

Statistical bulletin

Marriages in England and Wales: 2020

Number of marriages that took place in England and Wales analysed by age, sex, previous partnership status and civil or religious ceremony.



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1 . Main points

- In 2020, marriages were affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, including the temporary closure of wedding venues and registration offices; additionally restrictions including the number of guests may also have impacted marriages.
- There were 85,770 marriages in total in England and Wales in 2020, a decrease of 61.0% from 219,850 in 2019; the lowest number of marriages on record since 1838.
- Marriage rates have fallen to their lowest on record in 2020; for men, there were 7.4 marriages per 1,000 men not in a legal partnership compared with 19.1 in 2019; for women, there were 7.0 marriages per 1,000 women not in a legal partnership compared with 17.8 in 2019.
- The average (median) age at marriage for opposite-sex couples in 2020 was 35.3 years for men and 33.2 for women; for same-sex couples this was higher at 38.1 years for men and 34.6 years for women.
- Of those getting married in 2020, there was a lower proportion of couples where both partners married for the first time compared with 2019; 63.2% of opposite-sex couples and 69.9% of same-sex couples.
- Religious ceremonies accounted for 15.0% of opposite-sex marriages in 2020, a decrease from 18.7% in 2019 and the lowest percentage on record; for same-sex marriages, proportions were similar in 2020 and 2019.

Statistician's comment

"Restrictions related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have had a marked impact on the number, timing and characteristics of marriages taking place in 2020 compared with previous years. Marriage rates in 2020 have more than halved compared with 2019 and have fallen to their lowest on record. While August is usually the most popular month to marry, in 2020 there was a shift to September and October respectively for opposite-sex and same-sex couples. While divorce proceedings were also impacted by the pandemic, for the first time, marriage rates were lower than divorce rates. Future analysis will show whether there is a rise in marriage rates in 2021 as restrictions were lifted."

Follow Demography on Twitter [@RichPereira_ONS](https://twitter.com/RichPereira_ONS).

2 . Marriages

Number of marriages

There were 85,770 marriages in England and Wales in 2020, a decrease of 61.0% from 219,850 in 2019. Marriages in 2020 were affected by the impact of the closure of registration services, leading to postponed and cancelled weddings, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This is the largest annual decrease ever recorded and is the lowest number of marriages recorded since the first full year of marriage records in 1838.

In the 30 years previously, 1989 to 2019, numbers of marriages decreased by 36.6%. However in 2020, there were 82,959 opposite-sex marriages, a decrease of 61.1% from 2019 (213,122) and there were 2,811 same-sex marriages, a decrease of 58.2% from 2019 (6,728). As in previous years, there were more female same-sex couples marrying (57.2%) than male. For same-sex civil partnerships the majority were male couples (61.5%). See our [Civil partnerships in England and Wales](#) release.

Over the last 30 years there has been a steady increase in the percentage of marriages which are performed as civil ceremonies and in the last four years alone civil ceremonies have increased from 76.0% of all marriages in 2016 to 85.5% in 2020. In 2020, the lowest percentage of religious marriages was recorded since records began.

Marriage rates

Marriage rates account for changes in the adult population not in a legal partnership, who will be referred to as “unmarried”, in addition to the number of marriages, and so they provide a better indication of changing trends.

In 2020, marriage rates fell to their lowest level since 1862. While marriage rates had been declining since 2016, the large decrease between 2019 and 2020 is likely because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions that were in place for parts of the year. Separate rates for those forming opposite-sex and same-sex marriages are available in the [datasets](#).

