

Statistical bulletin

Divorces in England and Wales: 2019

Annual divorce numbers and rates, by duration of marriage, sex, age, previous marital status, and to whom granted and reason.



Contact:
Kanak Ghosh
health.data@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)1329 444110

Release date:
17 November 2020

Next release:
October to November 2021
(provisional)

Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Number of divorces and rates](#)
3. [Grounds for divorce](#)
4. [Duration of marriage](#)
5. [Divorces in England and Wales data](#)
6. [Glossary](#)
7. [Measuring the data](#)
8. [Strengths and limitations](#)
9. [Related links](#)

1 . Main points

- There were 107,599 divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2019, increasing by 18.4% from 90,871 in 2018; the scale of this increase partly reflects divorce centres processing a backlog of casework in 2018, which is likely to have translated into a higher number of completed divorces in 2019.
- The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples in 2019 increased to 8.9 divorces per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 years and over from 7.5 in 2018; this increase will have been impacted by the additional processing of casework in 2018.
- There were 822 divorces among same-sex couples in 2019, nearly twice the number in 2018 (428 divorces); of these, nearly three-quarters (72%) were between female couples.
- Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for opposite-sex couples divorcing in 2019 with 49% of wives and 35% of husbands petitioning on these grounds; it was also the most common reason for same-sex couples divorcing, accounting for 63% of divorces among women and 70% among men.
- In 2019, the average (median) duration of marriage at the time of divorce was 12.3 years for opposite-sex couples, a small decrease from 12.5 years in the previous year.

Statistician's comment

"Same-sex couples have been able to marry in England and Wales from March 2014. Since then, we have seen the number of divorces of same-sex couples increase each year from very small numbers in 2015 when the first divorces took place, to more than 800 in 2019, reflecting the increasing size of the same-sex married population in England and Wales.

"While we see that 56% of same-sex marriages were among females, nearly three-quarters of same-sex divorces in 2019 were to female couples. Unreasonable behaviour, which includes adultery, was the most common ground for divorce among same-sex couples this year as almost two-thirds of couples divorced for this reason."

Kanak Ghosh, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics. Follow Vital Statistics Outputs Branch on Twitter [@NickStripe_ONS](https://twitter.com/NickStripe_ONS).

2 . Number of divorces and rates

Opposite-sex divorces

There were 107,599 opposite-sex divorces in 2019, an increase of 18.4% from 90,871 in 2018. This is the highest number of opposite-sex divorces recorded since 2014 when 111,169 divorces were granted in England and Wales. It is also the largest annual percentage increase in the number of divorces since 1972, following the introduction of the The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

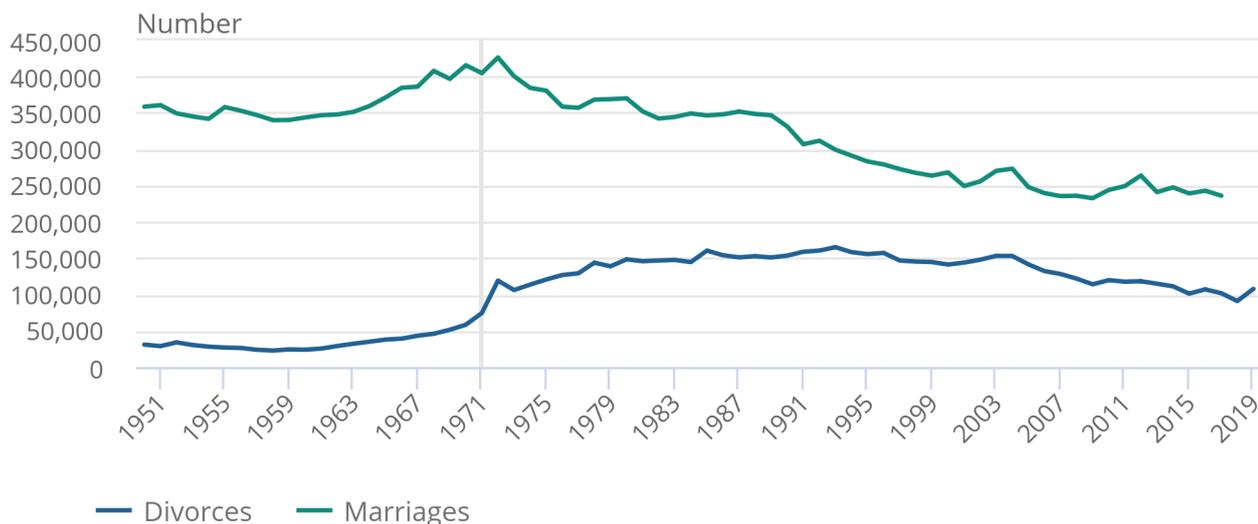
The size of the increase can be partly attributed to a backlog of [divorce petitions](#) from 2017 that were processed by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in early 2018, some of which will have translated into [decree absolutes](#) (completed divorces) in 2019. This is likely to have contributed to both the particularly low number of divorces in 2018 (the lowest since 1971) and the increase seen in 2019. More information can be found in our [Divorces in England and Wales 2018 bulletin](#).

