

Statistical bulletin

Civil partnerships in England and Wales: 2021

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



Contact:
Amanda Sharfman and Pamela
Cobb
pop.info@ons.gov.uk
+44 1329 444661

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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Civil partnership formations](#)
3. [Civil partnership dissolutions](#)
4. [Civil partnerships in England and Wales data](#)
5. [Glossary](#)
6. [Measuring the data](#)
7. [Strengths and limitations](#)
8. [Related links](#)
9. [Cite this statistical bulletin](#)

1 . Main points

- In 2021, there were 6,731 civil partnerships formed in England and Wales, a decrease of 19.4% from 8,351 in 2020.
- The number and timing of civil partnership formations and dissolutions granted during 2020 and 2021 may have been affected by restrictions around ceremonies and receptions, and disruption to registration services and family court activities in England and Wales during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- The majority (5,692) of civil partnership formations in 2021 were between opposite-sex couples; this is a decrease of a quarter (24.8%) from 7,566 in 2020, the first full year that opposite-sex civil partnerships had been possible in England and Wales.
- There were 1,039 same-sex civil partnerships formed in England and Wales in 2021, an increase of 32.4% from 785 in 2020; of these, the majority of formations were among male couples (56.9%).
- Around one in three males and females entering an opposite-sex civil partnership in 2021 had previously been married or in a civil partnership; less than one in five women, and one in six men, forming same-sex civil partnerships had previously been in a legally registered partnership.
- The age distribution of people forming opposite-sex civil partnerships is older than those forming same-sex civil partnerships; more than half (58.1%) of all people forming opposite-sex civil partnerships in 2021 were aged 50 years and over, whereas this age group accounts for 44.9% of same-sex civil partners.

Statistician's comment

"In 2021, the majority of civil partnerships continued to be between opposite-sex couples, following their introduction in late 2019. Current data show the age distribution of people forming opposite-sex civil partnerships is older than those forming same-sex civil partnerships. Our data shows those forming opposite-sex civil partnerships are more likely to have been previously married or civil partnered than those forming same-sex civil partnerships. These differences might partly reflect opposite-sex couples potentially in long standing relationships taking the new opportunity to legally register their union as an alternative to marriage."

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

2 . Civil partnership formations

Number of civil partnerships

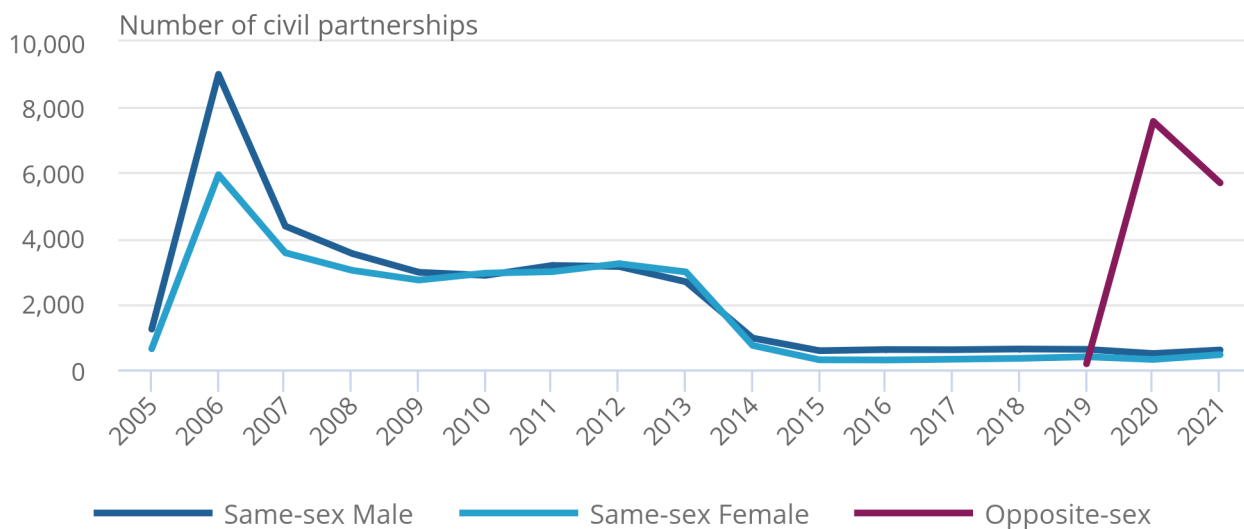
There were 6,731 civil partnerships formed in England and Wales in 2021, with 84.6% of those between opposite-sex couples (5,692). The number of civil partnerships declined by 19.4% compared with 2020 (8,351 formations), driven by the decline in opposite-sex civil partnerships. Same-sex civil partnership formations were also at their highest levels when first introduced in 2005 (see Figure 1). Same-sex formations increased by 32.4% compared with 2020 (785) but remained consistent with previous years before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, rising by 4.5% from 994 in 2019 to 1,039 in 2021.

