

Population Estimates by Marital Status, Mid-2010



Coverage: **England and Wales**

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Geographical Area: **Other**

Theme: **Population**

Key points

- Of the 44.9 million adults usually resident in England & Wales in mid-2010, 48.2 per cent were married, 35.6 per cent were single, 9.3 per cent were divorced and 7.0 per cent were widowed.
- Changes in the population by marital status in the year to mid-2010 continue the long term trends seen since mid-1971; the proportions of the adult population who are married and widowed continue to decline and the proportions who are single and divorced continue to rise.
- The proportion of adult females who are widowed has decreased around twice as much as the proportion of adult males who are widowed between mid-1971 and mid-2010.
- In the year to mid-2010, estimates of the number of people marrying abroad (both non-residents marrying in England & Wales and residents marrying abroad) increased the married population of England & Wales by 74,000.
- The proportion of the adult population of England & Wales who are married is one of the highest in Europe.

Population estimates by marital status, 2010

This bulletin presents the key messages shown by the 2010 mid-year population estimates by legal marital status. It describes the recent changes in the population by marital status for England & Wales, and makes comparisons over recent decades. It also describes the age structure of the population by marital status drawing out points of interest.

The mid-year population estimates by legal marital status provide estimates of the population who are single, married, widowed and divorced. They refer to the usually resident population in England & Wales as a whole on 30 June of the reference year and are published by sex and single year of

age. This product is the official set of population estimates by marital status for England & Wales, published annually.

The estimates are based on the 2001 Census, updated each year using the cohort component method with a combination of registration and survey data sources.

Population estimates by marital status have a number of uses, both direct and indirect, informing policy decisions at a national level. The estimates are used as denominators in the calculation of rates, for example marriage and divorce rates. The estimates are also used as source data for other ONS outputs, such as population projections by marital status, which are, in turn, used as an input for household projections published by Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Population projections by marital status are also used by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to cost various aspects of the future social security programme.

Population estimates by marital status and associated outputs are also of interest to government departments, local government, commercial companies, special interest groups, academia, and the general public.

For further information on how ONS population estimates by marital status meet user needs along with information on their fitness for purpose, please see the [Quality and Methodology Information paper \(201 Kb Pdf\)](#).

Full details of the [methods used to produce the population estimates by marital status](#) can also be found on the ONS website.

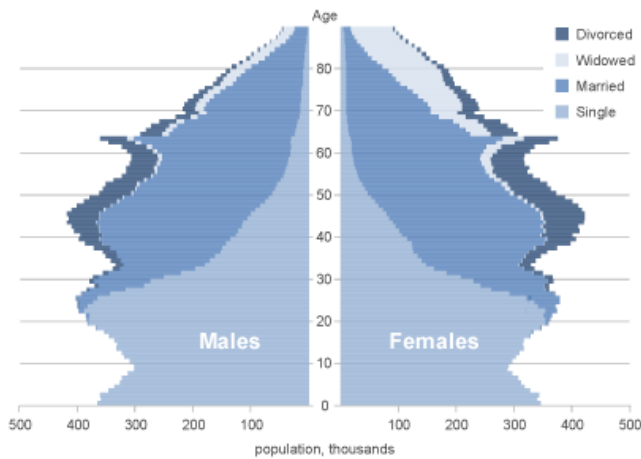
Population estimates by marital status for mid-2010, England & Wales

The estimated resident population of England & Wales was 55,240,500 in mid-2010, of which 44,926,200 were aged 16 and over. The population as defined by legal marital status can be divided into those who are single, married, widowed and divorced. This Statistical Bulletin refers to the adult population (population aged 16 and over) as those aged under 16 are all considered to be single.

In mid-2010, 48.2 per cent of the adult population of England & Wales were married (21.6 million people), 35.6 per cent were single (16.0 million people), 9.3 per cent were divorced (4.2 million people) and 7.0 per cent were widowed (3.1 million people). These proportions vary by age and sex and are explored using the population pyramid (Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the age and sex structure of the England & Wales population by marital status. Each bar represents a single year of age and its length shows the size of the population of that age. The coloured bands on the bar represent each marital status category. The structure of the pyramid is determined by patterns of births, deaths, marriages, divorces and migration.