Figure 1: The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples increased in 2019 following decreases seen in 2017 and 2018

Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2019

Figure 1: The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples increased in 2019 following decreases seen in 2017 and 2018

Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2019



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

Notes:

1. Marriage statistics are only available up to the 2017 data year.
2. 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.

Although the number of divorces increased in 2019, there has been an overall downward trend in divorce numbers since the most recent peak in 2003 and opposite-sex divorces remain 30% lower than 2003 figures (Figure 1). The fall in the number of divorces since 2003 is broadly consistent with an overall decline in the number of marriages between 2003 and 2009; since then, the number of marriages has fluctuated while the number of divorces continued to decline overall.

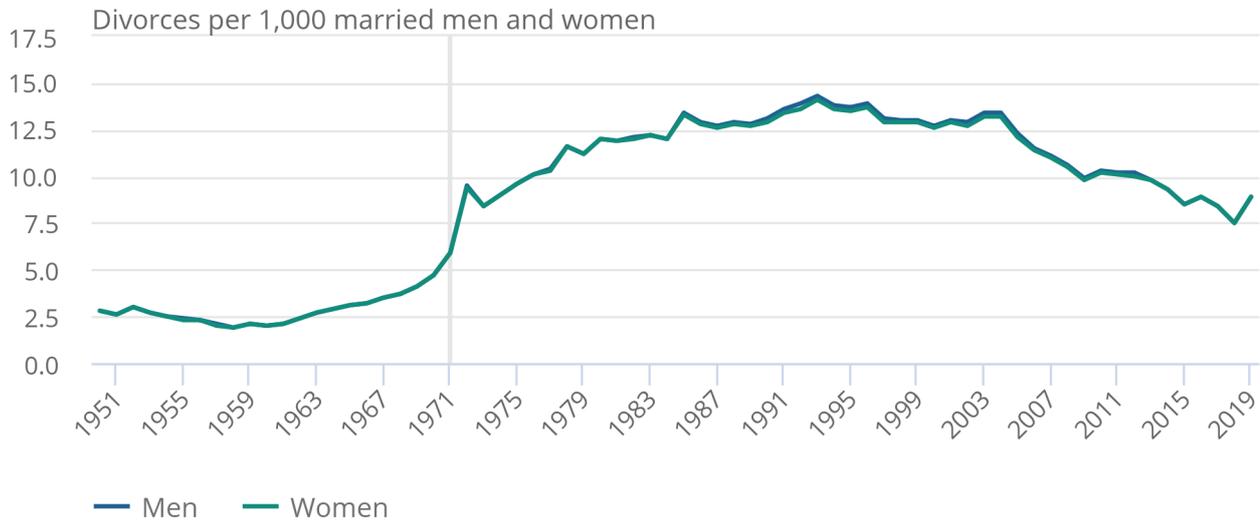
When considering changes in the number of divorces, it is important to take account of the size of the married population, which will affect the number of divorces. In 2019, the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 years and over (divorce rates) increased for both men and women to 8.9 from 7.5 in 2018 (Figure 2). However, divorce rates remain well below the most recent peaks recorded in 2003 and 2004 (13.4 men per 1,000 married men and 13.2 women per 1,000 married women). The increase in divorce rate in 2019 will have been affected by the processing of the backlog of divorce applications in 2018.

Figure 2: The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples increased in 2019 following decreases seen in the last two years

Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2019

Figure 2: The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples increased in 2019 following decreases seen in the last two years

Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Divorces in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

Changes in behaviour and attitudes to divorce are considered to be important factors 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 general decrease in divorce rates since 2003. [Levels of cohabitation](#) increased over this period while the married population declined and our latest [marriage statistics for 2017](#) show that nearly 9 in 10 couples (88%) were cohabiting before marriage.

The [accompanying dataset](#) for this release provides further breakdowns of the number of opposite-sex divorces by sex, age, previous marital status and percentage of marriages ending in divorce by year of marriage.

Same-sex divorces

There were 822 divorces among same-sex couples in 2019, nearly double that in the previous year when there were 428 same-sex divorces (Figure 3). Of these, 72% were to females couples, a decrease from 75% in 2018.

