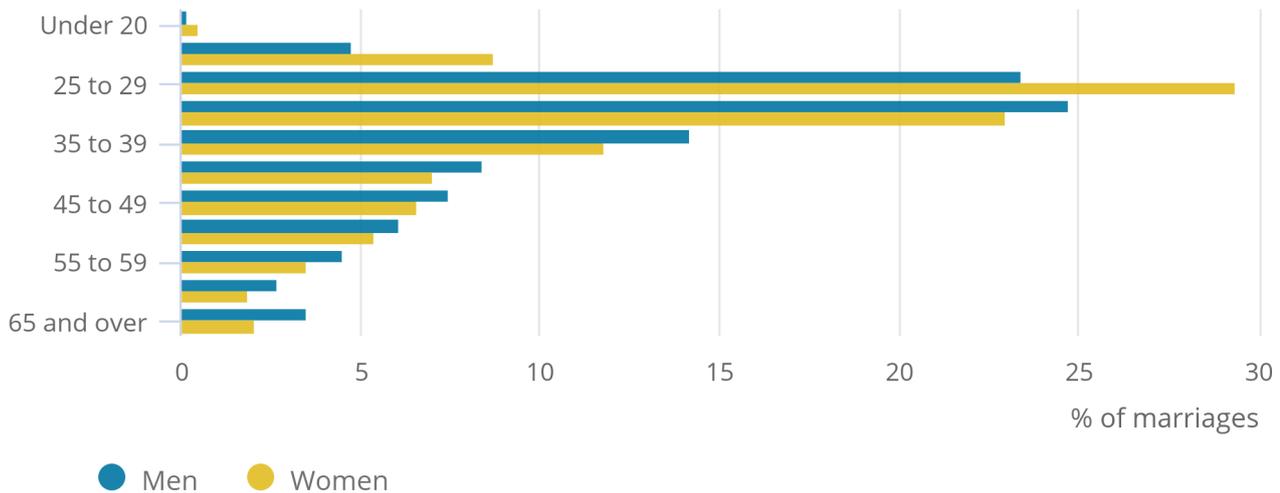
Among opposite-sex couples, more women than men married at younger ages (under 30 years) and more men than women married at older ages (30 years and over) (Figure 3). This pattern reflects that, on average, men tend to form relationships with women younger than themselves. Among same-sex couples in 2017, more women than men married at ages under 50 years whereas more men married at ages 50 years and over.

### Figure 3: More women than men married at younger ages while more men than women married at older ages for opposite-sex marriages

Percentage of marriages of opposite-sex couples by age of men and women, England and Wales, 2017

### Figure 3: More women than men married at younger ages while more men than women married at older ages for opposite-sex marriages

Percentage of marriages of opposite-sex couples by age of men and women, England and Wales, 2017



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

Similarly, marriage rates for opposite-sex couples have generally been increasing among older people in recent years and falling at younger ages. Over the last decade, men and women aged under 20 years have recorded the largest percentage decreases in marriage rates (57% for men and 62% for women). In contrast, marriage rates for those aged 65 years and over have increased the most; for men it increased by 31% while for women it has more than doubled (89%). For more information see [Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#).

For marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average (mean) age for men marrying in 2017 was 38.0 years, while for women it was 35.7 years. In comparison, the average age at marriage for same-sex couples in 2017 was slightly higher, at 40.1 years for men and 36.6 years for women.