Figure 1: Opposite-sex civil partnerships decreased in the second full year since their initial introduction

Number of civil partnership formations by sex and partnership type, England and Wales, 2005 to 2021

Figure 1: Opposite-sex civil partnerships decreased in the second full year since their initial introduction

Number of civil partnership formations by sex and partnership type, England and Wales, 2005 to 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Civil partnerships in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The first day that couples could form a same-sex partnership was 21 December 2005 and 31 December 2019 for opposite-sex couples in England and Wales.
2. Marriages of same-sex couples could take place in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

The majority (56.9%) of same-sex civil partnerships formed in England and Wales continue to be between male couples. However, the increase in same-sex civil partnership formations in 2021 has been driven by female couples, with an increase of 48.3% compared with 2020, while male couples have increased by 22.4%. This increase is also seen when comparing 2021 same-sex formations with 2019 (before the coronavirus pandemic), with the number of female couples increasing by 16.7%.

Civil partnership formations during 2020 and 2021 may have been affected by disruption to registration services in England and Wales because of the coronavirus pandemic. It is possible that delays in registration, because of restrictions in 2020, may have led to more formations in 2021 than there would have been otherwise.

Since the introduction of same-sex marriages in 2014, fewer women have formed civil partnerships each year than men, this is likely a result of more female couples choosing to marry than male couples. This is supported by our marriage statistics, which show that there have consistently been more same-sex marriages between female couples than between male couples each year.

Age of civil partners

The age distribution of those entering opposite-sex civil partnerships in 2021 is generally older than those entering same-sex partnerships. Over half (58.1%) of those entering opposite-sex civil partnerships were aged 50 years and over, whereas for same-sex civil partnerships this figure is less at 44.9%. This is reflected in the median ages, which are 55.2 and 52.8 years for males and females entering opposite-sex civil partnerships and 49.1 and 42.7 years for males and females entering same-sex civil partnerships.

In 2021, around one in six (16.6%) of those entering a same-sex civil partnership in England and Wales were aged 65 years and over. In contrast, less than one in four (22.3%) of those entering an opposite-sex civil partnership were aged 65 years and over (Figure 2).

The age distribution of people entering opposite-sex civil partnerships has changed between 2020 and 2021. During this period, the percentage of civil partnerships formed among those aged 44 years and under has increased by 11.9%, whereas it has decreased for those aged 45 years and over. Formations among those aged 45 to 64 years and those aged 65 years and over have decreased by 5.4% and by 6.4% respectively.

The average age at formation for same-sex couples decreased year on year (until the introduction of same-sex marriage), as older couples who had waited for the introduction of the legislation took the opportunity to form a civil partnership early on. The differences between the age distributions of those forming opposite-sex and same-sex partnerships may partly reflect a similar situation. Opposite-sex couples potentially in long standing relationships could have taken the new opportunity to legally register their union as an alternative to marriage.

Figure 2. The age distribution of people forming opposite-sex partnerships is generally older than those forming same-sex civil partnerships

Percentage of civil partnership formations by age, sex and partnership type, England and Wales, 2021

Notes:

1. Totals may not sum because of rounding.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

The age at which people form same-sex and opposite-sex civil partnerships also varies by sex. For example, 25.9% of males forming opposite-sex civil partnerships are aged 65 years and over, whereas just 15.9% of males forming same-sex partnerships are aged 65 years and over. For females forming civil partnerships, the largest difference is for those aged 55 to 64 years; 15.5% of females forming same-sex partnerships are aged 55 to 64 years, compared with 26.5% of females who formed opposite-sex civil partnerships.

Previous partner status

In 2021, around 1 in 10 males (10.3%) forming same-sex partnerships in England and Wales had been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved. In contrast, there were nearly three times as many (29.8%) males forming opposite-sex partnerships who had previously been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved. This is similar for females, where 17.3% of women forming same-sex partnerships had been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved, but for women forming opposite-sex partnerships this percentage was much higher (30.4%). This may reflect the older age structure of those forming opposite-sex civil partnerships compared with those forming same-sex civil partnerships.