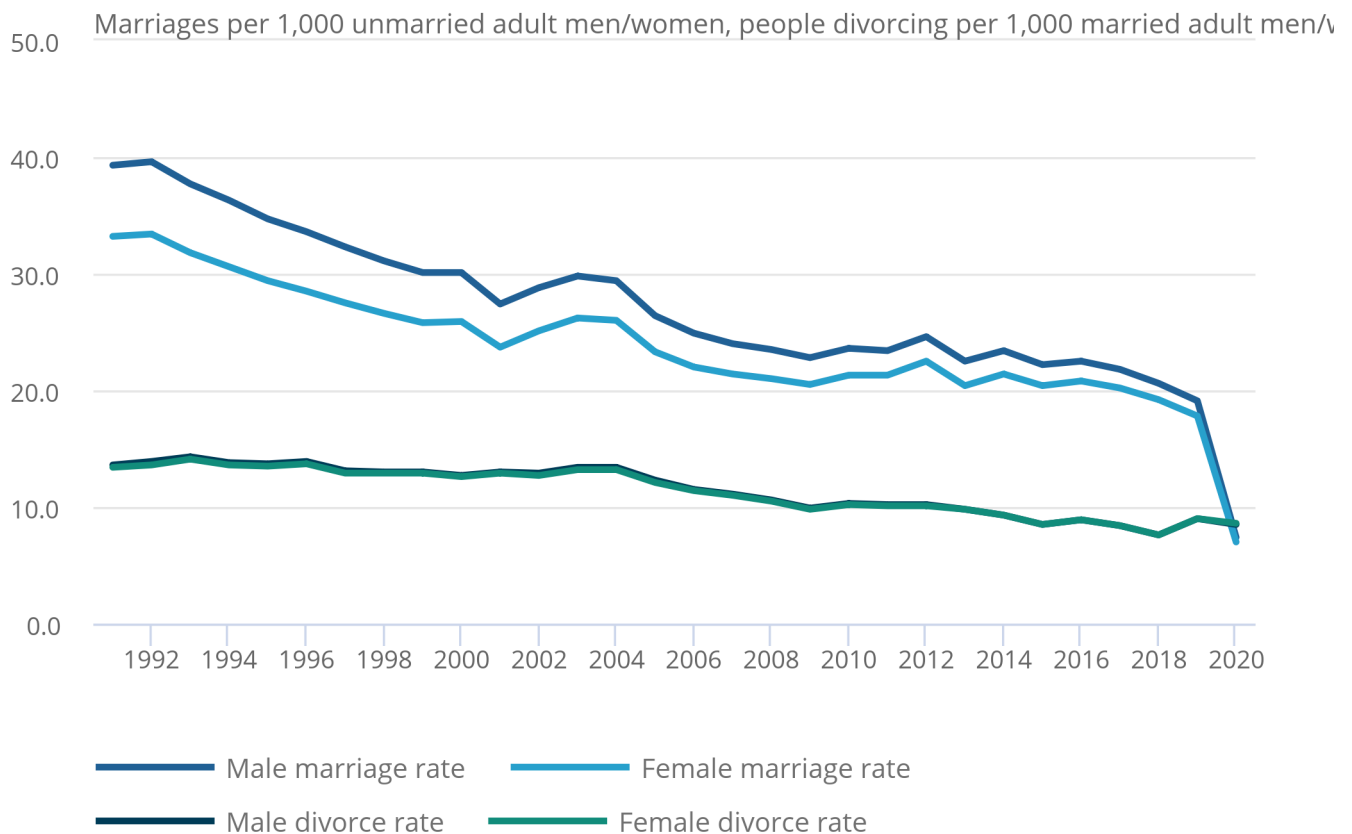
In 2020, for the first time since records began, marriage rates were lower than divorce rates (Figure 1). There were 7.4 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 7.0 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women compared with 8.5 divorces per 1,000 married men and 8.6 divorces per 1,000 married women. This is likely because of national lockdown and wider coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions. Divorces were also impacted by coronavirus restrictions, which disrupted family court activities. For more information please see our [Divorces in England and Wales release](#).

Figure 1: Marriage rates decreased by more than half in 2020 and were lower than divorce rates

Total marriage and divorce rates by sex, England and Wales, 1991 to 2020

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Total marriage and divorce rates by sex, England and Wales, 1991 to 2020



Source: Marriages in England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Figures for 2014 onwards include opposite-sex and same-sex marriages, which have been possible in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.
2. The first divorces of same-sex couples took place in 2015.
3. These figures exclude civil partnership conversions.

Marriages by date

The first national lockdown was introduced on 23 March 2020. Only marriages in exceptional circumstances could take place during periods of national lockdown (Figure 2). Only 264 marriages took place from 24 March to 3 July 2020 (0.3% of total marriages that year), compared with 71,883 during the same period in 2019 (32.7% of total marriages in 2019).

