

Divorces in England and Wales QMI

Quality and methodology information for divorce statistics, detailing the strengths and limitations of the data, methods used and data uses and users.

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1 . Output information

National Statistic		
Survey name	Divorces in England and Wales	Frequency Annual
How compiled	Based on third party data	
Geographic coverage	England and Wales	
Last revised	02 November 2022	

2 . About this Quality and Methodology Information report

This quality and methodology report contains information on the quality characteristics of the data (including the European Statistical System five dimensions of quality) as well as the methods used to create it.

The information in this report will help you to:

- understand the strengths and limitations of the data
- learn about existing uses and users of the data
- understand the methods used to create the data
- help you to decide suitable uses for the data
- reduce the risk of misusing data

3 . Important points

- Divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by His Majesty's 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 Wales.
- Marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014; the first divorces recorded between same-sex couples were in 2015.
- Civil partnership dissolutions are not included in our divorce statistics, they are reported separately in [Civil partnerships in England and Wales](#).

4 . Quality summary

Overview of Divorces in England and Wales data

Divorces taking place in England and Wales are recorded by the courts in the HM Courts and Tribunals Service's (HMCTS) Core Case Data (CCD) management system and sent to us electronically for the production of statistics and analysis. Previously, information about divorces and divorce proceedings were recorded in the HMCTS FamilyMan case management system.

We are responsible for publishing demographic statistics on [divorces](#) taking place in England and Wales. The statistics are published by sex, petitioner, duration of marriage to decree absolute (or final order), grounds for divorce and to whom granted. Age at divorce and marital status at time of marriage were published until the 2019 data year, and the number and ages of children involved were also published up until the 2015 data year. From the 2020 data year, information about age and marital status is no longer collected during the divorce process and since 2014, it has not been mandatory for couples divorcing to provide information on children, so we have discontinued these figures. More information is available in [Section 5](#) of this report.

Figures represent both divorces and annulments that took place in England and Wales. A marriage is dissolved, following a petition for divorce and the granting of a decree absolute (or final order), or annulled, following a petition for nullity and the awarding of a decree of nullity.

Since the 2014 data year, our annual divorces release includes a selection of [summary datasets](#) and a more detailed [explorable dataset](#). A statistical bulletin provides commentary on the main points. The summary datasets provide extensive time series for comparison. The explorable dataset provides more detailed data on divorces of opposite-sex couples in England and Wales for 2009 onwards. Figures can be extracted on fact proven, length of marriage, petitioner, age of husband and wife at divorce (available until 2019 only), previous marital status of husband and wife (available until 2019 only) and whether the couple had children (available until 2014 only).

Prior to the 2014 data year, a series of more detailed [datasets](#) were published with an accompanying statistical bulletin presenting the latest year's figures and historical data where possible.

Divorce statistics on case progression are available from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#). HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) also publish the latest [monthly management information](#) on workload, timeliness and performance against new processing targets for HMCTS divorce cases.

Annual divorce statistics for the UK and its constituent countries are published in the [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#) publication.

Divorce statistics for 2007 and earlier years were published in the annual reference volume [Series FM2](#); the final volume of FM2 was produced in March 2010.

Following the implementation of the [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#), the first marriages of same-sex couples took place on 29 March 2014. Civil partners have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage from 10 December 2014. Figures showing the number of divorces to same-sex couples have since been included in our annual divorce publications. The first divorces recorded between same-sex couples in England and Wales were in 2015.

Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces.

Uses and users of Divorces in England and Wales data

Divorce statistics are used widely to inform policy development. For example:

- the [Department for Work and Pensions \(DWP\)](#) uses divorce data in dynamic simulation models covering pension-age populations to model pensioner incomes, as well as entitlement to State Pensions and pension-age benefits; this involves modelling whole life courses, including the formation of partnerships (marriage, civil partnership and cohabitation) and dissolution of the same partnerships
- the [Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\)](#) is responsible for policy and legislation on divorces, and is one of the main users of our divorce statistics; divorce statistics are used by MoJ to inform policy, financial and workload decisions

Other uses and users include:

- organisations, such as Eurostat and the United Nations, who use our divorce statistics to compare similar statistics across different nations and the development of other statistical measures based on divorce statistics
- organisations in the voluntary sector who may use our divorce statistics to support campaigns; these organisations often pass on our divorce statistics to their own users
- lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law who use divorce data to comment on trends in case law and predict likely future trends in legal business
- academics and researchers who use divorce data for research into family change and to assess the implications on care, housing and finances in later life
- the media, which has a high level of interest in divorces, especially the recent [trend for older people to divorce](#)

5 . Quality characteristics of the Divorces in England and Wales data

Relevance

(The degree to which statistical outputs meet users' needs.)

