

Article

# Marriage and civil partnership status in England and Wales: Census 2021

Details adults' legal partnership status, including: changes over time; where groups of each legal partnership status live; education; ethnicity; and, religion.

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# 1 . Main Points

- The proportion of adults who have never married or been in a civil partnership has increased every decade from 26.3% in 1991 to 37.9% in 2021, whereas the proportion of adults who are married or in a civil partnership (including separated) has fallen from 58.4% in 1991 to 46.9% in 2021.
- The increase in adults who have never been married or in a civil partnership (since 2011), after standardising for age, is seen across all local authorities, religious groups and ethnic groups.
- Between 2011 and 2021, the number of widowed adults (3.0 million) has decreased by 6.3%, women who are widowed decreased by 8.3%, but the number of men who are widowed increased by 0.6%.
- The proportion of adults who are divorced is similar in 2021 (9.1%) and 2011 (9.0%); the proportion of younger adults who are divorced has decreased, whereas the proportion of older adults has increased.
- Adults in same-sex marriages and civil partnerships are more likely to be younger, have no religion, and have higher-level qualifications than adults in opposite-sex marriages.

## 2 . Changes in legal partnership status from 1991 to 2021

The proportion of adults who have never entered a legally registered partnership has increased every decade from 26.3% in 1991 to 37.9% in 2021. There has been a decline in the proportion of adults who are in a legally registered partnership from 58.4% to 46.9% over the same time period.

In 2021 the proportion of adults who are divorced increased to 9.1% from 6.2% in 1991.

The proportion of adults who are widowed has declined steadily from 9.1% in 1991 to 6.1% in 2021.

### **Figure 1: The proportion of adults who are married or in a civil partnership has fallen between 1991 and 2021**

Legal partnership status as a proportion of usual residents, aged 16 years and over, England and Wales, 1991 to 2021

Download the data

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### **Adults who have never married or formed a civil partnership**

There is a greater proportion of adults aged under 70 years who have never married or formed a civil partnership than in 2011. The biggest increase is in the aged 25 to 29 years age group, where the proportion increases from 73.9% in 2011 to 84.2% in 2021, and the increase for the aged 30 to 34 years age group is from 49.2% to 58.9%.

The number of people getting married is at the lowest rate on record and the median age of those getting married is increasing. Read the latest marriage data in our [Marriages in England and Wales: 2019 bulletin](#).

The historical trends are similar for males and females aged under 70 years. There has been a decline since 1991 in the proportion of females aged 70 years and over who have never married or been in a civil partnership.

### **Figure 2: The proportion of adults who have never been married or in a civil partnership has increased for all ages under 70 years**

Usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales who have never been married or civil partnered by 5 year age group and sex, 1991 to 2021

Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts from Census 2021 have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

**Download the data**

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## **Adults who are married or civil partnered**

The proportions of adults aged under 70 years who are married or civil partnered has decreased for males and female since 2011. This is a continuing trend since 1991 as marriage rates have fallen.

The aged 25 to 29 years and 30 to 35 years age groups have the largest reduction in married or civil partnered since 2011 for males and females. Females aged 25 to 29 years have the largest decrease from 27.8% in 2011 to 17.5% in 2021.

The proportion of older adults who are married or in a civil partnership has continued to increase since 1991. This is because of:

- initial higher levels of marriage among these generations
- the reduction in the proportion of widows
- more adults remarrying at older ages

As the gap in life expectancy between males and females has reduced, the number of female widows has fallen. Read our analysis of mortality trends in our [Mortality in England and Wales: past and projected trends in average lifespan article](#).

## **Figure 3: The proportion of adults who are married has decreased for most age groups and increased at older ages**

**Usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales who are married or in civil partnership, including adults who are separated but still in a legally registered partnership, by 5 year age group and sex, 1991 to 2021**

**Notes:**

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts from Census 2021 have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

**Download the data**

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## Adults who are divorced or who were in a civil partnership that is now dissolved

The proportional increase in adults who are divorced or have had a civil partnership dissolved between 1991 (6.2%) and 2011 (9.0%) has slowed, with 9.1% of adults divorced in 2021.

The proportion of females is higher than males for all age groups aged 20 years and over in 2021.

