

Statistical bulletin

Conceptions in England and Wales: 2020

Annual statistics on conceptions to residents of England and Wales, with numbers and rates by age group including women aged under 18 years.



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1 . Main points

- There were 817,515 conceptions in 2020 to women aged 15 to 44 years in England and Wales, marking the sixth consecutive annual decrease.
- Women in the 30-to-34 age group had the highest number of conceptions for the fourth year in a row, with a record high of 248,528 conceptions in 2020.
- The under-18 conception rate fell to 13.1 conceptions per 1,000 women in 2020 from 15.8 per 1,000 women in 2019, continuing the trend of decreasing conception rates and record lows seen since 2007.
- The percentage of conceptions leading to legal abortions remained around a quarter, at 25.3% in 2020.
- London has seen the biggest decrease in conception rates in the last decade from 90.1 conceptions per 1,000 women in 2009 to 76.2 in 2020, a 15% decrease; the North West now has the highest conception rate.

Statistician's comment

"Today's data show there was an overall drop in conceptions in England and Wales in 2020. Although it may be expected that this would have led to a drop in births in 2021, [provisional births data](#) indicate that 2021 births actually increased, but that this varied over the year. The first half of 2021 saw a decrease in births, all of which would have been conceived in 2020 when conceptions decreased; while the second half of 2021 saw an increase in births, which related to conceptions at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021.

"The figures also show conceptions among women aged over 30 years have risen, while continuing to drop for those in the younger age groups. This release is our first look at conception rates during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, when lockdowns and restrictions may have affected behaviours; it is possible conception rates during this time were impacted differently across the different age groups of women."

Dr James Tucker, Head of Health and Life Events Analysis, Office for National Statistics

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2 . Conceptions numbers and rates

The number of conceptions in England and Wales dropped for the fifth year in a row, with 817,515 conceptions to women of all ages (15 to 44 years) in 2020. This is a decrease of 0.4% compared with 2019 when there were 821,089 conceptions. This is the smallest year-on-year decrease seen over the last five years. The conception rate for women of all ages in England and Wales saw a small decrease from 73.8 per 1,000 women in 2019 to 73.4 per 1,000 women in 2020.

The small decrease in the number of conceptions could imply that births and birth rates in 2021 should also decrease. [Provisional births data](#) indicate that 2021 births actually increased, but that this varied over the year. The first half of 2021 saw a decrease in births and births rates, all of which would have been conceived in 2020 when conceptions decreased. The second half of 2021 saw an increase in births, which would be related to conceptions at the end of 2020 (Oct to Dec) and the beginning of 2021 (Jan to Mar).

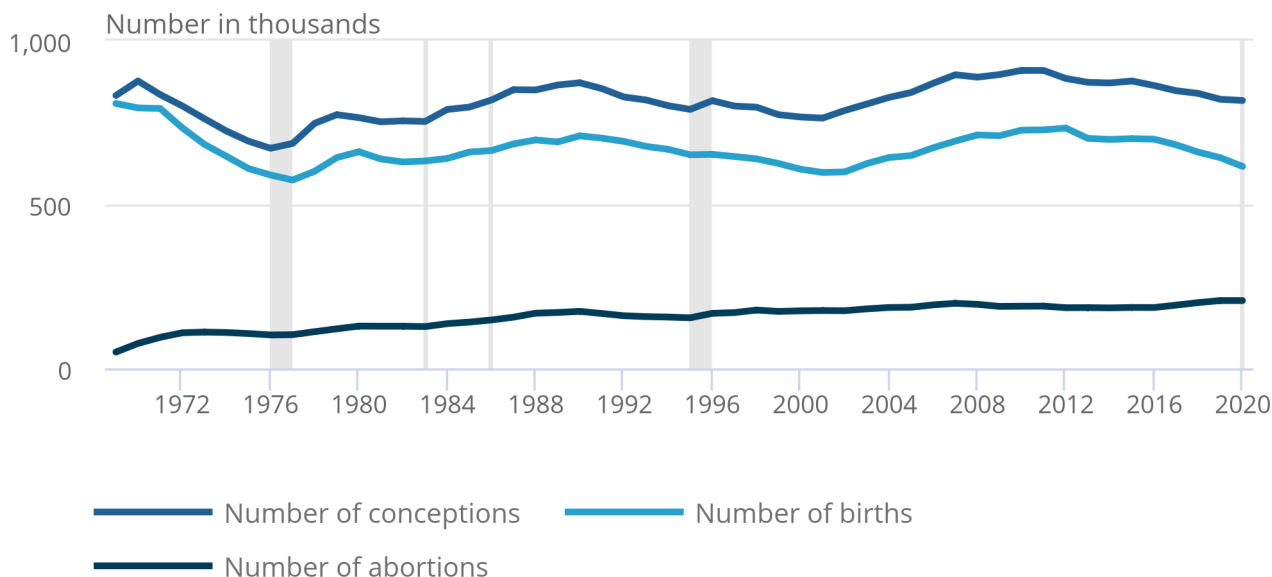
The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the associated national lockdown and restrictions may have made an impact on the behaviour of certain groups and people living in different regions and so could have impacted the overall number of conceptions and conceptions rates in 2020.

