

Statistical bulletin

# Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales: 2019

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



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Release date:  
17 July 2020

Next release:  
To be announced

## Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Marital status in England and Wales](#)
3. [Living in a couple in England and Wales](#)
4. [Marital status and living arrangements data](#)
5. [Glossary](#)
6. [Measuring the data](#)
7. [Strengths and limitations](#)
8. [Related links](#)

# 1 . Main points

- Married or civil partnered remained the most common marital status in 2019, accounting for just over half (50.4%) of the population aged 16 years and over in England and Wales; the proportion is slowly declining over time for all ages except those aged 70 years and over.
- Females aged 70 years and over in particular were more likely to be married or divorced in 2019 than 10 years ago, and less likely to be widowed.
- Around 60% of the population were living in a couple in 2019, the majority of these were married.
- Cohabiting is more common among younger age groups; 69.2% of those aged 16 to 29 years who were living in a couple were cohabiting, while only 4.5% of those aged 70 years and over living in a couple were cohabiting.

## Statistician's comment

“We see slow changes in the composition of the population aged 16 years and over by marital status over time. Married remained the most common marital status, accounting for just over half of the population in 2019, but this proportion is steadily declining except among those aged 70 years and over.

“In particular, females in their 70s were more likely to be married than a decade earlier. They were also more likely to be divorced, and less likely to be widowed. This reflects improvements in life expectancy over time, as well as an increase in marriages and divorces in later life.

“Approximately 60% of the population lived in a couple, the majority were married but around one in five were cohabiting. This is more common at younger ages; over two-thirds of people aged 16 to 29 years who were living in a couple were cohabiting.”

Amanda Sharfman, Centre for Ageing and Demography, Office for National Statistics

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# 2 . Marital status in England and Wales

We see steady changes over time in the marital status of the population of England and Wales aged 16 years and over. While there has been a gradual decline in the proportion of the population who are married, the proportion who are single (never married or in a civil partnership) has shown a steady increase.

In 2019, just over half of the population (50.4%) were in a legally recognised partnership (50.2% were married with a further 0.2% in a civil partnership). An estimated 35.0% of the population were single (never married or in a civil partnership), with divorced/dissolved civil partnership and widowed/surviving civil partner accounting for 8.2% and 6.5% of the population respectively.

There are differences in the marital status distribution between men and women, notably a higher proportion of men were single (38.3%) compared with women (31.8%).

## How do changes in marital status vary by age and sex?

There are differences in the change over time in marital status between men and women and between different age groups.

Overall, the proportion of men who are married has fallen by 1.9 percentage points compared with a decade earlier, while for women a fall of 1.4 percentage points has been seen. Conversely the proportion of men who are single has increased by 1.9 percentage points, while for women this has increased by 2.5 percentage points. Notably for women, the proportion of the population who are divorced has increased by 0.5 percentage points and the proportion widowed has decreased by 1.5 percentage points.

### Figure 1: The proportion of the population who are married has declined in the last decade

Percentage point change in marital status of people aged 16 years and over, by sex, 2009 to 2019, England and Wales

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Source: Mid-year population estimates, Labour Force Survey - Office for National Statistics

These overall changes mask clear differences in the changes in marital status for different age groups. Overall the proportion of the population who are married or in a civil partnership has been declining. This decline is particularly marked in the 50 to 69 years age group where there has been a decrease of 5.5 percentage points (to 67.0%) compared with a decade earlier. In contrast, the proportion of the population who are married or in a civil partnership has increased for those aged 70 years and over (54.8%, 3.8 percentage points higher than a decade earlier).

Females aged 70 years and over in particular were more likely to be married or divorced in 2019 than in 2009, and less likely to be widowed. The proportion of females aged 70 years and over who are married has increased from 37.9% to 43.8% over the last decade, while the proportion of males has remained similar (69% in 2009 compared with 68.3% in 2019). These changes reflect that life expectancy has generally been improving at a greater rate for men than for women ([National Life tables, UK: 2016 to 2018](#)) and that both marriage and divorce are on the rise at older ages.