Our divorce statistics represent both divorces and annulments that took place in England and Wales and report figures for a calendar year. Civil partnership dissolutions are not included in our divorce statistics; they are reported separately in [Civil partnerships in England and Wales](#). Our divorce statistics do not take into account married couples who separate but do not divorce.

Divorce statistics, marriage and civil partnership formation and dissolution statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), are used widely to:

- report on social and demographic trends
- inform policymakers about recent trends and policy impact, such as the proportion of marriages that end in divorce
- perform further analyses, for example, comparing trends in divorce with civil partnership dissolutions
- make international comparisons

We are unable to produce divorce statistics by area of residence. Divorce data provided to us by the courts do not contain information on the area of residence of the parties. Since 2018, [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#) published by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has included a file in CSV format containing petitioner's local authority of usual residence. Information on the location of the court is also available in the collection. Court location does not accurately reflect where parties lived either before or after separation, and divorce courts were centralised in 2015 to 11 main divorce centres throughout England and Wales.

Accuracy and reliability

(The degree of closeness between an estimate and the true value.)

Divorce information recorded by the courts and provided to His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) is supplied by the petitioner and respondent on the divorce form in fulfilling the legal requirements for filing a petition. As the information is required for a legal process, it may be presumed that the quality of the data is good, especially as the petitioner must swear under oath (an affidavit) that the information supplied is correct. There is no routine independent statistical verification of the data, but editing checks are carried out to detect clerical, coding and keying errors.

Since 2018, HMCTS has provided an online service for applying for a divorce. HMCTS estimated that the simpler and less technical service had contributed to a 95% drop in the number of applications being returned to the petitioner because of mistakes compared with paper forms.

Revisions of divorce statistics do not occur frequently, but sometimes it is necessary to revise the statistics following improvements made to the data collection, data sources and quality assurance methods. In January 2010, we released revised divorce statistics for 2003 to 2007 following the identification of duplicates in the dataset. Duplicates were identified because of discrepancy work investigating the differences that existed between the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and MoJ divorce statistics. MoJ also revised their figures back to 2003.

Further quality work was carried out later in 2010 in preparation for an exercise to compare ONS divorce records with MoJ systems to try to work out the remaining differences. This work alerted us to the fact there were still duplicates within our divorce datasets. It was later determined that the original duplicate check carried out on the datasets had not been sufficient. New duplicate checks were introduced onto the system and in February 2011, we revised divorce data back to 2003 again. A [statement about the differences](#) that existed between ONS and MoJ divorce figures was published in June 2012.

The court system in England and Wales records all divorces taking place in England and Wales, regardless of the usual residence of the two parties. The marriage can have taken place abroad, but it must be legally recognised in the UK, and one of the parties must have a permanent home in England and Wales.

It is possible that some people who are usually resident in England and Wales may undertake divorce proceedings in another country, so are not included in the divorce statistics for England and Wales. Similarly, some people who are overseas residents may divorce in England and Wales. It is likely that the numbers of divorces taking place abroad are low (as divorce is not open to those without a connection to another country), so the exclusion of such divorces will not impact the main uses of the data.

The most up-to-date population estimates by marital status are used in the calculation of divorce rates. If the population estimates by marital status are revised, our published divorce rates are recalculated using these estimates and noted in published tables.

Output quality trade-offs

(Trade-offs are the extent to which different dimensions of quality are balanced against each other.)

Prior to the 2013 data year, when divorce records began to be received electronically, each year a certain number of divorces were not included in the published figures. This was because the decree absolute paper forms were received later than the date on which the annual dataset was taken.