Figure 1: Population pyramid showing population of England & Wales by age, sex and marital status for mid-2010



Source: Office for National Statistics

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(64 Kb)

The single (never married) population are represented by the bands nearest the vertical axis. Those aged under 16 are all considered to be single in line with the legal age of marriage in England & Wales and until around age 20 almost all the population remain 'never married'. The size of the never married population reduces sharply for those in their twenties and early thirties as the size of the married population increases. This reflects those marrying for the first time in their twenties and thirties; provisional data for 2009 shows the average (mean) age at first marriage was 32.1 years for men and 30.0 years for women. Among the total adult population, the proportion of males who are single (39.1 per cent) is larger than the proportion of females who are single (32.2 per cent); this partly reflects the older average age at first marriage for men.

The married population of England & Wales represents 48.2 per cent of the total adult population, and a similar proportion of males and females are married (49.5 per cent for males and 46.9 per cent for females).

The divorced population becomes visible on the pyramid for those in their twenties but remains small for those in their twenties and thirties, partly reflecting the relatively small size of the population at risk of divorce (i.e. the married population). The proportion of the population who are divorced increases for those in their forties and fifties and is largest for those aged 53; of the population at this age in mid-2010, 17.6 per cent are divorced. There are a larger number of divorced women than men. One possible reason for this is that more divorced men remarry each year than divorced women, leaving more divorced women in the population.

Very small proportions of females aged under forty and males aged under fifty are widowed and the widowed population only becomes visible on the pyramid at older ages, reflecting higher mortality.

The differences between the marital status distribution of men and women are most apparent in the older ages. In mid-2010, women are more likely to be widowed at older ages than men. Men have lower life expectancy than women, and women are typically married to an older spouse, leading to a higher proportion of widowed women than men.

Changes in the population by marital status over time

Between mid-2001, the most recent year for which Census data are currently available, and mid-2010, the proportion of the adult population who were single increased by 5.2 percentage points, and the proportion of the adult population who were divorced increased by 1.1 percentage points. The proportion of the adult population who were married or widowed decreased by 4.9 and 1.3 percentage points respectively.

Changes in the marital status distribution of the population are most visible over a longer period of time. Figure 2 shows the proportion of the adult population in each marital status group for Census years from 1971, the earliest date for which population estimates by marital status are available for England & Wales, to mid-2010. During this period, the proportion of the adult population who were single or divorced has increased by 14.5 and 8.0 percentage points respectively and the proportions who were married or widowed has decreased by 20.0 and 2.5 percentage points respectively. Table 1 shows the population by marital status for the same years.

Table 1: Adult population by marital status for England & Wales in 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2010

	population thousands				
Year	Single	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Total
Mid-1971	7,756	25,088	3,492	482	36,818
Mid-1981	9,127	24,522	3,637	1,439	38,724
Mid-1991	10,708	23,469	3,678	2,646	40,501
Mid-2001	12,692	22,239	3,477	3,456	41,865
Mid-2010	15,972	21,643	3,128	4,183	44,926

Table source: Office for National Statistics

Table notes:

- Note: Figures may not add due to rounding

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(13.5 Kb)

One of the main reasons for the decrease in the married population and the increase in the single population is the growth of cohabitation by unmarried couples. In the early 1960s in Britain fewer than one in a hundred adults under 50 are estimated to have been cohabiting at any one time, compared with one in six in 2010¹. Cohabitation may be seen as a precursor to, or an alternative to marriage; the average age at first marriage is increasing and there has been a general decrease in the annual number of marriages since the early 1970s.