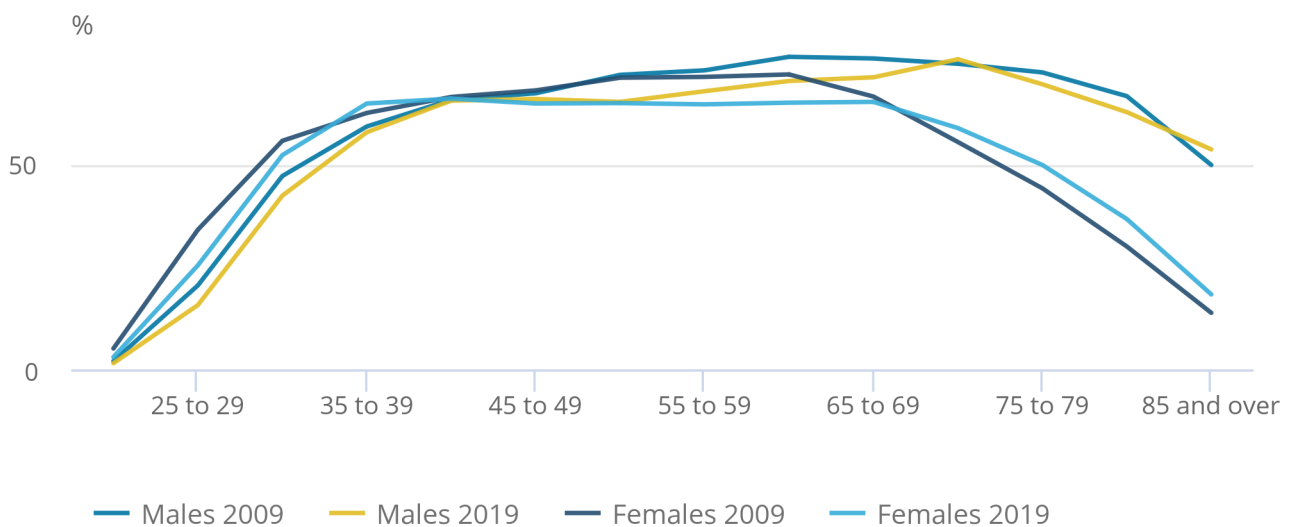
Marriage rates for those aged 65 years and over have increased the most between 2007 and 2017; for men it increased by 31% while for women it has more than doubled (89%) ([Marriages in England and Wales: 2017](#)).

**Figure 2: Proportion of the population who are married is decreasing in younger age groups but increasing for older women**

Percentages of people aged 16 years and over who were married in 2009 and 2019, by sex, England and Wales

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Percentages of people aged 16 years and over who were married in 2009 and 2019, by sex, England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics - Mid-year population estimates, Labour Force Survey

The majority (90.5%) of those aged 16 to 29 years were single (never married or in a civil partnership) in 2019. This proportion has been increasing over time as people choose to postpone entering a legal partnership. [Marriages in England and Wales: 2017](#) highlights a steady increase in the average age at marriage for opposite-sex couples since the 1970s.

A greater proportion of males in the 16 to 29 years age group remain single (never married or in a civil partnership) (92.9%) than females (88.0%), reflecting the younger age at which women tend to marry. However, this difference has reduced over time suggesting a levelling up of the age at which men and women choose to marry or enter a civil partnership for the first time.

## How has the population in same-sex civil partnership and marriage changed?

Just over 100,000 people (63,000 males and 41,000 females) were estimated to be married to someone of the same sex in 2019. The number of people in same-sex marriages increased initially following their introduction in 2014 but the proportion has remained relatively consistent over the previous year with people in same-sex marriages accounting for 0.4% of the married population.

The latest data show the number of [marriages](#) between same-sex couples in 2017 was similar to 2016, while there was an increase in the number of [divorces](#) over the same period.

In 2019, just over half (54.0%) of the 193,000 people estimated to be in a legally recognised partnership with someone of the same sex were married. This proportion has increased from 21.3% in 2015.

Latest data for 2018 show that [civil partnership formation](#) has increased following a large decrease between 2013 and 2015 after the introduction of marriage for same-sex couples in 2014.

## 3 . Living in a couple in England and Wales

The proportion of the population living as part of a couple has changed little between 2009 and 2019. In 2019, the majority (61.3%) of the population aged 16 years and over were living in a couple. Around one in four people were not living in a couple and had never been married or in a civil partnership.