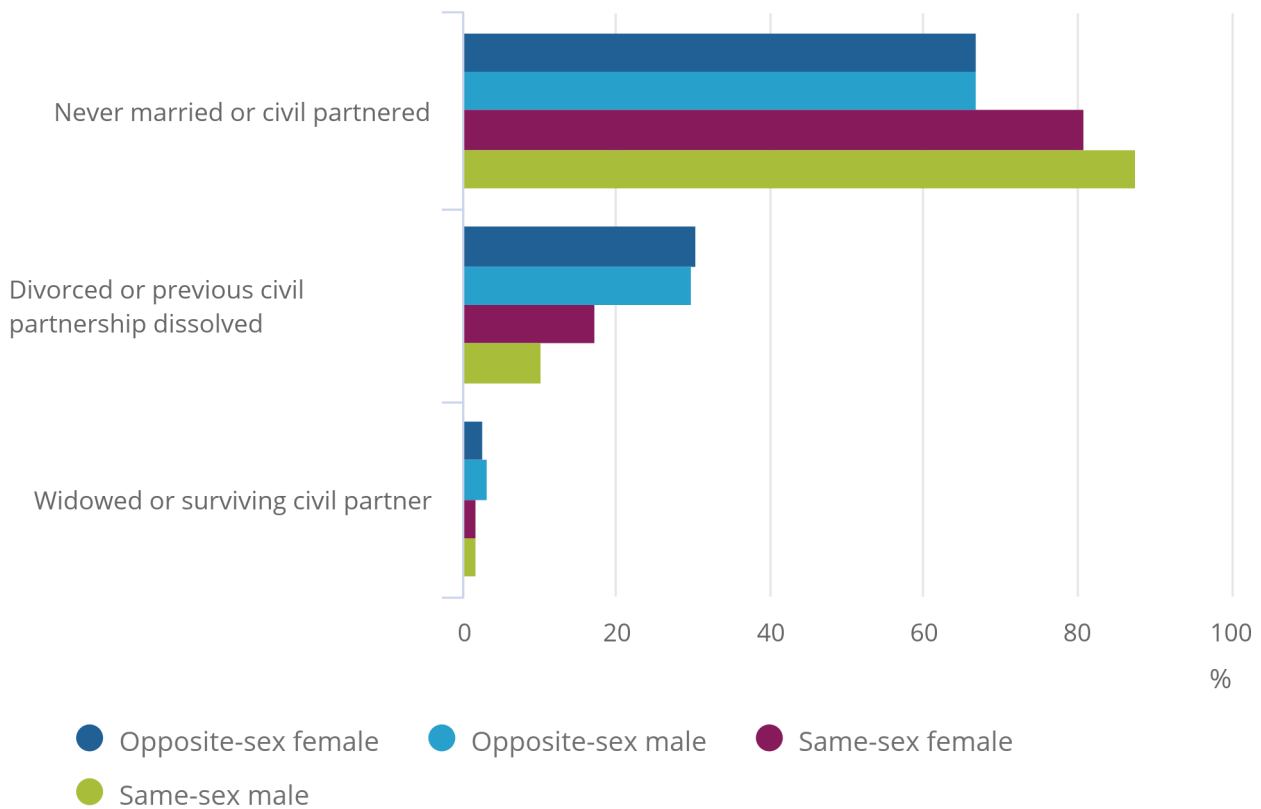
The most common previous legal partnership status was "never married or civil partnered", this has been the case since same-sex civil partnerships were first introduced in 2005. Males and females forming opposite-sex partnerships in 2021 show little difference in their previous partner status (Figure 3). However, for same-sex formations there is some variation. There is a higher percentage of males forming same-sex civil partnerships who have never been in a legally registered partnership (87.7%), compared with 80.9% of females.

Figure 3: Over a quarter of people forming opposite-sex partnerships had been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved

Percentages of males and females forming a civil partnership by partnership type and previous partnership status, England and Wales, 2021

Figure 3: Over a quarter of people forming opposite-sex partnerships had been divorced or had a previous civil partnership dissolved

Percentages of males and females forming a civil partnership by partnership type and previous partnership status, England and Wales, 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Civil partnerships in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Totals may not sum because of rounding.

3 . Civil partnership dissolutions

To obtain a civil partnership dissolution in England and Wales, a couple must have been in a registered civil partnership for at least 12 months.

There were 680 same-sex civil partnership dissolutions granted in England and Wales in 2021, an increase of 1.3% compared with 2020, when 671 dissolutions were granted. Dissolution rates almost halved between 2019 and 2020, from 20.6 per 1,000 of the civil partnered population in 2019 decreasing to 10.4 in 2020. The dissolution rate has remained at this lower level, 10.5 per 1,000 of the civil partnered population, in 2021.

Rates of female couples dissolving a civil partnership have been consistently higher than male couples since dissolutions were first recorded in 2007. However, the difference between males and females is smaller in 2021 than in all previous years except 2007.