A table published in our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) shows the difference between the number of divorces stored on our database and the number included in our publications each year. Although this means some divorces were not included in the statistics, it was a necessary compromise needed to publish timely data. The electronic receipt of data now means that we receive nearly all divorces in a year in time for the annual publication.

From the 2020 data year onwards, information about the age and previous marital status of people who divorce is not available as it is no longer collected during the divorce process. Our published data tables, which previously presented statistics by age and marital status therefore do not show this information for the 2020 data year onwards.

For the 2019 data year and earlier years, there are missing values for some variables in the divorce records, in particular for the age at marriage, and previous marital status variables. Prior to the 2014 data year, in cases where one or more of the items of information collected was found to be missing, the procedure adopted was as follows:

- age at marriage: this was imputed using a series of look-up tables, depending on whether the age of one or both parties was missing
- marital status at marriage: bridegrooms were assumed to be single men who have never been married, and brides were assumed to be single women who have never been married
- date of marriage: this was very rarely missing; where it was missing, age at divorce could not be derived and was recorded as "not stated" because date of marriage was missing or incomplete

The level of imputation for age at marriage and marital status at marriage increased between 2003 and 2013. During the divorce process these fields are taken from the marriage certificate supplied by the petitioner. Some marriage certificates relating to marriages that took place outside of England and Wales do not contain these variables. Marital status and age at marriage are also not mandatory fields in the divorce process and consequently are not always collected by the courts. Data have not been imputed for the 2014 data year onwards, and "not stated" categories have been added to published tables instead.

For the 2014 to 2019 data years, we saw increases in the proportion of records where the age at marriage of one or both members of a divorcing couple is not available. This age at marriage information is required for calculating age at divorce. Consequently, any calculations based on age for these years exclude these records.

Coherence and comparability

(Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain, for example, geographical level.)

Methods for compiling divorce statistics and the data collected at divorce have remained relatively unchanged for many years, and time series data are available on a comparable basis back to 1858 in some tables. It is not possible for some tables to include more historical data because not all data are available electronically to reprocess.

Divorces taking place in Scotland and Northern Ireland are recorded by the courts in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Comparability between countries within the UK is possible for divorces, as they are recognised across the UK. We quality assure divorce data for England and Wales. We also coordinate and publish statistics for the whole of the UK, with breakdowns for each constituent country.

Although both the [Scottish Government](#) and [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(NISRA\)](#) publish regular divorce statistics for their own countries, by collating all the data in our [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#) publication, figures can be easily compared across countries.

Comparability is maximised by the following:

- divorce statistics published by the ONS, Scottish Government and NISRA are all produced using date of decree absolute
- divorce statistics published by the ONS, Scottish Government and NISRA are compiled from returns of "Decrees made Absolute" supplied by the courts and include nullities of marriage; this is also the case for many countries internationally, including New Zealand and Australia

MoJ also publish a summary of divorce figures as part of their [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#), which are used by court staff for case management purposes.

The number of divorces indicated by ONS and MoJ statistics, while similar, do not match exactly. Some of the difference is the result of not counting precisely the same cases. For example:

- ONS divorce figures include annulments while MoJ figures do not; the number of annulments in 2021 published by MoJ was 236
- since 2007, divorce figures published by MoJ have included dissolutions of civil partnerships, which are not included in our figures; the number of [civil partnership dissolutions in 2020](#) published by the ONS was 671
- there are likely to be differences as a result of differing dates of extraction

Occasionally, MoJ may revise their published divorce statistics, for example, to account for identified reporting errors. These revisions are usually small and are not reflected in ONS divorce statistics that have already been published.

Prior to the 2013 data year, some other differences also existed from the way data were collected and processed. These include:

- differences in the number of late divorce records excluded from both MoJ and our annual datasets
- differences in the process to remove duplicate records
- differences between the number of records entered onto the FamilyMan system and the number of paper records received by us from courts

In June 2012, together with MoJ, we published a [statement on differences](#) between these figures that existed at the time, and worked closely together to reconcile the two sets of statistics as far as possible.