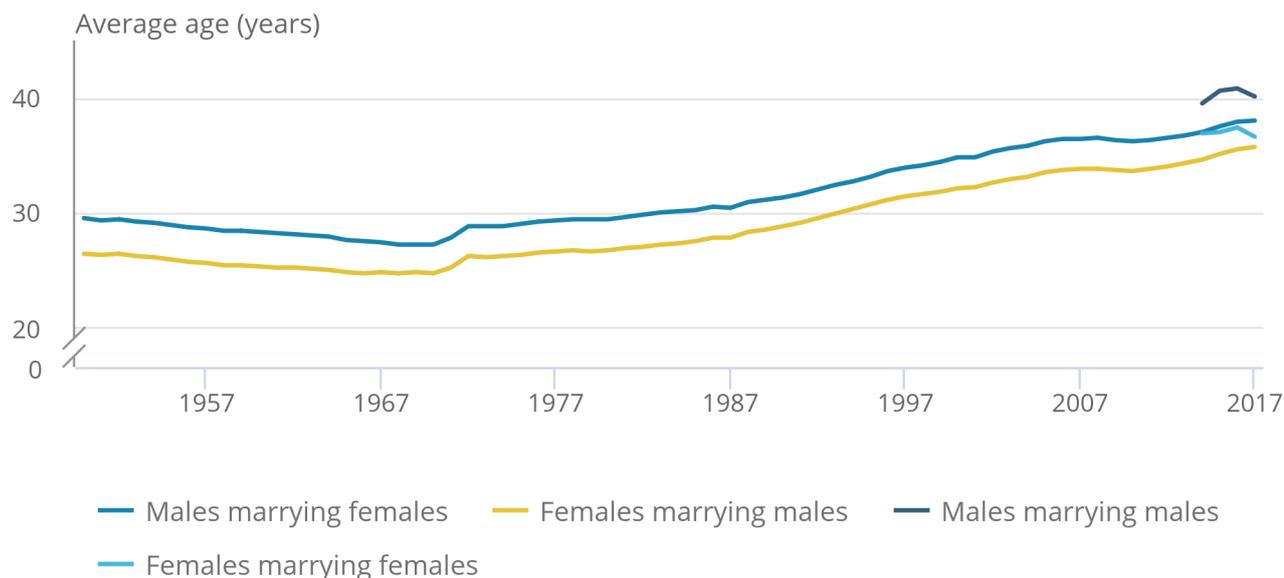
Since 1970, there has been a gradual increase in the average age at which opposite-sex couples marry, increasing by 11 years for both men and women over this period (Figure 4). These changes are in line with wider demographic changes seen in society recently and are discussed further in the blog [Married by 30? You're now in the minority](#).

**Figure 4: The average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples has steadily increased since the early 1970s**

Average (mean) age at marriage by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2017

**Figure 4: The average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples has steadily increased since the early 1970s**

Average (mean) age at marriage by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2017



Source: Marriages in England and Wales, 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.

## 4 . First marriages and remarriages

Among opposite-sex couples, more than three-quarters of men (76%) and women (77%) married for the first time in 2017. In comparison, a higher proportion of same-sex couples married a partner to form their first legally recognised relationship (89% of men and 81% of women).

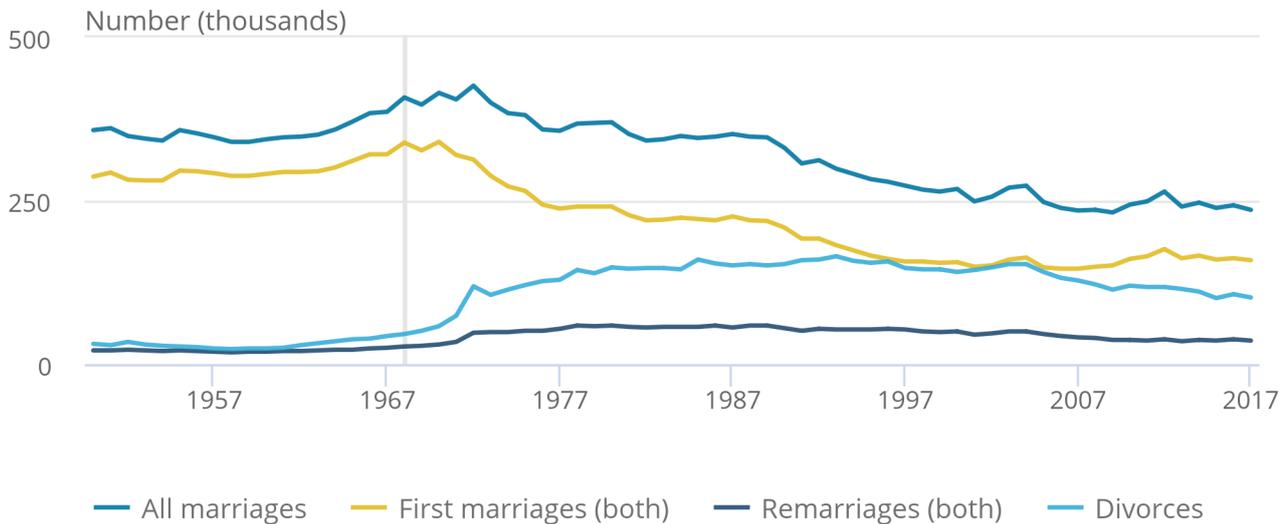
There has been a gradual decline in the number of first marriages since 1972, which mirrors the long-term trend recorded for all marriages (Figure 5). In contrast, the number of remarriages (where both partners were previously married) increased in the early 1970s. This may be related to the increased number of divorces in the 1970s following the introduction of the [Divorce Reform Act 1969](#), which made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