4 . Civil partnerships in England and Wales data

[Civil partnership formations](#)

Dataset | Released 9 December 2022

Annual statistics on the number of civil partnership formations that took place in England and Wales analysed by sex, age, partnership type, previous legal partnership status and area of occurrence.

[Civil partnership dissolutions](#)

Dataset | Released 9 December 2022

Annual statistics on the number of civil partnership dissolutions that took place in England and Wales analysed by sex and quarter of occurrence.

5 . Glossary

Civil partnership

A civil partnership is a legally registered relationship between two people of the same or opposite sex.

Civil partnership formation

A civil partnership is formed when the parties involved register as civil partners in the presence of a registration officer and two witnesses.

Civil partnership dissolution

A civil partnership dissolution is the termination of a civil partnership and is a procedure similar to divorce.

General Register Office

The [General Register Office \(GRO\)](#) is responsible for ensuring the registration of all births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships that have occurred in England and Wales and for maintaining a central archive. The GRO has been part of the Identity and Passport Service since 1 April 2008. The Identity and Passport Service was renamed HM Passport Office on 13 May 2013.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service

[HM Courts and Tribunals Service \(HMCTS\)](#) is an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice and is responsible for the administration of criminal, civil and family courts and tribunals in England and Wales. This includes the administration of the divorce and civil partnership dissolution processes.

Civil Partnership Act 2004

The [Civil Partnership Act 2004](#) was introduced for the whole of the UK, making same-sex civil partnership statistics across the UK countries comparable. Recent changes in legislation have also enabled opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships across all countries of the UK. More information on comparability across the UK and the different legislative changes can be found in the [Civil partnerships in England and Wales QMI](#).

Government Equalities Office

The [Government Equalities Office \(GEO\)](#) is the government department responsible for a range of equalities policy and legislation. The GEO is also the lead department on gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in government. This includes the [Civil Partnership Act 2004](#), [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#) and [Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registration etc\) Act 2019](#).

6 . Measuring the data

Civil partnership formation statistics are derived from information recorded when civil partnerships are legally registered as part of civil registration. Figures represent civil partnerships that are formed in England and Wales only; civil partnership formations to residents of England and Wales that take place abroad are not included.

Civil partnership dissolution statistics are derived from information recorded by HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) during the dissolution process; figures include annulments. Dissolution statistics do not include couples who separate but do not dissolve their civil partnership. Dissolutions where the civil partnership formation took place abroad are included, provided the civil partnership was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties has a permanent home in England or Wales. Opposite-sex civil partnership dissolutions are not available in this release as there are currently too few cases to report: they will be included in future releases of this publication once sufficient numbers are taking place.

Quality and methodology

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

Accuracy

From the 2020 data year onwards, information about the age and previous legal partnership status of people dissolving civil partnerships is not available. This is because it is no longer collected during the divorce and civil partnership dissolution process by HMCTS.

7 . Strengths and limitations

National Statistics status for Civil partnerships in England and Wales

National Statistics status means that our statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

See our most recent full assessment from December 2011 which confirms National Statistics status in [Statistics on Civil Partnerships: Letter of Confirmation as National Statistics](#).

Improvements since last review

Coverage of annual civil partnership statistics was altered from UK to England and Wales only from the 2014 data year onwards following a consultation exercise in February 2015. This has led to more timely final statistics for England and Wales. Summary figures for the UK continue to be published in our [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages dataset](#).

We also undertook a user consultation exercise in February 2015 to understand the (then current) user requirement for specific civil partnership formation and dissolution tables and the potential demand for new anonymised datasets.

In October 2013, we undertook a user consultation exercise to understand [User requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same sex couples](#). In April 2014, we published the [response to the user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics given the introduction of marriage of same sex couples consultation \(PDF, 102KB\)](#).

Summary tables have been extended to provide statistics on civil partnership formations of opposite-sex couples from the 2019 data year, following the introduction of civil partnerships of opposite-sex couples on 31 December 2019.

8 . Related links

[Civil partnership formation statistics for Scotland](#)

Web page | Released 28 June 2022

Marriage and civil partnership formation statistics for Scotland for 2021 and earlier years.

[Civil partnership dissolution statistics for Scotland](#)

Publication | Released 28 April 2022

Civil justice statistics in Scotland, including main statistics tables, figures and supplementary data tables including civil partnership dissolution statistics.

[Civil partnership statistics for Northern Ireland](#)

Web page | Released 21 September 2022

Civil partnership formation and dissolution statistics for Northern Ireland.

[Demography and migration topic summary](#)

Publication | Released 2 November 2022

Published data about demography and migration in England and Wales, as part of the topic summaries released for Census 2021, including some information on civil partnerships.

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

Publication | Released 3 December 2021

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

[Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 16 December 2021

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

9 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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