

Statistical bulletin

Divorces in England and Wales: 2018

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



Contact:
Kanak Ghosh
vsob@ons.gov.uk
+44 (0)1329 444655

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1 . Main points

- There were 90,871 divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2018, a decrease of 10.6% compared with 2017 and the lowest number since 1971.
- Recent Ministry of Justice (MoJ) statistics highlight an administrative reason behind the scale of this decrease: divorce centres processed a backlog of work in 2018 resulting in 8% more divorce petitions; we expect this to translate into a higher number of completed divorces in 2019.
- The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples fell to 7.5 divorces per 1,000 married men and women from 8.4 in 2017, the lowest rate since 1971; this will also have been affected by the backlog of work in divorce centres in 2018.
- The average duration of marriage among opposite-sex couples who divorced in 2018 was 12.5 years.
- There were 428 divorces of same-sex couples in 2018, increasing from 338 in 2017; of these, three-quarters were among female couples.
- Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for opposite-sex couples divorcing in 2018, with 51.9% of wives and 36.8% of husbands petitioning on this ground; it was also the most common reason for same-sex couples divorcing.

2 . Things you need to know about this release

Important information for interpreting these divorce statistics:

- 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
- 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](#)

3 . The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples decreased to the lowest level since 1971

The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples in England and Wales in 2018 decreased by 10.6% to 90,871, compared with 101,669 in 2017. This decrease partly reflects the overall trend seen in recent years, but it can also be attributed to a particularly low number of [divorce petitions](#) processed in 2017, which then reached [decree absolute](#) in 2018.

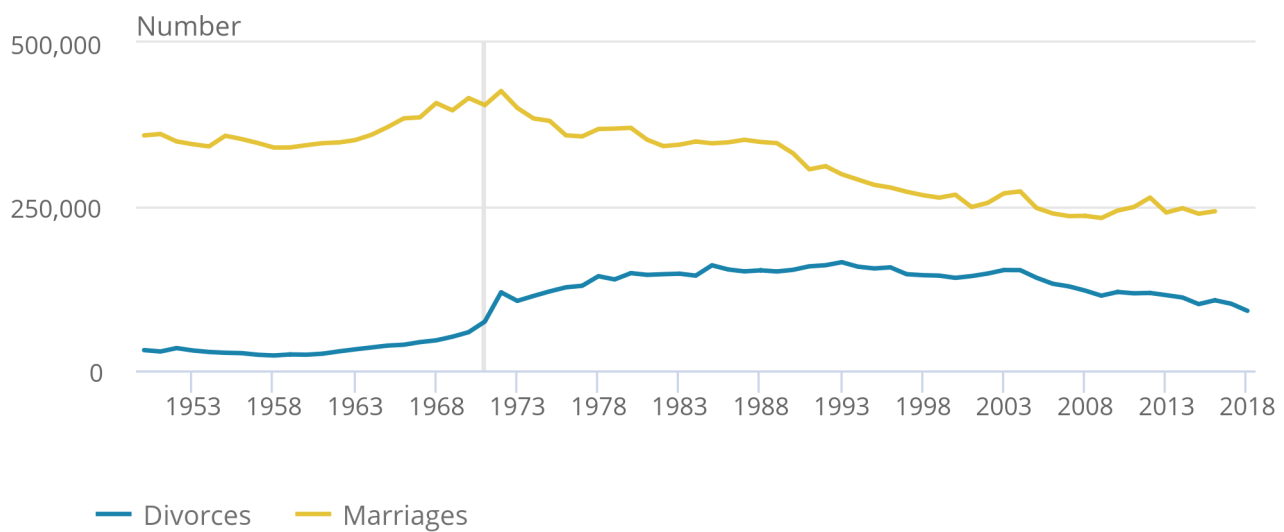
The Ministry of Justice's (MoJ's) [Family Court Statistics Quarterly 2018 report](#) indicates that as a result of divorce centres processing a backlog of work last year, divorce petitions increased by 8% in 2018. This is more in line with the number of petitions seen prior to the low number in 2017. The 2018 backlog of work also resulted in a five-week increase to the average time taken from date of petition to decree absolute in 2018 (to 54.3 weeks). As a result, the number of completed divorces is likely to increase in 2019 compared with 2018.

Figure 1: The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples has fallen to the lowest level since 1971

Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2018

Figure 1: The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples has fallen to the lowest level since 1971

Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages and Divorces in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Marriage statistics are only available up to the 2016 data year.
2. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation and is associated with the increase in the number of divorces during the 1970s.