**Figure 5: There has been a long-term decline in the number of first marriages since 1972**

Number of first marriages and remarriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2017

Figure 5: There has been a long-term decline in the number of first marriages since 1972

Number of first marriages and remarriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2017



Source: Marriages in England and Wales, Divorces in England and Wales, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. First marriages refer to marriages where both partners were never previously married.
2. Remarriages refer to marriages where both partners were previously married.
3. Marriages where one partner was previously married are excluded in this analysis.
4. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation and is associated with the increase in the number of divorces during the 1970s.

Two-thirds (67%) of all marriages between opposite-sex couples in 2017 were first marriages for both partners. Remarriages for both parties accounted for 15% of marriages while the remaining marriages were to couples where only one partner had been previously married. Among marriages of same-sex couples, 80% of marriages between males and 69% of marriages between females in 2017 were the first legally recognised partnership for both partners.

## 5 . Type of ceremony

The popularity of religious ceremonies has steadily declined over time compared with civil ceremonies. In 1900, religious ceremonies accounted for 85% of all marriages; by the late 1970s this had fallen to less than half (49%) and then to 23% in 2017. Civil marriages have outnumbered religious marriages every year since 1992 (Figure 6).

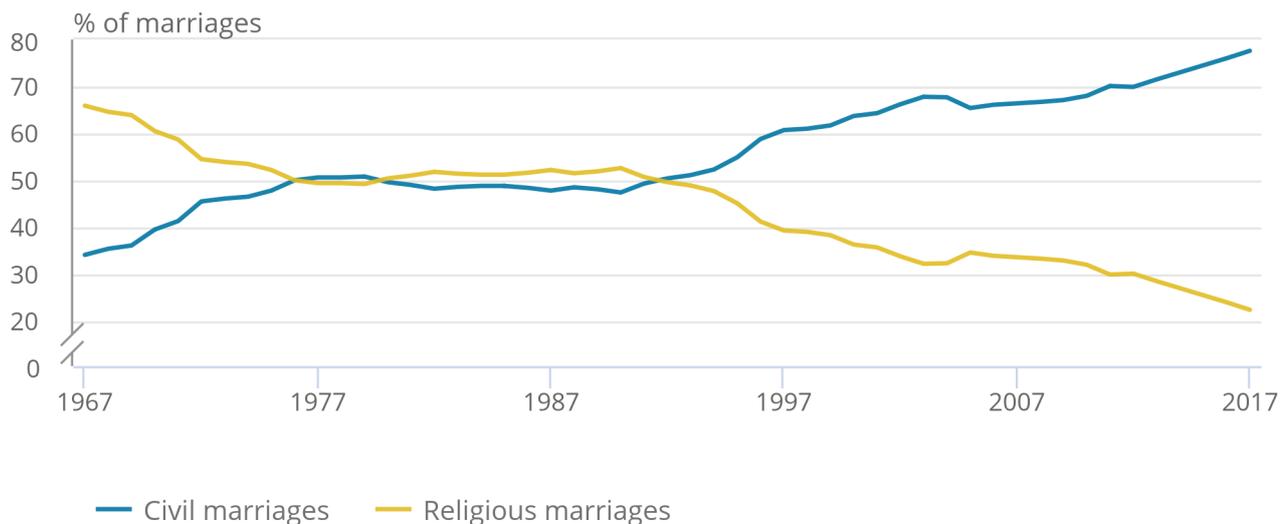
Religious ceremonies accounted for less than one in four (23%) of marriages between opposite-sex couples (the lowest on record) and 0.6% of marriages between same-sex couples in 2017. Only 43 same-sex couples married through religious ceremonies in 2017; not all religious organisations conduct marriages of same-sex couples.