Figure 1: The number of abortions increased while the number of conceptions and births continued to decrease in recent years

Number of conceptions, births and abortions for all women, England and Wales, 1969 to 2020

Figure 1: The number of abortions increased while the number of conceptions and births continued to decrease in recent years

Number of conceptions, births and abortions for all women, England and Wales, 1969 to 2020



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

Notes:

1. Abortion numbers taken from the [Department of Health and Social Care](#).
2. Prior to 1969, the first full year for which abortions data were available, the number of conceptions was equivalent to the number of maternities.
3. Sharp decreases in number of conceptions and births that occurred between 1970 and 1976 could be explained by the [increased use of contraception](#) over this period.
4. Vertical grey lines represent (from left to right): several scares about the [safety of the contraceptive pill](#) between 1976 and 1996, which may have led to increases in the number of conceptions because of less reliable contraception methods, if any, being used, and the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

The conception rate for women of all ages (15 to 44 years) in England and Wales saw a small decrease from 73.8 per 1,000 women in 2019 to 73.4 in 2020. This rate has been decreasing almost every year since 2011, with the exceptions of 2014 and 2015. The overall conception rate has not been this low since 2002 when there were 72.1 conceptions per 1,000 women of all ages.

3 . Age at conception

Women aged 30 to 34 years had the highest number of conceptions for the fourth year in a row, with a record high of 248,528 conceptions in 2020. This age group also had the highest conception rate of 123.9 per 1,000 women aged 30 to 34 years.