We have seen an overall downward trend in divorce numbers since their most recent peak in 2003. The fall in the number of divorces since 2003 is broadly consistent with a decline in the number of marriages since 1989 (Figure 1).

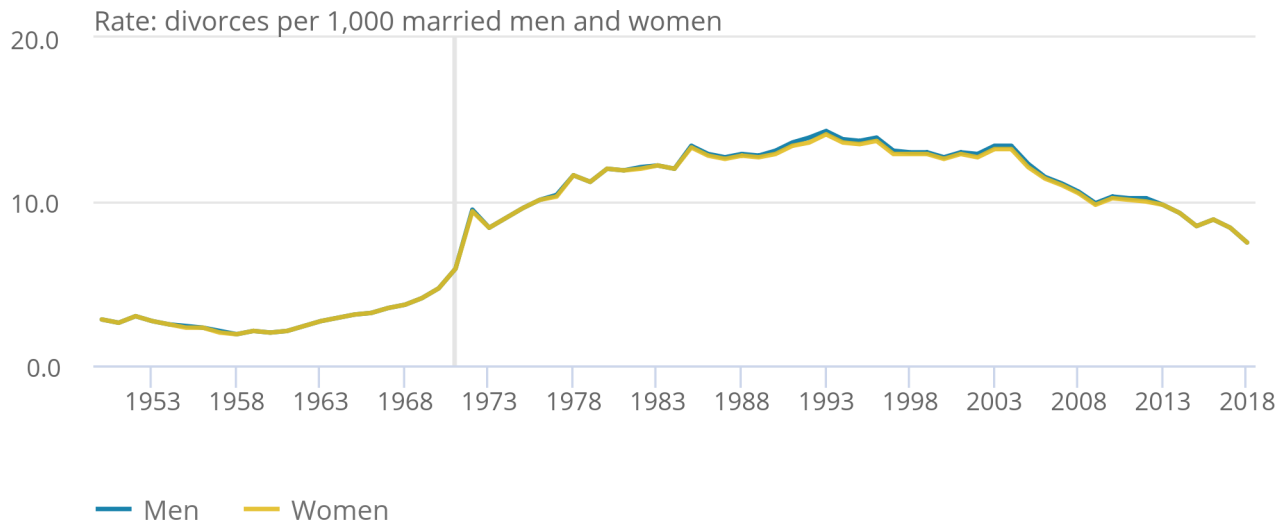
Divorce rates take account of the size of the married population, which affects the number of divorces. In 2018, the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women decreased to 7.5, compared with 8.4 in 2017 (Figure 2). Divorce rates are now at their lowest level since 1971 and well below the most recent peaks seen in 2003 and 2004 (13.4 men per 1,000 married men and 13.2 women per 1,000 married women). But the scale of decline in divorce rates in 2018 will also have been affected by the backlog of work in divorce centres in 2018.

Figure 2: The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples is at the lowest level since 1971

Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2018

Figure 2: The divorce rate among opposite-sex couples is at the lowest level since 1971

Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples by sex, England and Wales, 1950 to 2018



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

Notes:

1. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

Changes in behaviour and attitudes to divorce are considered to be an important factor behind the increase in divorce rates between the 1960s and the early 1990s. Also, the [Divorce Reform Act 1969](#) came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation – this caused a large increase in divorce rates in 1972.

Changes in attitudes to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or prior to marriage, particularly at younger ages, are likely to have been a factor affecting the general decrease in divorce rates over the last 25 years. Over this period, [levels of cohabitation increased](#) so that by 2016, [almost 9 in 10 couples \(88%\) were cohabiting before marriage](#). Marriage rates have more than halved since the 1960s and 1970s.

4 . What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

The percentage of marriages ending in divorce generally increased for those marrying between the 1960s and the mid 1990s (Figure 3). For example, 22% of marriages that took place in 1965 had ended by their 20th wedding anniversary. By 1995, this had increased to 38% of marriages ending in divorce after the same length of time.