**Figure 6: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992**

Percentage of civil and religious ceremonies, England and Wales, 1967 to 2017

## Figure 6: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992

Percentage of civil and religious ceremonies, England and Wales, 1967 to 2017



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

Notes:

1. Figures for 2014 to 2017 include both opposite-sex and same-sex marriages.
2. Marriages of same-sex couples have been possible in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

## 6 . Cohabitation

Nearly 9 out of 10 opposite-sex couples (88%) cohabited before getting married in 2017. This proportion has steadily increased over the last 20 years from 69% in 1997 to 81% in 2007 and is in line with the [increasing level of cohabitation](#) seen more generally.

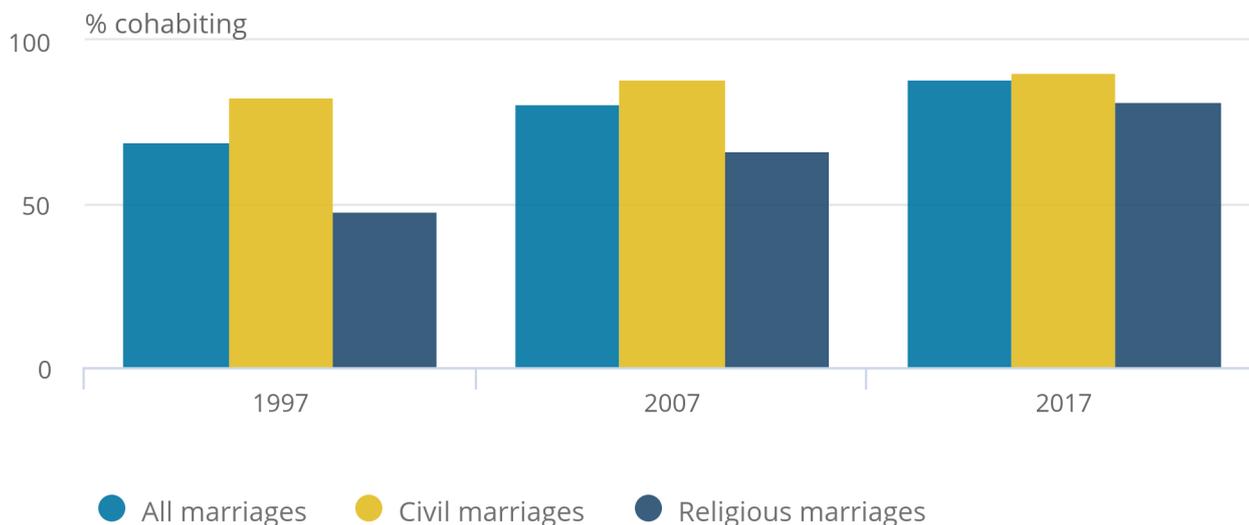
Couples who marry through a religious ceremony are less likely to cohabit before marriage than those who have a civil ceremony. In 1997, less than half (48%) of all couples who had a religious ceremony cohabited before marriage compared with 83% of those who had a civil ceremony. In 2017, this gap had reduced and 81% of couples who had a religious ceremony cohabited compared with 90% of couples who chose a civil ceremony (Figure 7).