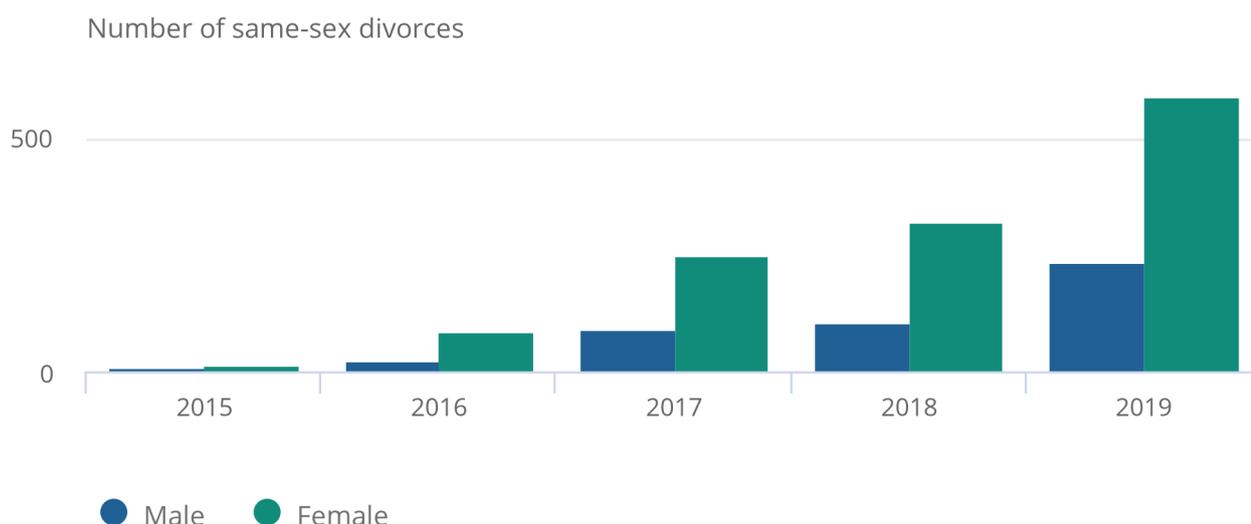
This is the fifth year that divorces of same-sex couples has been possible since the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples in March 2014. The number of same-sex divorces has increased each year reflecting the increasing size of the same-sex married population since 2014 while females accounted for the majority of divorces among same-sex couples each year.

Figure 3: The number of same-sex divorces among male and female couples has increased each year since 2015

Number of same-sex divorces by sex, England and Wales, 2015 to 2019

Figure 3: The number of same-sex divorces among male and female couples has increased each year since 2015

Number of same-sex divorces by sex, England and Wales, 2015 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Divorces in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014, the first divorces recorded between same-sex couples were in 2015.

The relatively small number of divorces among same-sex couples does not allow accurate rates to be calculated at present.

The [accompanying dataset](#) for this release provides further breakdowns of same-sex divorces by sex, age and previous marital status.

3 . Grounds for divorce

The majority of divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2019 were petitioned by the wife (62%), the same proportion as the previous year. Wives have consistently petitioned the majority of opposite-sex divorces in England and Wales since 1949, but the proportion has fallen by 10 percentage points since the peak in 1992 when 72% of divorces were petitioned by the wife.

In 2019, the most common grounds for opposite-sex divorce was unreasonable behaviour, with 35% of all husbands and 49% of all wives petitioning for divorce on these grounds. This has consistently been the most common grounds for wives petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s; previously, it 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 (two years with consent). There are likely to be a range of behavioural, cultural and financial reasons for these trends.

Unreasonable behaviour was also the most common ground for divorces among same-sex couples in 2019 and 65% of same-sex couples divorced for this reason (70% of male same-sex divorces and 63% of female same-sex divorces).

The [accompanying dataset](#) for this release provides further breakdowns of same-sex divorce by petitioner and decree granted.

4 . Duration of marriage

In 2019, the median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for divorces granted to opposite-sex couples was 12.3 years, a small decrease from 12.5 years in 2018. The 2018 and 2019 figures have now surpassed the previous high seen more than forty-five years ago in 1972 when it was 12.2 years. Over the last 50 years, the median duration has fluctuated between 8.9 years and 12.5 years.

The median duration of marriage for same-sex couples who divorced in 2019 was 4.3 years for men and 4.1 years for women. These smaller durations reflect that same-sex marriage has only been possible in England and Wales since March 2014 and the first of these divorces took place in 2015.

Tables 6, 7a and 7b in the [accompanying dataset](#) for this release provide an analysis of trends of the proportion of marriages that end in divorce by year of marriage and the proportion of men and women who have ever divorced by birth cohort.