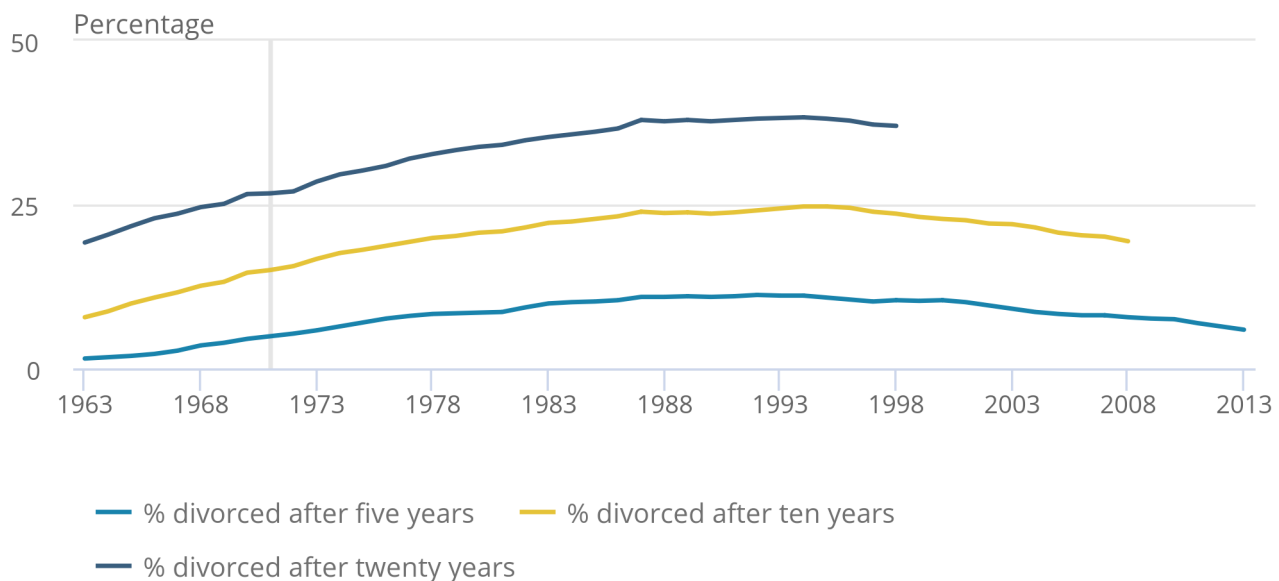
For those marrying since the mid 1990s, there is evidence of a decrease in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce (Figure 3). For example, 11% and 25% of marriages that took place in 1995 had ended by their 5th and 10th anniversaries respectively. Our latest data indicate that only 6% of marriages that took place in 2013 had ended by their 5th anniversary and 19% of marriages that took place in 2008 had ended by their 10th anniversary.

Figure 3: The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has been decreasing for those who have married since the mid-1990s

Percentage of marriages ending in divorce by anniversary and year of marriage, England and Wales, 1963 to 2013

Figure 3: The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has been decreasing for those who have married since the mid-1990s

Percentage of marriages ending in divorce by anniversary and year of marriage, England and Wales, 1963 to 2013



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

Notes:

1. When calculating these percentages, it has been assumed that the couples who married each year have not moved out of England and Wales, couples who divorced each year have not moved into England and Wales since getting married, and couples marry in the country where they usually live.
2. More information about the assumptions and how to interpret the statistics can be found in the Interpreting Table 6 worksheet of the published tables associated with this release.
3. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

The cumulative percentage of marriages that end in divorce increases more rapidly in the first 10 years of marriage. Once the 20th wedding anniversary is reached, the cumulative percentages increase less rapidly.

The number of marriages that took place each year and the percentage of these marriages that are estimated to have ended in divorce by 2018 can be explored further in Figure 4.

Figure 4: What percentage of marriages from your wedding year have ended in divorce?

Notes:

1. Cumulative percentages add a percentage from one period to the percentage of another period to show the total percentage over a given time period.
2. When calculating these percentages, it has been assumed that the couples who married each year have not moved out of England and Wales, couples who divorced each year have not moved into England and Wales since getting married, and couples marry in the country where they usually live.
3. More information about the assumptions and how to interpret the statistics can be found in the Interpreting Table 6 worksheet of the published tables associated with this release.
4. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