## Figure 7: Nearly 9 out of 10 opposite-sex couples cohabited before marriage in 2017

Percentage of opposite-sex couples cohabiting before marriage by type of ceremony, England and Wales, 1997, 2007 and 2017

### Figure 7: Nearly 9 out of 10 opposite-sex couples cohabited before marriage in 2017

Percentage of opposite-sex couples cohabiting before marriage by type of ceremony, England and Wales, 1997, 2007 and 2017



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

The percentage of same-sex couples who cohabited before marriage in 2017 was similar to that of opposite-sex couples who had civil marriages. In 2017, 94% of male and 92% of female same-sex couples cohabited before marriage.

## 7 . Proportion of men and women who have ever married

The proportion of men and women who have ever married has been declining in recent decades. For example, 81% of men and 89% of women born in 1930 were estimated to have been married by the age of 30 years. For those born in 1967, these proportions had fallen to 49% and 63% respectively and the latest figures show that, of those born in 1987, less than one in four (23%) men and less than a third (32%) of women were married by age 30 years (Figure 8).

The greatest decline has been for men and women in their late teens and early twenties. Of those born in 1930, 51% of men and 74% of women were married by age 25 years. These proportions fell to 25% of men and 44% of women born in 1967 and by 1993 (the most recent birth cohort to reach age 25 years in our marriage data) only 3.6% of men and 7.5% of women were married by age 25 years (Figure 8).

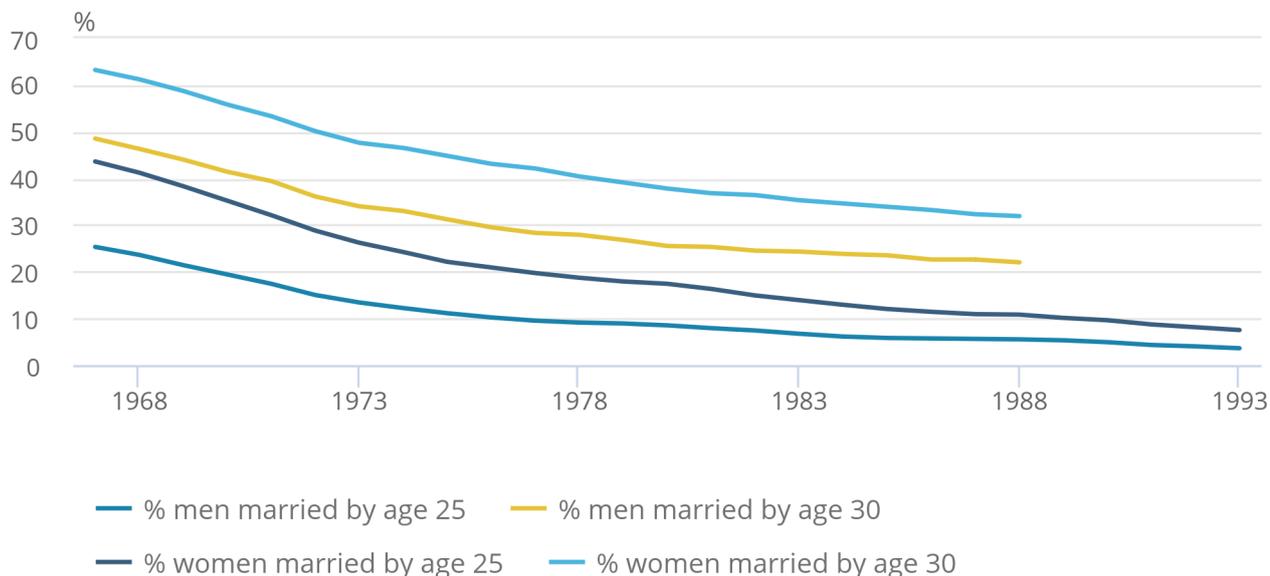
These trends reflect the increasing proportion of men and women delaying marriage to later in life or not getting married at all. More explanations of these trends are available alongside the [datasets](#) published with this release.