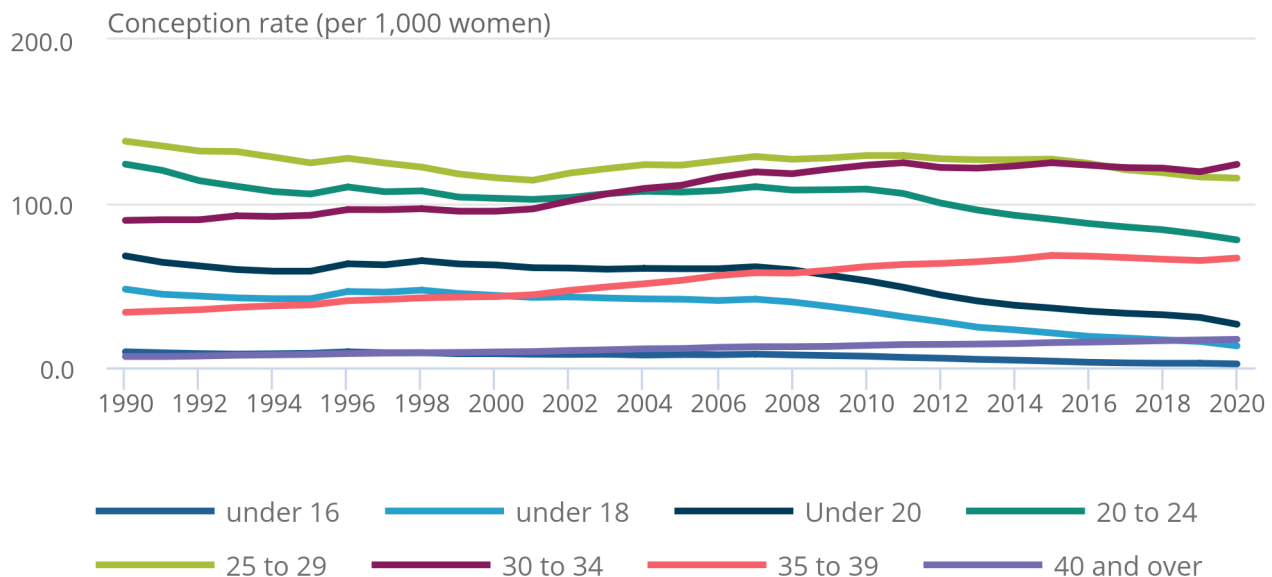
In 2020, all age groups 30 years and over saw an increase in conception rates; this ends a four-year run of women over 40 years being the only age group to see an increase in conception rates. Age groups under the age of 30 years saw a continued decrease in the conception rate, particularly those aged under 20 years. Those aged under 18 years saw the biggest decrease.

Figure 2: The 30 to 34 years age group had the highest conception rate for the fourth year in a row

Conceptions per 1,000 women by age group, England and Wales, 1990 to 2020

Figure 2: The 30 to 34 years age group had the highest conception rate for the fourth year in a row

Conceptions per 1,000 women by age group, England and Wales, 1990 to 2020



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

4 . Teenage conceptions

Previous [government initiatives and socio-economic factors](#) appear to have influenced decreasing conception rates in the last two decades. In 2018, the government published the [Teenage pregnancy prevention framework](#) guidance, which aims to prevent unplanned pregnancy and promote healthy relationships among young people in England. This is driven by many factors, such as the [UK's relatively high teenage birth rates](#), as compared with the rest of Europe, and [health consequences for adolescent pregnancies](#).

The conception rates for women aged under 18 years in England and Wales fell by 17% from 15.8 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 17 years in 2019 to 13.1 conceptions per 1,000 in 2020. This rate has been decreasing each year since 2007, when the conception rate stood at 41.6, over three times higher than in 2020. This is a record low conception rate for the age group and the biggest percentage decrease seen since 2013.

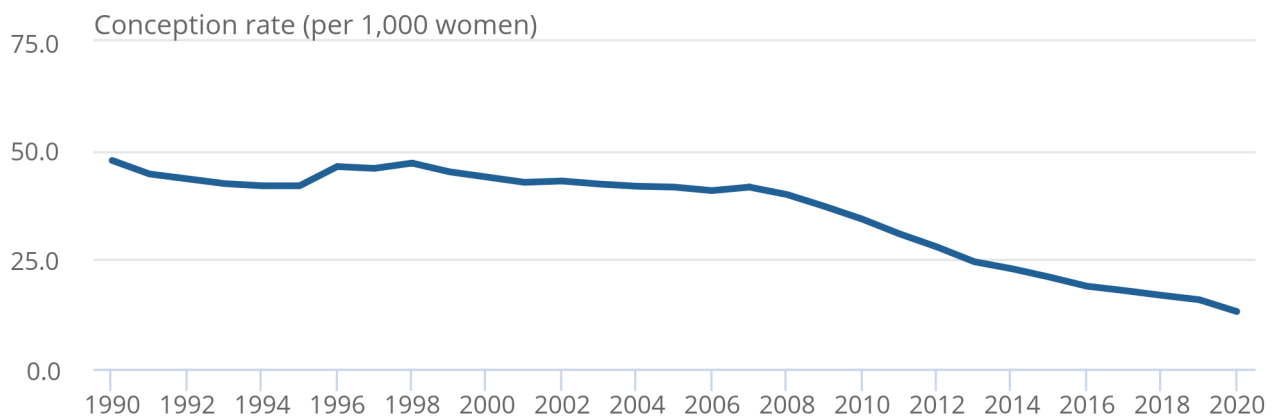
There was a 16% decrease in the under-16 age group conception rates, from 2.5 conceptions per 1,000 women aged 13 to 15 years in 2019 to 2.1 in 2020. This is the largest annual decrease seen since 2016.

