

Statistical bulletin

# Divorces in England and Wales: 2020

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



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# 1 . Main points

- In 2020, there were 103,592 divorces granted in England and Wales, a decrease of 4.5% compared with 2019; of these, the majority were among opposite-sex couples (98.9%).
- The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has previously reported that family court activities were affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic during 2020, including the temporary suspension of operations by some courts for a period of time; this may have impacted the number and timeliness of completed divorces in 2020 but it is difficult to know the extent of the impact.
- There were 102,438 opposite-sex divorces in 2020, decreasing by 4.8% from 107,599 in 2019.
- In 2020, there were 1,154 divorces among same-sex couples, increasing by 40.4% from 2019; of these, the majority continued to be accounted for by female same-sex divorces (71.3%).
- Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for wives petitioning for divorce among opposite-sex couples in 2020, accounting for 47.4% of petitions; for husbands, the most common reason for divorces was a two-year separation, accounting for 34.7% of divorces followed by 33.8% for unreasonable behaviour.
- For same-sex divorces, unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for divorce in 2020 for both female and male couples; unreasonable behaviour accounted for 55.2% of female divorces and 57.0% of male divorces.
- In 2020, the average (median) duration of marriage at the time of divorce was 11.9 years for opposite-sex couples, a decrease from 12.4 years in 2019.
- For same-sex divorces in 2020, the average (median) duration of marriage at the time of divorce was 4.7 years for female couples and 5.4 years for male couples; divorces among same-sex couples have only been possible since 2015 following the introduction of same-sex marriages in March 2014.

## 2 . Divorces in England and Wales data

[Divorces in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 1 February 2022

Annual statistics on the number of divorce and divorce rates, by petitioner and decree granted, sex and duration of marriage.

## 3 . 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.

## 4 . Measuring the data

This is the first time that divorce statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2020. 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](#).

## Quality and methodology

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.

## Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has reported that family court activity was affected by the coronavirus pandemic during 2020 and also resulted in some courts temporarily suspending operations for a period of time. This may have impacted both the number and timelines of the divorces granted during 2020. However, it is difficult to know the precise impact of the pandemic on divorce applications and proceedings or to attribute this to the number of divorces granted in 2020.

## 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 divorced people 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

From the 2020 data year onwards, information about the age and previous marital status is not available as it is no longer collected during the divorce and civil partnership dissolution process by HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS). Consequently, we can no longer provide statistics on these characteristics from the 2020 data year and onwards. Historical data on age at divorce and previous marital status will still be available.

The median duration of marriage at divorce reported 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 the average duration of marriage. The mean would be affected by the relatively small number of divorces that take place when duration of marriage exceeds 15 years.

## 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.

## 5 . 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 year of occurrence, fact proven, who petitioned and duration of marriage.

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

Publication | Released 27 April 2021

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 | Released 21 October 2021

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](#)

Dataset | Released 3 December 2021

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 | Released 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 | Released 21 May 2021

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.