5 . Divorces in England and Wales data

[Divorces in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 17 November 2020

Annual statistics on the number of divorce and divorce rates, by petitioner and decree granted, sex, age, previous marital status and percentage of marriages ending in divorce by year of marriage.

6 . Glossary

Annulment

An annulment of marriage occurs following a successful petition for nullity. It declares that the marriage itself is void (that no valid marriage ever existed) or voidable (was legal at time of registration but is no longer legal).

Decree absolute

A decree absolute is granted upon a dissolution of marriage, following a petition for divorce, and ends a valid marriage. A dissolution of marriage occurs following a successful petition for divorce and ends a valid marriage. Dissolution of marriage covers annulments and decree absolutes.

Facts proven

A petitioner must prove one or more of five facts (adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion and separation, either with or without consent of the respondent) to establish the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS)

[HM Courts and Tribunals Service \(HMCTS\)](#) is an executive agency of the [Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\)](#) and is responsible for the administration of criminal, civil and family courts and tribunals in England and Wales. This includes the administration of the divorce and civil partnership dissolution processes. HMCTS supplies information on divorces to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Petitioner

The person seeking a dissolution or annulment.

Respondent

The person to whom a petition for divorce has been served.

Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) contains a glossary of other terms used in this bulletin.

7 . Measuring the data

This is the first time that divorces statistics for England and Wales has been published for 2019. The release provides final annual data.

Divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) 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/or Wales. Civil partnership dissolutions are not included in our divorce statistics; they are reported separately in [Civil partnerships 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 and these are included in our divorce statistics from the 2015 data year onwards.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Divorces Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) report](#). Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces and includes a glossary of terms.

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

8 . Strengths and limitations

Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for developing and monitoring government policy and they are used by religious and other belief organisations to monitor trends and plan their services.

National Statistics status for Divorces 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:

- Coverage of annual divorce statistics was altered from UK to England and Wales only from the 2014 data year onwards following a consultation exercise in February 2015. This has led to more timely final statistics for England and Wales. Summary figures for the UK continue to be published in [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#).
- We undertook an user [consultation exercise](#) in October 2013 to understand the user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same sex couples. The [response to this consultation \(PDF, 102KB\)](#), was published in published in April 2014.
- Summary tables have been extended to provide statistics on divorces of same-sex couples from the 2015 data year, following the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples on 29 March 2014.
- Provision of detailed statistics for divorces of opposite-sex couples are available in an [explorable dataset](#) for the 2009 data year onwards.

Comparability

Divorce statistics are broadly comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in our [Divorces in England and Wales QMI report](#).

Divorce statistics are not directly comparable with survey estimates of the number of civil partners in England and Wales from household surveys such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey (APS), as they are estimates of the number of divorcees in the population rather than the number of divorces that took place during a particular year.

Accuracy

There are missing values for some variables in the divorce records, in particular the age at marriage (used to derive age at divorce) and previous marital status variables. Prior to the 2014 data year, these missing values were imputed. From the 2014 data year onwards, any missing age or previous marital status are shown in published tables as "not stated".

From the 2014 data year, we have seen an increasing proportion of records where the age is missing for one or both partners of couples who divorce. Consequently, any calculations based on age (such as the calculation of rates by age) exclude these records. We are working with the HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) to understand the reasons for this and improve the completeness of this variable.

The average (mean) ages presented in the published tables for 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.

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 that take place when duration of marriage exceeds 15 years.

Timeliness

Our divorce statistics are currently published approximately ten months after the reference year the data relates to. A very small number of divorce records for England and Wales can be received by us later than the date on which the annual dataset is taken. These records are not included in published figures. The impact is negligible.

Calculation of rates

[Population estimates by marital status](#) only provide the total married population (including both same-sex and opposite-sex couples) disaggregated by age-group. For this reason, divorce rates for both same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples have been calculated using the total married population by age group.

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.

9 . Related links

[Explorable dataset for divorces in England and Wales](#)

Webpage | Released 17 November 2020

This dataset provides statistics on divorces between opposite-sex couples, which took place in England and Wales, broken down by the age and previous marital status of each partner, the year of occurrence, fact proven, who petitioned and duration of marriage.

[Divorce statistics for Scotland](#)

Publication | 7 April 2020

Civil justice statistics in Scotland including main statistics tables, figures and supplementary data tables including divorce and civil partnership dissolutions statistics.

[Divorce statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Webpage | 14 February 2020

Divorce statistics for Northern Ireland based on decree absolute data provided by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS).

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

Publication | Released 22 November 2019

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

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

Article | 18 July 2017

This article 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.

[Divorce statistics for Europe](#)

Article | 6 October 2020

This article presents developments that have taken place in relation to family formation and dissolution through an analysis of marriage and divorce indicators for the EU-27 countries.