Figure 3: Under-18 years conception rate continued to decrease in 2020

Conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 17, England and Wales, 1990 to 2020

Figure 3: Under-18 years conception rate continued to decrease in 2020

Conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 17, England and Wales, 1990 to 2020



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

5 . Conceptions leading to legal abortions

The percentage of conceptions leading to legal abortions has increased for the sixth year in a row, with around a quarter (25.3%) of conceptions leading to abortion in 2020.

The under-16 and the under-18 age groups were the only age groups that saw a decrease in the percentage of conceptions leading to legal abortion.

Figure 4: The percentage of conceptions in all ages leading to legal abortion has increased in recent years

Percentage of conceptions leading to legal abortion, England and Wales, 1990 to 2020

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

6 . Conceptions by area of usual residence

We continue to see conception numbers and rates vary by region. The North West had the highest overall conception rate of all the English regions and Wales, with 78.0 conceptions per 1,000 women in 2020, up from 77.2 in 2019. This is the first time in recent years that London did not have the highest conception rate.

London had the third-highest conception rate of all the English regions and Wales in 2020, after seeing the biggest decrease in conception rates in the previous year with 76.2 conceptions per 1,000 women in 2020, a 2.7% drop. Since 2009, London's conception rate has declined by 15%.

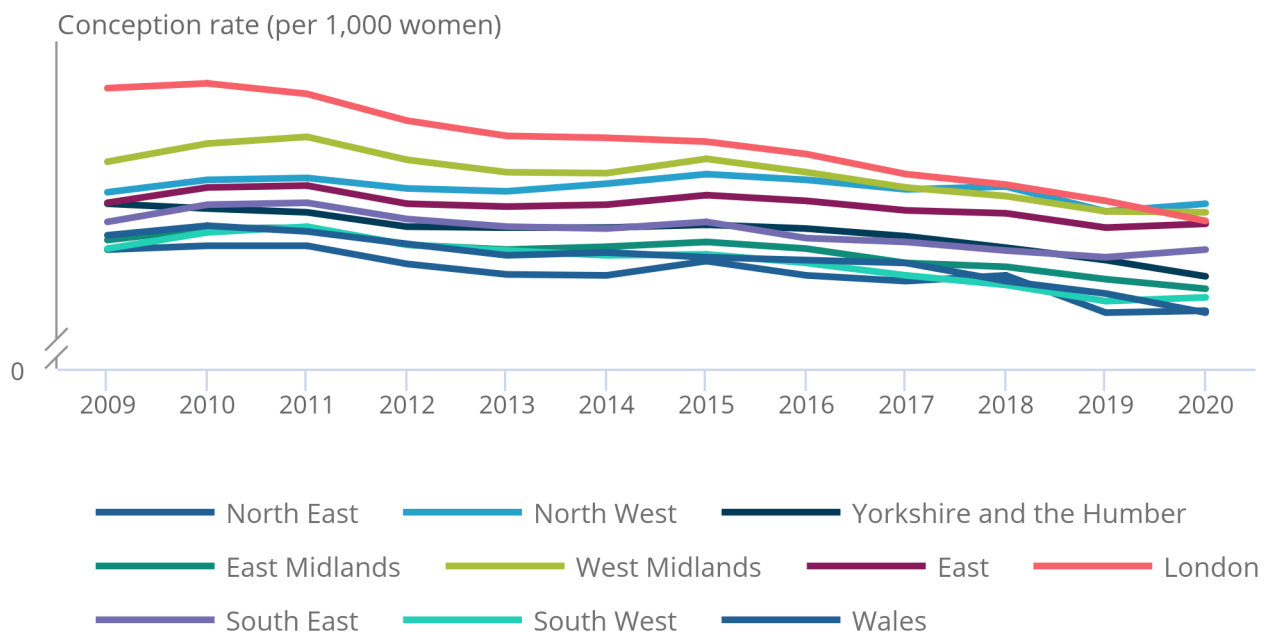
Wales had the lowest overall conception rate in 2020, with 66.6 conceptions per 1,000 women. Wales has also seen a large decrease since 2009, down 11% from 74.7 conceptions per 1,000 women.