The average age that adults are getting divorced has generally increased year on year for both females and males. For more information, see our [Divorces in England and Wales dataset](#). [Remarriage rates](#) have stayed very similar with a slight decrease from the mid-2000s. For more information, see our [Marriages in England and Wales: 2019 bulletin](#).

The decrease in the proportion of younger adults who are divorced is expected to be partly a result of the increase in the average age at marriage.

### Figure 4: The proportion of adults who are divorced or were in a civil partnership that is now dissolved has decreased for adults aged under 50 years, and increased for those aged 50 years and over

Usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales who are divorced or were previously in a civil partnership that is now dissolved by 5 year age group and sex, 1991 to 2021

#### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts from Census 2021 have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

#### Download the data

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## Adults who are widowed or surviving civil partners

In 2011, 3.2 million adults aged 16 years and over were widowed, falling by 6.3% to 3 million in 2021. This change is influenced by females who are widowed where the number has decreased by 8.3%, whereas the number of males who are widowed has increased slightly by 0.6%.

The proportion of adults who are widowed has decreased for all age groups, with females in all age groups aged 70 years and over having the biggest changes since 2011, with the aged 80 to 84 years age group decreasing from 58.9% to 48.8%.

Since 1991 there has been little change in the number of males who are widowed, from 720,000 (3.8% of males aged 16 years and over) to 730,000 (3.1%) in 2021, whereas the number of females who are widowed has decreased from 2.9 million (14.0% of females aged 16 years and over) to 2.2 million (9.0%).

The decrease in females who are widowed at older ages is because of the reducing gap in life expectancy between males and females, as well as adults remarrying at older ages. For more information, see our [Mortality in England and Wales: past and projected trends in average lifespan article](#).

### Figure 5: The proportion of adults who are widowed has reduced, most of this reduction is due to a decline in female widows

Usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales who are widowed or a surviving partner from a civil partnership by 5 year age group and sex, 1991 to 2021

#### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts from Census 2021 have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

Download the data

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## Same-sex and opposite-sex marriage and civil partnerships

Adults in same-sex marriages and all civil partnerships make up less than 0.5% of the population aged 16 years and over. Same-sex married is the largest group at 0.28% (134,000). Followed by same-sex civil partnered at 0.14% (67,000) and opposite-sex civil partnered at 0.07% (36,000).

Although quality issues with these small categories were handled in census quality assurance, these numbers are still inflated. For more information, see our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#). Because of data quality concerns, opposite-sex civil partnerships are excluded from the analysis of characteristics of adults in each partnership type.

Same-sex marriage was introduced in 2014 and opposite-sex civil partnerships in 2019. Same-sex couples in civil partnerships have been able to convert civil partnerships into marriages since same-sex marriage was introduced.

## Age and sex structure of people in all legal partnership types

The median age for those in an opposite-sex marriage is 55 in comparison with same-sex marriage, which is 44, and same-sex civil partnerships, which is 53. This may be partly explained by those in opposite-sex marriages having been able to age through time unlike those in same-sex legal partnerships. The median age is lower for females in same-sex marriage (42) compared with males (46).

There is a larger proportion of males in same-sex civil partnerships and a larger proportion of females in same-sex marriages.

## Figure 6: Adults in same-sex legal partnerships have a younger age profile than opposite-sex married adults

Population pyramids of usual residents in each legal partnership type (married, in a civil partnership, opposite and same-sex), usual residents aged 16 years and over, England and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

Download the data

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## Legal partnership status of adults living in communal establishments

The legal partnership status of adults living in communal establishments, such as halls of residence or care homes, is a population that is not always included in survey data. It makes up 1.7% of the total population and differs substantially from the household population. This is because of the age structure, with 63.2% of adults who have never been married and live in a communal establishment live in an education establishment such as halls of residence. Most adults (95.1%) who are widowed and live in a communal establishment live in a care home.

## Figure 7: Most usual residents living in education communal establishments have never been married or in a civil partnership

Legal partnership status of residents living in communal establishments as a proportion of usual residents, usual residents aged 16 years and over, England and Wales, 2021

### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Percentages have been calculated using rounded data.

### Download the data

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## 3 . Geographical distribution

View the data showing the proportions of adults in each legal partnership status on our [Census 2021 map](#).

