

Article

Families and households statistics explained

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 . Overview

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.

Family

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

"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

"Non-dependent children" are those living with their parent(s) and who are either aged 19 years or over and have no spouse, partner or child living in the household 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.

Household

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.

A "household" is (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.

Dwellings

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. Estimates of dwellings are not covered in the Families and households publication.

Labour Force Survey

Estimates of numbers and types of families and households, which are published annually in the [Families and households 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.

Family unit

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.

Household reference person (HRP)

Sometimes when publishing ad hoc analyses, we are interested in the characteristics of the household reference person as a representative of the household.

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.

The previous definition, "Head of Household" to pre-2001 is 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 . How households are classified

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.

Living alone

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 69 years, 70 to 74 years and 75 years and over. People living alone are not classed as a family so are excluded from any tables which report on the estimated number of families or people living in families.

Living with a partner and child but also parents

Here we would have more than one family: the person, their partner and the child would form one family, and the parents (grandparents 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)

Living with a partner and child but also one parent

If a couple and their dependent child live with one parent (a grandparent of the child) who is not living with a partner, then the classification of this household would be a one family household containing a couple with one to two dependent children.

In this scenario the grandparent does not form their own family so the household is included in the category that best describes the household structure (based on the family present in the household). This is the case even if the grandparent is the household reference person.

Living 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.

If there is a couple in the household or if someone lives with their child, they are considered to have formed their own family. This means that some instances of those living in "house shares" or "flat shares" might be captured as other household types such as a couple or lone parent family household. If there is more than one couple and /or family living in a house or flat share they will be classed as a "multi-family household" (defined earlier).

Adult living with parents

If you live with your parent, grandparent or step-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".

Lodger living with a family

Lodgers who have no spouse, partner or child living in the household 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", because that lodger lives with a couple who do not have children.

Living 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 where fewer than 50% of the units in the establishment have their own cooking facilities, or similar accommodation where elderly people have their own rooms, but the main meal is provided
- hotels, guest houses, B&Bs and inns and pubs with residential accommodation with room for 10 or more guests
- 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 NHS accommodations which are treated as private addresses and are sampled as such. Those residing in university halls of residence, who have a parental home in the UK, are included at their parental address.

4 . How families are classified

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.

Child 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).

Married but spouse currently lives away

If we encounter a situation where a resident is part of a married couple who are together but not living together, then we would interview the resident of the selected address but would not include their spouse at the same address. This is because if the spouse is living in a private address elsewhere, then they have an opportunity to be captured at that 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.

If a person in a sampled address is in a relationship with a partner they do not live with and they are not in a legal relationship (married or in a civil partnership) then the partner is not included at the sampled address.

Foster child living in the 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. As a result, in the families and households dataset, foster children are not included in the family they are living with. In these cases the household type is based on the family the foster child lives with.

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

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) families and households 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 families and households estimates are 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 \(PDF, 4.2MB\)](#); 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 \(PDF, 5.14MB\)](#), 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 Office for National Statistics (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.

Research outputs

It is our mission to provide the best insights on population and migration using a range of new and existing data sources to meet the needs of our users. Our ambition continues to be to put administrative data at the core of both population and migration statistics, delivering the best quality census outputs in 2022 and a transformed system by 2023.

However, we have accelerated our approach for transforming migration statistics because of the current situation around the coronavirus (COVID-19). We will rigorously quality assure new methods and share the impact of any changes made, demonstrating the benefits and improvements before implementing them.

The [Transformation of the population and migration statistics system: overview](#) gives more information on this work.

[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 publishes [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.

The ONS also publishes information on the economic status of households in the UK and the people living in them in the [Working and workless households](#) release.

Sources of families data

These statistics are the only available annual estimates of the numbers of families and people in families. Data on families are also available from the 2011 Census. 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 2009).

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](#) and [families and the labour market](#) are also available.

8 . Changes to marriages and civil partnerships in the UK

Civil partnerships in the UK are a form of civil union allowing couples to obtain essentially the same rights and responsibilities as civil marriage. Civil partnerships were first granted for same-sex couples under the [Civil Partnership Act 2004](#). 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 [Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registrations etc.\) Act 2019](#) received Royal Assent on 29 March 2019 and made provision for opposite-sex civil partnerships to be formed in England and Wales from 31 December 2019.

In Scotland, the [Civil Partnership \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 30 September 2019 and obtained [Royal Assent](#) on 28 July 2020. The [Civil Partnership \(Scotland\) Act 2020](#) came into force on that date allowing opposite-sex couples to enter into a civil partnership in Scotland.

Changes to the law in Northern Ireland made under the powers in section 8(1) of the [Northern Ireland \(Executive Formation etc.\) Act 2019](#) made opposite-sex civil partnerships legal in Northern Ireland with effect from 13 January 2020.

Estimates for families and households containing couples in opposite-sex civil partnerships will not be available until sample sizes become large enough to produce robust estimates. This will be reviewed annually.

The [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#) legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales from 13 March 2014 and the [Marriage and Civil Partnership \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) from 16 December 2014 in Scotland. As the Northern Ireland Assembly was not restored by 21 October 2019, the UK Parliament's obligation on the UK Government to change the law and extend same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland became lawful 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.

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

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 three. Families and households estimates for lower levels of geography which cannot be produced from Labour Force Survey (LFS) data might be available from the [2011 Census](#).

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 may be charged in line with our [charging policy](#).

Data on families and households prior to 1996

The Families and households estimates in this publication cover the period from 1996 to 2019. 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 are also available from the [UK Data Archive](#), which has data going back as far as 1973.

Families and households data not published here

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 are 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. Quarterly data are available back to 1992, but annual datasets are available back to 1973, when the survey began.

Labour Force Survey (LFS) data and where they 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](#).

Data reweighting and 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 and projections 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 were reweighted following revisions to the mid-year estimates for those specific years. In the 2018 publication, the estimates for these years differed slightly from previous publications.

The [most recent release](#) adds the 2020 estimates to the previously published 1996 to 2019 dataset.

Data for young adults living with their parents

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.

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 two or more people, none of whom are living as part of a family (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 type consisting of both couple households (with or without children) 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, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with no children living with them.

Couple with one or more dependent children

Either a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with children who are aged under 16 years or who are aged 16 to 18 years 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, 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 family with a single male or female parent living with children under 16 years or aged 16 to 18 years and in full-time education. Some of these families may contain non-dependent children too.

Note: The definition of a lone parent does not make any distinction between situations where a child has regular contact and/or partly resides with their other parent and a child who solely resides with and is cared for by one parent. Only the parent living with their children is included in the estimated number of lone parent families and households.

Lone parent with non-dependent children

A family with a single male or female parent living 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).

Proxy interview

Where responses are provided on behalf of another resident in the household if that person is unavailable or unable to respond for themselves.

11 . Related links

[Families and households in the UK: 2020](#)

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Trends in living arrangements including families (with and without dependent children), people living alone and people in shared accommodation, broken down by size and type of household.