Figure 5: London's conception rate has decreased the most over the decade

Conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years by area of usual residence, English regions and Wales, 2009 to 2020

Figure 5: London's conception rate has decreased the most over the decade

Conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years by area of usual residence, English regions and Wales, 2009 to 2020



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

This trend of London seeing the largest decreases is also mirrored in the under-18 conception statistics. London now has the lowest conception rate at 9.8 conceptions per 1,000 women aged under 18 years, a 27% drop from 2019 (13.5 conceptions per 1,000 women).

Across all English regions, the North East had the lowest overall conception rate for women of all ages (15 to 44 years), it also had the highest conception rate for women aged under 18 years. The North East has consistently had the highest under-18 conception rate of all the English regions since 2003.

7 . Conceptions data

[Conceptions in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 14 April 2022

Annual statistics on conceptions to residents of England and Wales - numbers and rates by age group, inside and outside marriage or civil partnership, and area of usual residence.

[Quarterly conceptions to women aged under 18 years](#)

Dataset | Released 14 April 2022

Provisional quarterly statistics on the number of conceptions to women aged under 18 years by region and other local authority area within England and Wales.

8 . Glossary

Abortion

The legal termination of a pregnancy under the [1967 Abortion Act](#).

Births

Includes live births and stillbirths unless otherwise stated.

Conception

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses the definition of conception as a pregnancy of a woman that leads either to a maternity or an abortion.

Live birth

A baby showing signs of life at birth.

Maternity

Maternity refers to a pregnancy resulting in the birth of one or more live-born or stillborn children. The number of maternities represents the number of women giving birth rather than the number of babies born (live-born and stillborn).

9 . Measuring the data

Conception statistics bring together records of birth registrations collected under the [Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953](#) and of abortion notifications supplied under the [Abortion Act 1967](#).

They include all the pregnancies of women resident in England and Wales that lead to one of the following outcomes:

- a maternity at which one or more live births or stillbirths occur, which is registered in England and Wales
- a termination of a pregnancy by abortion under the 1967 Act, which takes place in England and Wales; pregnancies that lead to miscarriages are not included

Conceptions in 2020 may result in maternities or abortions in 2020 or 2021. Maternities that result in one or more live births or stillbirths are counted once only.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and conceptions statistics

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, birth registration services in England and Wales were suspended in March 2020. From June 2020, birth registrations restarted where it was safe to do so. However, the 2020, and to some extent the 2021, birth registration data used in this release were delayed. This had a direct impact on our release calendar.

10 . Strengths and limitations

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

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Conception statistics QMI](#).

11 . Related links

[Abortion statistics for England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 4 January 2022

Report produced by the Department of Health and Social Care providing statistics on abortions recorded in England and Wales in 2020.

[Births in England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 October 2021

Live births, stillbirths, and the intensity of childbearing, measured by the total fertility rate.

[Birth characteristics in England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 13 January 2022

Annual live births by sex, ethnicity and month, maternities by place of birth and with multiple births, and stillbirths by age of parents and calendar quarter.

[Northern Ireland termination of pregnancy statistics 2020/2021](#)

Publication | Released 20 January 2022

This publication presents information on the number of admissions with a diagnosis of medical abortion and termination of pregnancy to Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland during 2007 to 2008 and 2020 to 2021.

[Teenage pregnancies](#)

Publication | Released 6 July 2021

This release by Information Services Division (ISD) provides an annual update on teenage pregnancy statistics in Scotland.