When rates of legal partnership status are age standardised, the geographical distribution changes because of the different age structure of each area.

## Figure 8: Age standardised proportions change distributions, for example, Tower Hamlets moves from having amongst the lowest proportion of widows to the highest.

Legal partnership status as an age-standardised proportion of usual residents aged 16 years and over in each local authority in England and Wales, 2021

### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.

**Download the data**

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The broad patterns observed in the geographical spread of married adults (higher proportions in rural areas) and never married adults (higher proportions in urban areas) is not changed by age standardisation. Although the differences between areas are less prominent after age is corrected for.

In England, the areas with highest proportions of people who have never been married are in London. In Wales the local authority with the highest proportion is Gwynedd.

Areas with older populations have higher numbers of widows. When age is accounted for, the 2021 proportions change substantially. Age standardisation moves Tower Hamlets, which is ranked the lowest when age is not considered, to having the highest rate of adults who are widowed.

The local authority in Wales with the highest age-standardised proportion of adults who are widowed is Blaenau Gwent.

Age standardisation also changes the patterns in types of areas with highest rates of divorced adults. The local authority with the highest proportion of adults who are divorced is Norwich, despite being 87th out of 331 local authorities before standardisation. Local authorities with high proportions when age is accounted for appear to be areas that are towns or cities but that are generally surrounded by rural areas, such as Norwich. The local authority in Wales with the highest age-standardised proportion of adults who are divorced is Neath Port Talbot.

## 4 . Characteristics of adults by legal partnership status

### Religion

The age-standardised proportions of adults who have never been married or civil partnered was highest among adults reporting "No religion", at 41.2% in 2021, increasing from 36.2% in 2011. This was the biggest change among usual residents who declared a religion.

Adults who identified as "Muslim" had the lowest proportions of adults who were never married in both years (18.8% in 2011 and 22.9% in 2021).

The age-standardised proportion of adults who were never married in 2021 increased across all groups since 2011.

Religious groups in England and Wales have different age and sex structures. For more information, see our [Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

### **Figure 9: Age standardised proportions of usual residents who are never married or in a civil partnership have reduced across all religious groups**

**Age standardised proportions of all usual residents aged 16 years and over in each legal partnership status as a proportion of religious groups in England and Wales 2021**

#### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.

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## Ethnic group

After accounting for age, the ethnic groups with the highest proportions of adults who have never been married or civil partnered are within the "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African" and "Mixed and Multiple" ethnic groups. The lowest proportions are in "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh" ethnic groups.

The age-standardised proportion of adults who have never been married or in a civil partnership has increased across ethnic groups between 2011 and 2021.

### **Figure 10: Age standardised proportions of adults who have never been married or in a civil partnership have increased across all ethnic groups**

Age standardised proportions of all usual residents aged 16 years and over in each legal partnership status as a proportion of ethnic group in England and Wales 2021

#### Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.

#### Download the data

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Ethnic groups in England and Wales have different age and sex structures. For more information, see our [Ethnic group by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

## Qualifications

As the level of education increases, the age-standardised proportion of the population who are married or civil partnered increases and the proportion of adults who are never married decreases.

### **Figure 11: Adults who are married or in a civil partnership have the highest level of qualifications when age is accounted for**

Age standardised proportions of all usual residents aged 16 and over in each legal partnership status as a proportion of adults with each level of qualifications in England and Wales 2021

**Notes:**

## Notes:

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.

2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.

3. Highest level of qualification uses the following categories:

- no qualifications: no formal qualifications

- Level 1: one to four GCSE passes (grade A\* to C or grade 4 and above) and any other GCSEs at other grades, or equivalent qualifications

- Level 2: five or more GCSE passes (grade A\* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications

- apprenticeships

- Level 3: two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications

- Level 4 or above: Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications

- other qualifications, of unknown level

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## Characteristics of same-sex married and same-sex civil partnered people

The characteristics of those in same-sex legal partnerships are compared with adults in opposite-sex marriages. Characteristics are presented as age standardised rates to account for the differing age profiles of each partnership type.

### Religion of same-sex married and civil partnered people

Same-sex civil partnered and same-sex married people are more likely to have no religion than opposite-sex married people. Same-sex civil partnered people have the highest proportion of adults with no religion.