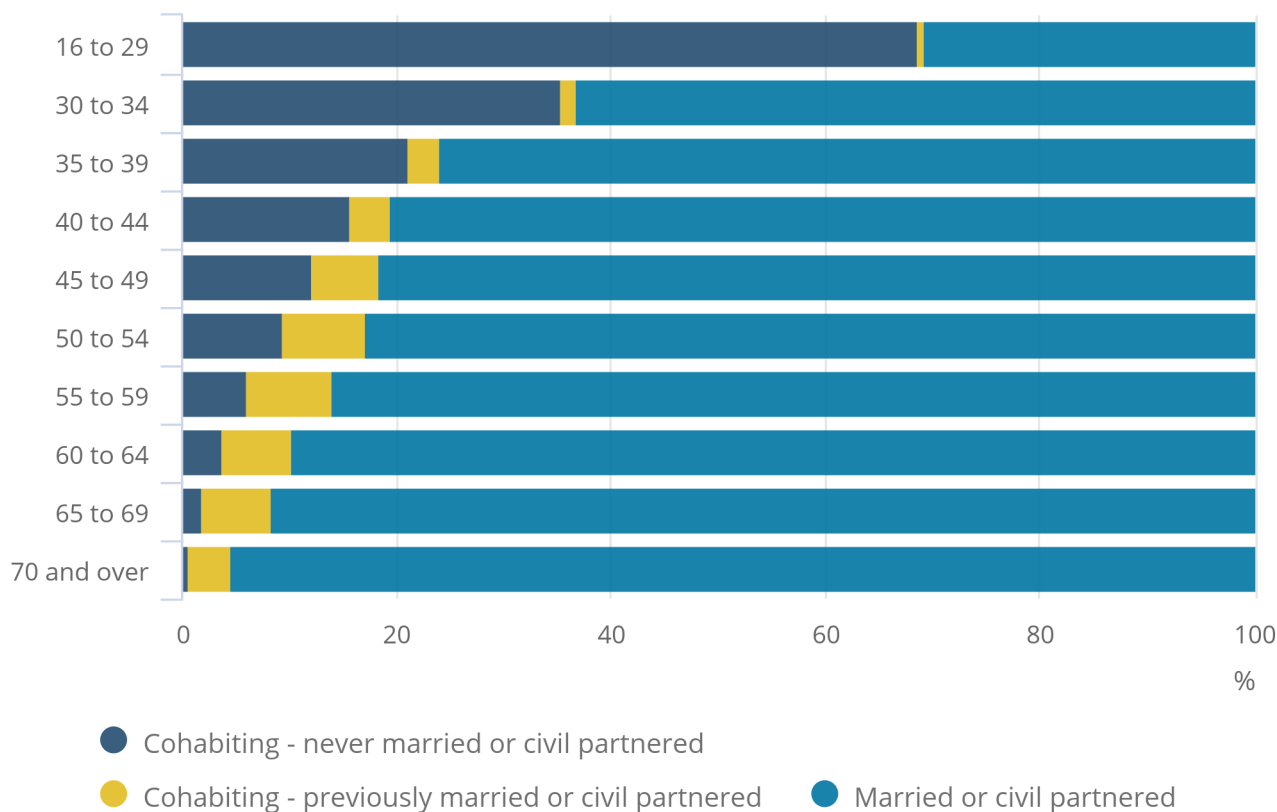
Living arrangements vary by age group. The majority (71.6%) of those aged 16 to 29 years were not living in a couple, while the majority of those aged 70 years and over (56.3%) were living in a couple.

**Figure 3: The proportion of those living in a couple who are cohabiting decreases with age**

Proportion of people aged 16 years and over living in a couple by marital status and age, England and Wales, 2019

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Proportion of people aged 16 years and over living in a couple by marital status and age, England and Wales, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - Mid-year population estimates, Labour Force Survey

Notes:

1. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

The marital status characteristics of the cohabiting population also varies by age group. Overall, just over one in five (21.9%) of those living in a couple were cohabiting. Among those aged 16 to 29 years this was 69.2%, while among those aged 70 years and over this was only 4.5%.