The most popular day to get married in 2020 was a Saturday, this has been the case for the last 20 years. However, there was a decrease in the percentage of marriages that took place on Saturday, from 47.9% in 2019 to 38.3% in 2020. Many marriage ceremonies were cancelled or postponed from March 2020 because of coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions and so it may be couples were more willing to marry on other days of the week.

September was the most popular month in 2020 for opposite-sex marriages and October for same-sex marriages. In contrast, August was the most popular month over the last two decades for all couples. The most popular date in 2020 to get married was 26 September with 1,726 marriages taking place on this day. The sixth most popular day to marry was 4 November, the day before a national lockdown came into place; 1,425 couples chose to marry on this Wednesday.

Figure 2: Marriage numbers were low during periods of national lockdown

Total number of marriages per week, England and Wales, 2020 and 2019

Notes:

1. These figures exclude civil partnership conversions.
2. The last week of December is a partial week.
3. Because of the leap year in 2020, the 29th February has been included for 2019 to ensure that the dates for 2020 and 2019 align. This means that the 7 days commencing 26th February is based on only 6 days for 2019.
4. Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions differed for England and Wales and, after the introduction of the tier system within England, restrictions differed between tiers.
5. There were a number of marriages which took place at the start of the 7 days commencing the 4th November, prior to the November National lockdown coming into effect.
6. Some of the main coronavirus restrictions for 2020 are shown on the chart.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Age at marriage

The age distribution of those entering marriages in 2020 was older than in 2019 and those forming same-sex marriages were older than those forming opposite-sex marriages. Additionally, men were generally older than women getting married. The average (median) age of men marrying in 2020 was 35.4 years and for women this was 33.2 years.

Rates of opposite-sex marriage at all age groups decreased from 2019 to 2020. The biggest decrease in marriage rates was for men and women aged 25 to 29 years, with male rates falling by 66.1% from 28.3 per 1,000 unmarried men in 2019 to 9.6 per 1,000 unmarried men in 2020 and female rates decreasing by 65.7% from 41.4 per 1,000 unmarried women in 2019 to 14.2 per 1,000 unmarried women in 2020. This could reflect younger couples choosing to wait until coronavirus restrictions had lifted.

For women entering same-sex marriages, 20- to 24-year-olds had the largest percentage decrease in rates in 2020, from 0.3 to 0.1 per 1,000 unmarried women. For men, 40- to 44-year-olds had the largest percentage decrease in rates, from 1.1 to 0.4 per 1,000 unmarried men.

For those marrying for the first time, same-sex couples were older than opposite-sex couples; never-married men marrying a partner of the same sex had a median age of 36.8 years on average while women were aged 32.3 years. Men marrying a partner of the opposite sex were aged 32.1 years and women were aged 30.6 years. In contrast, opposite-sex couples who remarried were older than same-sex couples; these figures can be found in the [datasets](#).

Previous partnership status

In 2020, the most common previous legal partnership status was “never married” and this has been the case since marriages began. Men and women forming opposite-sex marriages show little difference in their previous partnership status (72.5% and 72.8%, respectively, had never been married). However, for marriages between same-sex partners there was a higher percentage of men who have never been married (88.1%), compared with 76.7% of women. This is a pattern also seen in same-sex civil partnerships.

Around 1 in 10 men (11.1%) forming same-sex marriages in England and Wales had been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved. In contrast, there were twice as many men entering opposite-sex marriages (24.9%) who had previously been divorced or had a civil partnership dissolved.

Of those getting married, there was a decrease in the proportion of first marriages in 2020 compared with previous years. For opposite-sex couples, 63.2% of partners both married for the first time in 2020, compared with 67.9% in 2019. Among same-sex couples, 69.9% of partners both married for the first time in 2020, compared with 74.5% in 2019.

Marriages by area of occurrence

Every area in England and Wales experienced a decrease in marriages from 2019 to 2020 (Figure 3). Most areas saw more than a 50% decrease in overall marriage numbers in 2020.

The areas that saw the largest percentage decrease from 2019 to 2020 were Bedford and Walsall, where marriages decreased by 80.8% for both. London was the region where the greatest proportion (17.7%) of marriages took place in England and Wales in 2020; this is a change from the previous three years where the greatest proportion of marriages took place in the South East.