Age-standardised proportions for each partnership type show that same-sex married and civil-partnered adults are less likely to be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh than opposite-sex married adults.

Age-standardised proportions show that both same-sex partnered groups are more likely to be Buddhist than opposite-sex married groups.

Age-standardised proportions for residents reporting that they are Jewish are the same for same and opposite-sex married groups (0.7%), and slightly lower for same-sex civil partnered (0.6%).

## Figure 12: People in same-sex legal partnerships are more likely to have no religion than people in opposite-sex marriages

Ratio of age standardised proportions of people in same-sex marriages and civil partnerships to people in opposite-sex marriages in each religious group, usual residents aged over 16 years in England and Wales, 2021

**Notes:**

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.

**Download the data**

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## **Qualifications of same-sex married and civil-partnered people**

Same-sex married and civil partnered people have higher age-standardised proportions of Level 4 (degree or equivalent) qualifications than opposite-sex married people. Both same-sex groups also have lower proportions of people with no qualifications. Those in same-sex civil partnerships are more qualified than those in same-sex marriages.

### **Figure 13: People in same-sex legal partnerships are more likely to have higher qualifications than people in opposite-sex marriages**

**Ratio of age-standardised proportions of people in same-sex marriages and civil partnerships to people in opposite-sex marriages by highest level of qualification, usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales, 2021**

**Notes:**

1. To ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the data, population counts have been rounded to the nearest five and counts under 10 have been suppressed.
2. Age standardised proportions have been calculated after data is rounded and suppressed so will not always total 100%.
3. Highest level of qualification uses the following categories:
  - no qualifications: no formal qualifications
  - Level 1: one to four GCSE passes (grade A\* to C or grade 4 and above) and any other GCSEs at other grades, or equivalent qualifications
  - Level 2: five or more GCSE passes (grade A\* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications
  - apprenticeships
  - Level 3: two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications
  - Level 4 or above: Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications
  - other qualifications, of unknown level (excluded from this analysis due to very small counts)

**Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

## 5 . Legal partnership data

### [Legal partnership status](#)

Dataset | Released 2 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in England and Wales by their legal partnership status. The estimates are at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

### [Number of usual residents in households and communal establishments](#)

Dataset | Released 2 November 2022

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in England and Wales by whether they resided in households and communal establishments. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

## 6 . Glossary

### Age-standardised proportion

Age-standardised proportions (ASPs) allow for fairer comparison between populations over time and across geographies, as they account for differences in the population size and age structure. The 2013 European Standard Population is used to standardise proportions.

### Legal partnership status

Classifies a person according to their legal marital or registered civil partnership status on Census Day, 21 March 2021.

It is the same as the 2011 Census variable "Marital status" but has been updated for Census 2021 to reflect the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, which made provision for the extension of civil partnerships to couples who are not of the same sex.

### Usual resident

A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day, 21 March 2021 was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more, or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

## 7 . Data sources and quality

The census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned National Statistics status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. We ensure the census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of adults who were not recorded on a census response. This means that the census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical uncertainty associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. As we round all figures individually, table totals may not sum exactly.

Quality considerations along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally, are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the specific quality considerations for Demography. Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates report](#).

Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021 highlighted quality issues with legal partnership status. Implausibly high numbers of people reporting being (or having been) in same-sex marriages and opposite-sex civil partnerships. Most of this error has been corrected but census estimates of people in opposite-sex civil partnerships remain very high compared with events data. Census has more than twice as many people in total, and four times as many people aged under 40 years, in an opposite-sex civil partnership than the number of people who had entered into an opposite-sex civil partnership in England and Wales prior to Census Day.

## 8 . Related Links

### [Household and resident characteristics, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 2 November 2022

Summary of Household size, household composition, household deprivation status, and people's marital and civil partnership status, Census 2021 data.

### [People's living arrangements in England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 9 February 2023

Overview of people's living arrangements. It includes analysis on: their legal partnership status, non-dependent children, people living alone, people with second addresses, and whether people had moved in the year prior to census.

### [Census maps](#)

Interactive content | Updated 19 January 2023

Interactive map tool that visualises Census 2021 data on different topics down to a local authority area and neighbourhood level.

## 9 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 22 February 2023, ONS website, article, [Marriage and civil partnership status, England and Wales: Census 2021](#).