Our divorce statistics are not directly comparable with estimates from census or household surveys such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey (APS). This is because they are estimates of the number of divorcees rather than the number of divorces that took place during a particular year.

Concepts and definitions

(Concepts and definitions describe the legislation governing the output and a description of the classifications used in the output.)

Information on the legislation governing divorces is contained within Section 2 of our [User guide to divorce statistics](#). Specifically, these relate to:

- [The Matrimonial Causes Act 1973](#)
- [The Divorce Reform Act 1969](#)
- [The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984](#)
- [The Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#)
- [The Children and Families Act 2014](#)
- The [Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020](#)
- The [Marriage and Civil Partnership \(Minimum Age\) Act 2022](#)

To obtain a divorce in England and Wales, a couple must have been married for at least 12 months, the marriage must be legally recognised in the UK, and England and Wales must be the permanent home of one or both partners.

For divorce applications issued by the court before 6 April 2022 (before The [Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020](#) coming into effect), the petitioner also had to prove that the marriage had permanently broken down and could not be saved by providing evidence of one or more of the following five reasons (also known as "facts"):

- adultery (for opposite-sex divorces only)
- behaviour by one partner which means that the other cannot reasonably be expected to live with them
- separation for two years (with consent of partner)
- separation for five years (with or without consent of partner)
- desertion of one party by the other for a period of two years

There are no classifications used in the compilation of our divorce statistics.

Accessibility and clarity

(Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the release details, illustrations and accompanying advice.)

Following guidance from the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to improve digital accessibility of statistical spreadsheets, our published datasets for divorce statistics from the 2020 data year now incorporate and adhere to this guidance. This is to help improve the usability, accessibility and machine readability of our statistical spreadsheets.

Our recommended format for accessible content is a combination of HTML web pages for narrative, charts and graphs, with data being provided in usable formats such as CSV, Excel, and [explorable datasets](#). Our website also offers users the option to download the narrative in PDF format. In some instances, other software may be used, or may be available on request.

Available formats for content published on our website, but not produced by us, or referenced on our website but stored elsewhere, may vary. For further information please contact pop.info@ons.gov.uk.

For information regarding conditions of access to data, please refer to the following links:

- [terms and conditions](#) (for data on the website)
- [accessibility](#)

Special extracts and tabulations of divorces data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and our [charging policy](#), where appropriate).

Enquiries should be made to Demography via email to pop.info@ons.gov.uk or by telephone on +44 1329 444661. We also publish [user requested data](#).

Timeliness and punctuality

(Timeliness refers to the lapse of time between publication and the period to which the data refer. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.)

Our divorce statistics are currently published approximately 10 months after the reference year to which the data relate.

The annual release of divorce statistics is announced on the [GOV.UK release calendar](#) at least four weeks in advance and on the [ONS release calendar](#).

Final divorce statistics for 2008 to 2015 were published around 12 to 13 months after the end of the data year. From the 2015 data year, divorce data were received monthly, three months after the end of the month and from the 2018 data year, 15 days after the month. This has enabled timely quality assurance and more timely publications from the 2016 data year than previously possible.

There have been three occasions when the divorces release has been delayed.

- The 2020 release was delayed because of the prioritisation of resources to focus on releases, which supported the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- The release of 2013, 2014 and 2015 statistics was delayed because of data processing changes following the move to receiving electronic data, rather than paper forms. This change occurred from the 2013 data year and more time has been required for detailed quality assurance following the processing changes.
- The 2013 release was also delayed to enable new and revised [population estimates by marital status](#) to be used in the calculation of divorce rates.
- During quality assurance work in 2008, we identified a shortfall of divorce records for 2007 for some courts between the ONS and MoJ. Further investigation identified that duplicates existed in both datasets. Both organisations began the task of removing these duplicates and consequently divorce statistics for 2003 to 2007 were revised on 28 January 2010 alongside final summary data for 2008.

For more details on related releases, the [GOV.UK release calendar](#) is available online and provides 12 months' advance notice of release dates.