**Figure 8: The percentage of men and women who have ever married by certain ages has been declining in recent decades**

Percentage of men and women ever married by age 25 years and 30 years by year of birth, England and Wales, 1967 to 1993

**Figure 8: The percentage of men and women who have ever married by certain ages has been declining in recent decades**

Percentage of men and women ever married by age 25 years and 30 years by year of birth, England and Wales, 1967 to 1993



Source: Marriages in England and Wales, Official for National Statistics

## 8 . Marriage conversions

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 from 10 December 2014, if they so desired.

In 2017, there were 1,072 same-sex couples who converted their existing civil partnership into a marriage, 36% fewer than in 2016. Male couples are more likely than female couples to convert their civil partnership into a marriage (57% of all conversions in 2017 were between male couples).

## 9 . When do couples get married

The most popular date to get married in 2017 was 2 September, with 4,370 weddings taking place on this day, and the least popular day was Christmas Day with only three weddings.

Saturday was the most popular day to get married in 2017, representing half of all marriages that year. Nearly three-quarters of religious marriages (74%) took place on a Saturday compared with less than half (43%) of all civil ceremonies (Figure 9).

## Figure 9: Most marriages took place on a Saturday in 2017

Number of marriages by day of the week and month, England and Wales, 2017

[Download the data](#)

The most popular day to get married over the last 20 years was 28 August, with an average of 1,523 weddings taking place on this day (Figure 10). Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day were the least popular days to get married, not least because most registration offices and approved premises are not open on these days.

August was also the most popular month to get married over this period in England and Wales (with an average of 1,281 weddings per day) and 7 of the top 10 most popular dates to get married were in August.

## Figure 10: August was the most popular month to get married over the last two decades

Average number of marriages per day, England and Wales, 1998 to 2017

[Download the data](#)

## 10 . Marriages in England and Wales data

[Marriages in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 14 April 2020

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

## 11 . Glossary

### Civil marriage

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

### Religious marriage

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

## Solemnised marriage

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

## General Register Office (GRO)

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

## Single men or women

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

## 12 . Measuring the data

This is the first time that final marriage statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2017. The release provides final annual data.

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

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

## 13 . Strengths and limitations

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

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

## National Statistics status for Marriages in England and Wales

[National Statistics](#) status means that our statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

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

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

Improvements since last review:

- summary tables have been extended to provide figures for marriages of same-sex couples, which have been possible since 29 March 2014
- summary tables have been extended to provide figures for conversions of civil partnerships of same-sex couples, which have been possible since 10 December 2014

## Timeliness of Marriages in England and Wales data

It is currently only possible to publish final annual marriage statistics around 26 months after the end of the reference year. This is because of 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 the Office for National Statistics); this directly affects the timing of statistical outputs. This may be because of a number of factors such as the closure of a building or change of incumbent.

Marriage statistics are published once we consider the annual dataset is acceptably complete. Marriage records received after our annual dataset is taken are not included in published figures. 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.

## Comparability

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

## 14 . Related links

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

Publication | Released 28 March 2019

Datasets providing detailed marriage statistics by age group, marital status, type of marriage, type of ceremony and area of occurrence for 2001 to 2016.

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

Article | 18 July 2017

Discusses the pattern of changing relationships at older ages in England and Wales and why older people are getting married and divorced in greater numbers.

### [Marriage statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Webpage | 14 February 2020

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

### [Marriage statistics for Scotland](#)

Webpage | 26 June 2019

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

### [Population estimates by marital status](#)

Bulletin | 12 September 2019

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

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

Bulletin | Released 22 November 2019

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