Figure 3: Every area of England and Wales experienced a decrease in marriage numbers in 2020

Marriage numbers and percentage difference by area of occurrence, England and Wales, 2019 and 2020

Notes:

1. On geographic boundaries as at April 2020
2. The Isles of Scilly has been grouped with Cornwall due to the small number of marriages in this area.
3. These figures exclude civil partnership conversions.
4. The percentage change shows the percentage difference in numbers between 2019 and 2020.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

3 . Marriages in England and Wales data

[Marriages in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 11 May 2023

Annual statistics on the number of marriages that took place in England and Wales analysed by age, sex, previous partnership status and civil or religious ceremony.

4 . Glossary

Civil marriage

A civil marriage can take place at a register office or other buildings approved for civil marriage. Both partners must personally give a formal notice of their intention to marry or form a civil partnership to the superintendent registrar of the district(s) where they have resided for the previous seven days.

Religious marriage

Religious marriages can take place in Church of England or Church in Wales premises, as well as in other buildings registered for marriage that are certified as a place of worship. Religious marriages also include marriages that took place according to the rites of the Society of Friends and those professing the Jewish religion.

Unmarried population

The unmarried adult population refers to men and women aged 16 years and over who have never entered a legal partnership (marriage or civil partnership), divorced (including those whose previous civil partnership has dissolved) or widowed (including surviving civil partners).

First marriages

First marriages refer to marriages where both partners had never previously been married or formed a civil partnership.

Remarriages

Remarriages refer to marriages where one or both partners were previously married or had formed a civil partnership.

5 . Measuring the data

This is the first time that final marriage statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2020. The release provides final annual data.

- Marriage statistics are derived from information recorded when marriages are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement.
- Figures represent civil and religious marriages that took place in England and Wales only.
- Marriages to residents of England and Wales that took place elsewhere are not included, while marriages that took place in England and Wales to non-residents are included.
- Marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014 and are included in these statistics.
- Same-sex couples in a civil partnership have been able to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage, if they so desired, from 10 December 2014; these are not included in the marriage statistics but are reported separately. Opposite-sex couples in a civil partnership are currently unable to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in our [Marriages Quality and Methodology Information report](#).

6 . Strengths and limitations

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

Marriage statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes, most recently the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples.

Timeliness of marriages in England and Wales data

It is currently only possible to publish final annual marriage statistics around 26 months after the end of the reference year because of delays in the submission of religious marriage entries by the clergy and authorised persons. It is estimated that each year around 4% of religious marriage returns received at the Office for National Statistics remain outstanding one year after the reference period. Marriage statistics are published once we consider the annual dataset is acceptably complete. More information on this can be found in our [User guide to marriage statistics](#).

The introduction of the [Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registration etc.\) Act 2019](#) (which came into force on 4 May 2021) is expected to reduce the delay in submission of religious marriage entries and therefore improve the timeliness of future marriage statistics.

Comparability

Marriage statistics are comparable between countries within the UK. More information on comparability, including comparability with survey data sources, is contained in our [Marriages Quality and methodology information release](#).

7 . Related links

[Explorable datasets for marriages in England and Wales](#)

Publication | Released 26 May 2021

Datasets providing detailed marriage statistics by age group, marital status, type of marriage, type of ceremony and area of occurrence for 2001 to 2020.

[Marriage and civil partnership status, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 22 February 2023

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

[Marriage statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Webpage | Released 21 November 2022

Annual marriage statistics for Northern Ireland for 2021 and earlier years by age, marital status, type of marriage and local government district.

[Marriage statistics for Scotland](#)

Webpage | Released 28 June 2022

Annual marriage and civil partnership statistics for Scotland for 2021 and earlier years by council area and country of residence of parties.

[Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements](#)

Bulletin | Released 16 December 2021

Annual estimates of population by legal marital status and cohabitation status by age and sex for England and Wales.

[Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#)

Bulletin | Released 24 February 2023

Annual UK and constituent country figures for births, deaths, marriages, divorces, civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions for the latest years available.

[Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#)

Article | Released 18 July 2017

Changing relationships patterns at older ages in England and Wales and why older people are getting married and divorced in greater numbers.

[Civil partnerships in England and Wales: 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 9 December 2022

Annual statistics on formations and dissolutions of civil partnerships analysed by the couples' sex, age, previous marital status and the place of registration.

[Divorces in England and Wales: 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 2 November 2022

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

8 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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