Of those who were cohabiting aged 16 to 29 years, less than 1% were previously married or in a civil partnership, while the majority (85.2%) of those aged 70 years and over who were cohabiting had been previously married or in a civil partnership.

## 4 . Marital status and living arrangements data

[Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales: 2019](#)

Dataset | Released 17 July 2020

Annual estimates of population by marital status and living arrangements by age group and sex.

## 5 . Glossary

### Marital status

Marital status indicates whether a person is legally married or not. This publication uses five categories of legal marital status:

- single, never married or never had a civil partnership
- married, including separated (this category includes those in both opposite- and same-sex marriages)
- civil partnered, including separated
- divorced, including those who have legally dissolved their civil partnership
- widowed, including surviving civil partners

### Civil partnership

Civil partnerships are a form of civil union granted to same-sex couples under the Civil Partnership Act 2004, and subsequently opposite-sex couples under the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registrations etc.) Act 2019. This allows couples to obtain the same rights and responsibilities as civil marriage. The Civil Partnership Act came into force on 5 December 2005, while the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registrations etc.) Act 2019 has made provision for opposite-sex couples to enter into civil partnerships from 31 December 2019.

## 6 . Measuring the data

The [Marriages \(Same-Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#) made provision for the marriage of same-sex couples in England and Wales from 29 March 2014 onwards. This publication provides an estimate of the number of people in a same-sex marriage by sex. Until sample sizes become large enough to produce robust estimates, data are unlikely to be available by age group. This will be reviewed annually.

[The Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registrations etc.\) Act 2019](#) received Royal Assent on 29 March 2019 and made provision for opposite-sex civil partnerships to be formed in England and Wales from 31 December 2019. This publication, therefore, does not include opposite-sex civil partnerships.

This bulletin focuses on the population aged 16 years and over. All analyses and percentages presented exclude those aged under 16 years. Marital status estimates for those aged 0 to 15 years are included within the datasets accompanying this release. All those aged under 16 years are considered to be single in line with the legal age of marriage or civil partnership in England and Wales.

Since these data are based on 2019, the impact of postponed weddings and civil partnerships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic will not be seen. Our [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) roundup](#) highlighted an estimated 73,600 weddings and same-sex civil partnership ceremonies may have been postponed in England during the three-month period of lockdown restrictions between 23 March and 3 July 2020. Any change in the proportions of the population by marital status during 2020 as a result will be identified in future publications.

## Quality

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements QMI](#).

## 7 . Strengths and limitations

Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements refer to the mid-year (30 June). The estimates are calculated by applying legal marital status and living arrangement distributions from Quarter 2 (Apr to June) of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to the mid-year population estimates for England and Wales. The LFS does not cover the 2% of the population who live in communal establishments, such as prisons and care homes.

The estimates presented within the datasets are provided with [confidence intervals](#) (around the survey component of the estimate) and also an indication of the size of the [coefficient of variation](#) (for the survey component of the estimate). These quality measures summarise the levels of uncertainty associated with survey estimates. You are advised to consult the quality measures when interpreting the estimates.

This bulletin does not include estimates of couples who are living apart together (LAT). The [Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements QMI](#) provides further detail.

## National Statistics status for Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements

[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.

Date of most recent full assessment: [July 2015](#)

Most recent compliance check which confirms National Statistics status: N/A

Improvements since last review:

- routinely publish marital status and living arrangements estimates for England and Wales separately, as well as for England and Wales combined
- routinely publish confidence intervals around our marital status and living arrangements estimates
- disaggregate estimates for the married population into those in opposite-sex and same-sex marriages
- publish a [summary document](#) detailing the review into marital status and living arrangements methodology



## 8 . Related links

### [Marriages in England and Wales: 2017](#)

Bulletin | Released 14 April 2020

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

### [Divorces in England and Wales: 2018](#)

Bulletin | Released 29 November 2019

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

### [Civil partnerships in England and Wales: 2018](#)

Bulletin | Released 11 October 2019

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

### [Labour Force Survey - user guidance](#)

User guide | Updated 19 June 2020

Guidance about the background and methodology of the Labour Force Survey (LFS).