Download this chart

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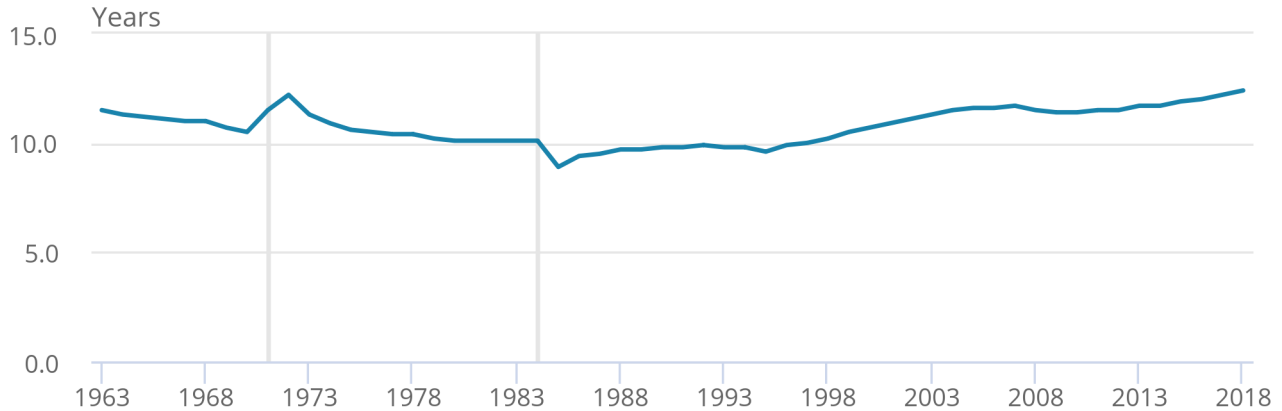
The average (median) duration of marriage of opposite-sex couples who divorced in 2018 was 12.5 years, increasing from 12.2 years in 2017. There has been a gradual increase in the median duration of marriages that end in divorce since 1995, when it was 9.6 years (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The average duration of marriage for opposite-sex couples who divorced has gradually increased since 2009

Median duration of marriage (years) that end in divorce for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1963 to 2018

Figure 5: The average duration of marriage for opposite-sex couples who divorced has gradually increased since 2009

Median duration of marriage (years) that end in divorce for opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1963 to 2018



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

Notes:

1. The Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect on 1 January 1971, made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.
2. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act replaced the minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce from three years to one year, resulting in a fall in the median duration of marriage in 1985.

The average (mean) age for divorce among opposite-sex couples in 2018 was 46.9 years for men and 44.5 years for women. This continues a year-on-year increase in average age for divorce since 1985, increasing by over nine years for both men and women. This reflects increases to both the average age at which couples marry and the average time they remain married before divorcing.

5 . The number of divorces of same-sex couples has increased each year since the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples

In 2018, there were 428 divorces among same-sex couples in England and Wales, increasing by more than one-quarter (26.6%) from 338 in the previous year. Of these, three-quarters (75%) were among female couples, a similar proportion to that seen in 2017.

This is the fourth year that divorces among same-sex couples have been recorded since the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples in March 2014. Divorces among same-sex couples were first recorded in 2015 and annual increases have been seen each year since then, reflecting growth in the size of the same-sex married population in England and Wales.

The median duration of marriage for same-sex couples who divorced in 2018 was 3.9 years for men and 3.5 years for women. Although marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014, it was legal for same-sex couples to marry in certain other countries prior to this date, for example, in [the Netherlands](#). Divorces relating to marriages that took place abroad are included in our figures, provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK, the divorce took place in England and Wales, and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and/or Wales.

Same-sex couples have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage since 10 December 2014. If a civil partnership was converted into a marriage but has subsequently ended in a divorce, the duration of marriage is based on the original date of the civil partnership formation. Consequently, the duration of marriage to divorce for same-sex couples can exceed the 29 March 2014 commencement date for marriages of same-sex couples.

The average (mean) age for divorce for same-sex couples who divorced in 2018 was higher for male couples (40.7 years) than female couples (38.3 years). This may reflect that male couples tend to be older when they marry compared with female couples. Our latest marriage statistics for 2016 show that the average ages for marriage for male and female same-sex couples were 40.8 and 37.4 years respectively.

6 . Unreasonable behaviour was the most commonly used ground for divorce by both opposite-sex and same-sex couples

Unreasonable behaviour was the most common ground for divorces granted in England and Wales in 2018. Of all decree absolutes granted to one partner (rather than jointly or both), this ground accounted for nearly half (46.3%) of all divorces granted; 46.1% opposite-sex couples and 76.2% of same-sex couples divorced for this reason. Unreasonable behaviour for same-sex couples who divorce can include having a sexual relationship with someone else of the same sex.

Two years separation with consent was the second most common ground for divorces granted in 2018 and accounted for more than one-quarter of divorces (26.8%), while five years' separation without consent accounted for 16.1% of divorces. Most of the remaining divorces were granted on grounds of adultery (10.1%) and 0.8% were for desertion and a combination of two or more grounds. [Adultery](#) can only legally be committed between two persons of the opposite sex.