In the unlikely event of a change to the pre-announced release schedule, we will notify you of the change and the reasons for the change as set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

6 . Methods used to produce the Divorces data

How we collect the data and main data sources

From 2020 data onwards, divorces have been extracted from HM Courts and Tribunals Service's Core Case Data (CCD) management system and sent to us electronically. From 2013 to 2019, divorces data were extracted from the FamilyMan case management system.

Divorces in 2013 and 2014 were received in annual files. From the 2015 data year, divorce data were received monthly, three months after the end of the month to enable timely quality assurance. From 2019, data are now received within 15 days after the end of the month. A series of checks are performed on the monthly data and any queries are addressed. The final annual dataset is then received three months after the year end.

Prior to the 2013 data year, divorce statistics for England and Wales were derived from data provided on the D105 form used to record decree absolutes. These paper forms were sent to us by the courts.

Most figures are based on the basic data supplied but some are based on derived information:

- duration of marriage to decree absolute (or final order): this is derived from date of marriage and date of decree absolute (or final order)
- age at divorce: this is derived up until the 2019 data year from age at marriage and duration of marriage; from this, an age (at last birthday) at the date of divorce is derived (since 2020, changes to the divorce form mean this information is no longer available, therefore we can no longer publish statistics on age at divorce)
- age of child at petition: this is derived up until the 2015 data year from date of birth of child and date of petition (since 2014 it has not been mandatory for couples divorcing to provide dates of birth of children; consequently, we no longer publish statistics on children)

Divorce rates are published for England and Wales (combined). The rate is the number of people divorcing per thousand married males and females and uses the latest available [population estimates by marital status](#).

Divorce rates for both same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples have traditionally been calculated using the total married population. This is because divorce rates were originally calculated by age group and population estimates by marital status are only available by age group for the total married population. They are not published for same-sex and opposite-sex married populations separately.

Since the 2020 data year, information on age is no longer collected as part of the divorce process so we are no longer able to calculate divorce rates by age. We are planning to review the way divorce rates are calculated in the future. In the interim, users can use divorce rates to look at trends in divorce for same-sex (or opposite-sex) couples over time. However, while total married population estimates are used as denominators, they should not be used to compare the rates of divorce for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. As opposite-sex couples account for a much greater proportion of the married population than same-sex couples, divorce rates for same-sex couples will be very small in comparison to opposite-sex couples if the total married population is used as the denominator for both.

How we process, analyse, quality assure and validate the data

Divorce data are extracted from the HMCTS Core Case Data management system and sent to us monthly. We conduct quality assurance tasks throughout the year on the dataset in preparation for the release of annual figures. These include:

- completeness checks, which consider whether any records may be missing; this is based on a comparison with MoJ divorce figures for the same period
- inconsistency checks within the dataset to ensure minimal internal errors

During the quality assurance of the annual dataset, further checks are carried out, including frequency checks and comparisons with the previous year's data as well as checks for duplicates.

Any queries with the data are referred to HMCTS for investigation and records are amended where necessary. Once all checks have been completed and queries resolved, the annual tables for publication are created.

7 . Other information

Assessment of user needs and perceptions

(The processes for finding out about uses and users, and their views on the statistical products.)

We welcome feedback on the content, format and relevance of our releases and encourage you to send feedback via email to pop.info@ons.gov.uk.

Feedback is requested with all emails sent by our Stakeholder Engagement Team and Impact within Demography.

Feedback is also received through our regular attendance at user group meetings and conferences.

A consultation to understand [user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics](#) following the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples was published in October 2013. The information provided was used to help us review our marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics to meet user needs as much as possible. A [summary of the responses to the consultation and future plans](#) was published.

Useful links

[Divorces in England and Wales](#) are published by sex, age and marital status at the time of marriage, duration of marriage to decree absolute, age at divorce and the grounds for divorce. Columns in tables by age and/or marital status are only available for data years prior to 2020.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#).

Further related releases produced by the Office for National statistics include [Marriages, Civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#) and [Families and households](#).

Scottish Government produces [divorce statistics for Scotland](#).

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency produces [divorce](#) statistics for Northern Ireland.

[Population estimates by marital status](#) provide the estimated population by age group, sex and marital status (single, married, civil partnered, divorced, and widowed) for England and Wales.

8 . Cite this QMI

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