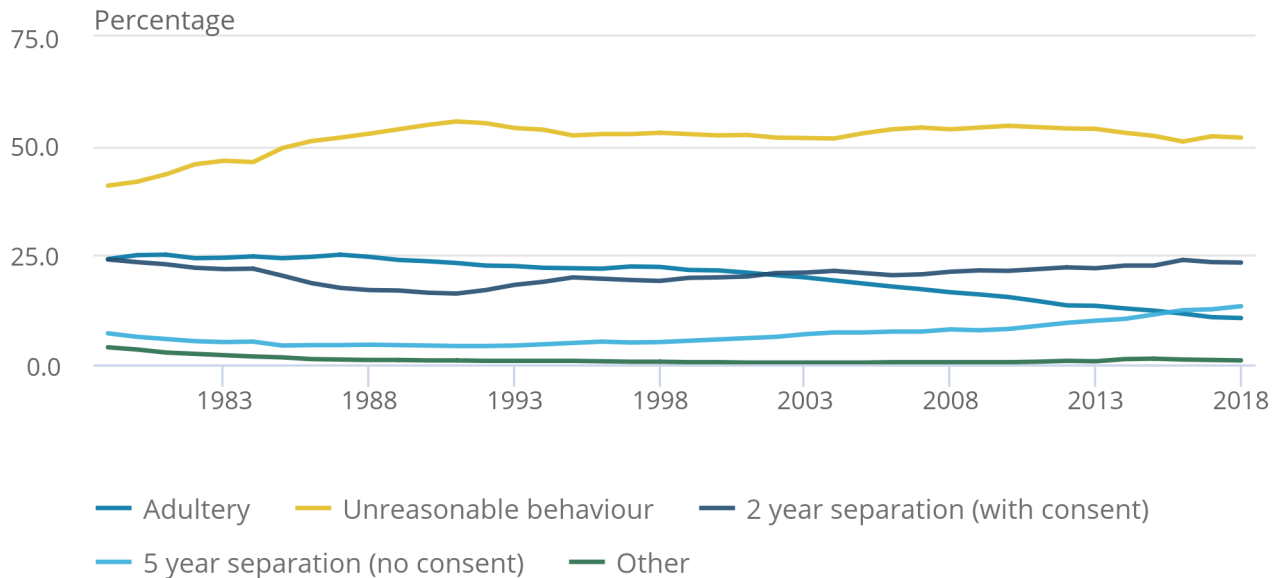
Unreasonable behaviour has consistently been the most common reason for wives petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s (Figure 6a). For husbands, however, unreasonable behaviour has only been the most common ground for petitioning a divorce since 2006. In the 1980s and 1990s, adultery was generally the most common ground for husbands, while between 1999 and 2005, it was two years' separation with consent grounds (Figure 6b). There are likely to be a range of behavioural, cultural and financial reasons for these trends.

Figure 6a: Unreasonable behaviour has been the most common reason for wives of opposite-sex couples petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s

Percentage of opposite-sex divorces petitioned by the wife by grounds for divorce, England and Wales, 1979 to 2018

Figure 6a: Unreasonable behaviour has been the most common reason for wives of opposite-sex couples petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s

Percentage of opposite-sex divorces petitioned by the wife by grounds for divorce, England and Wales, 1979 to 2018



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

Notes:

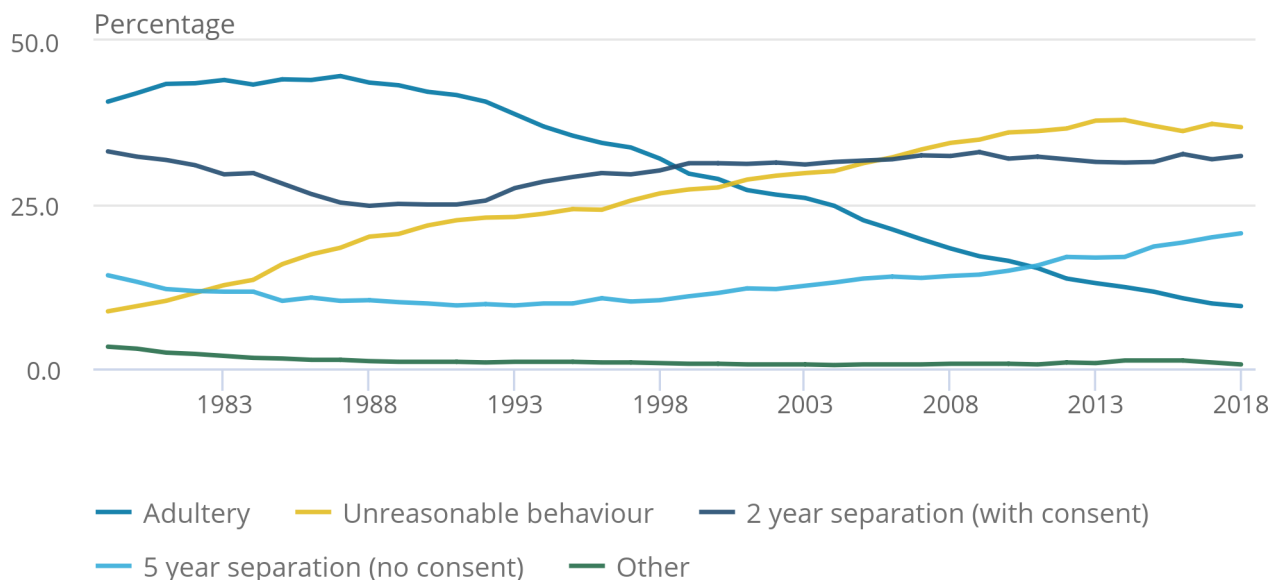
1. "Other" includes divorces on grounds of "desertion" and "combination of adultery and unreasonable behaviour".
2. Excludes divorces, which were granted to both parties jointly and annulments.

Figure 6b: Adultery ceased to be the most common reason for husbands of opposite-sex couples petitioning for divorce after the 1990s

Percentage of opposite-sex divorces petitioned by the husband by grounds for divorce, England and Wales, 1979 to 2018

Figure 6b: Adultery ceased to be the most common reason for husbands of opposite-sex couples petitioning for divorce after the 1990s

Percentage of opposite-sex divorces petitioned by the husband by grounds for divorce, England and Wales, 1979 to 2018



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

Notes:

1. "Other" includes divorces on grounds of "desertion" and "combination of adultery and unreasonable behaviour".
2. Excludes divorces, which were granted to both parties jointly and annulments.

The majority of divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2018 were petitioned by the wife (62%), the same proportion as the previous year. Wives have consistently petitioned the majority of opposite-sex divorces in England and Wales since 1949, but the proportion has fallen by 10 percentage points, from 72% in 1992.

7 . Links to related statistics

Our divorce [datasets](#) provide the main divorce statistics over time, with some figures available back to 1858. Our [explorable dataset](#), provides more detailed divorce statistics for 2009 to 2018.

The number of divorces and the divorce rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#) publication.

Further statistics on [marriages](#), [civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available. We also have [explorable datasets](#) for marriages and a visual story about [marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 years and over](#).

The report [What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) shows that the estimated percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage.

Special extracts and tabulations of divorces data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and the [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) charging policy](#), where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to Vital Statistics Outputs Branch by email to vsob@ons.gov.uk or telephone: +44 (0)1329 444110. [User-requested data](#) will be published.

8 . Quality and methodology

This is the first time that divorce statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2018; the release provides final annual data.

We previously aimed to publish annual divorce statistics around 12 to 13 months after the end of the reference period. From the 2015 data year, we moved to a monthly receipt of electronic divorce data for quality assurance. These data were received three months after the month end, enabling more timely publications than previously possible. From the 2018 data year, data are now received 15 days after the end of the month. A series of checks are performed on the data received and any queries are addressed.

Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes.

Our [Divorces in England and Wales Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) report](#) contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data and how it compares with related data
- the uses and users
- how the output was created

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

Divorce statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in our [Divorces in England and Wales QMI report](#).

The [Revisions policy for population statistics \(including divorce statistics\)](#) is available.

The average (mean) age at divorce is calculated as the sum of all age values divided by the total number of values. The average age is based on the age last birthday and adjusted to estimate for exact age. This calculation assumes that the ages are evenly spread between successive single years of age. The average ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing structure of the male and female population by age and marital status.

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

[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.

We have seen an increasing proportion of records in recent years where the age of one or both members of a divorcing couple is not available; these are presented in data tables as "not stated". Consequently, any calculations based on age exclude these records. We are working with the HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) to understand the reasons for this and improve the completeness of this variable.