A large increase in divorces was observed during the 1970s. The Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England & Wales on 1 January 1971 and this made it easier for couples to divorce upon separation. The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has generally increased for those marrying between the late 1960s and the early 1990s. For example 22 per cent of marriages in 1971 had ended by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 33 per cent of marriages in 1994 had ended after the same period of time². However there is some evidence of an end to increases in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce for couples married in the most recent years.

There are several possible explanations for the decrease in the proportion of the adult population who are widowed. Firstly, a lower proportion of people are marrying than previously. For example, for women born in 1941, 94 per cent had ever married by the age of 35³, whereas only 60 per cent of women born in 1973 had married by the age of 35, and not all of this decrease will be due to people marrying later. Secondly, a higher proportion of people aged over 50 are ever divorced than previously. Once a person is divorced, they are no longer at risk of becoming widowed. And thirdly, life expectancy has increased, particularly for males.

The proportion of adult females who are widowed has decreased about twice as much as the proportion of adult males who are widowed between mid-1971 and mid-2010. The main reason for this is that life expectancy has increased more quickly for men than women. Life expectancy at birth in England & Wales for males was 78.3 in 2008-2010, up 9.1 years since 1971. In contrast, life expectancy at birth for females was 82.3 in 2008-2010, a smaller increase of 6.8 years since 1971⁴. Further, many of the women who were widowed at a young age during World War II died between 1971 and 2010.

Notes for Changes in the population by marital status over time

1. Cohabitation and marriage in Britain since the 1970s, Eva Beaujouan and Maire Ni Bhrolchain, [Population Trends 145, Autumn 2011 \(283.5 Kb Pdf\)](#).
2. [Divorces in England and Wales 2009](#) - see age at marriage, duration of marriage and cohort analyses.
3. [Marriages in England and Wales 2009 provisional](#) - see cohabitation and cohort analyses.

4. [Life expectancies for England & Wales](#), ONS.

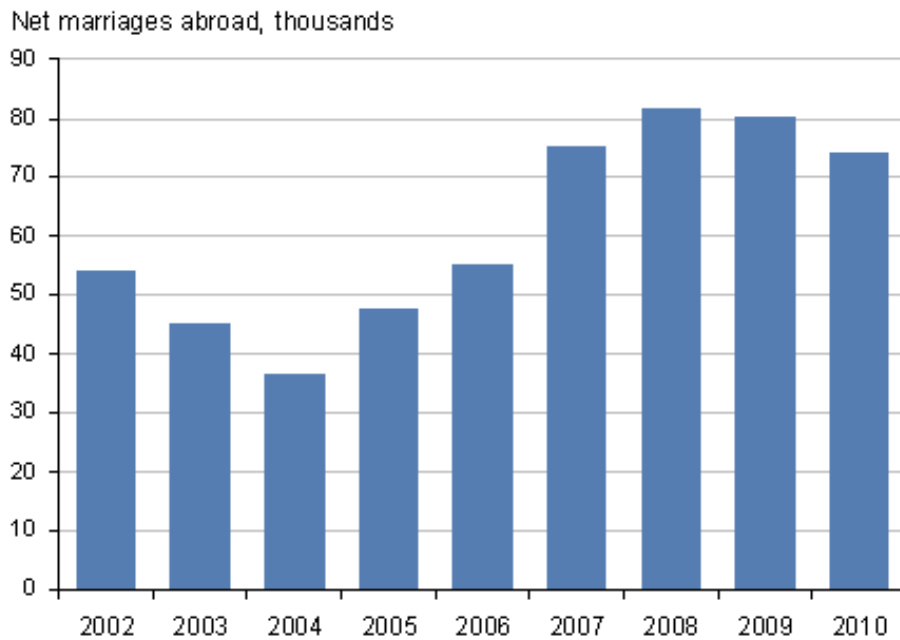
Marriages abroad

The official set of population estimates by marital status for mid-2010 includes an adjustment for marriages abroad. This adjustment takes account of estimates of residents of England & Wales who have travelled abroad to marry, and non-residents who have travelled to England & Wales to marry. This adjustment has been applied to the published estimates from mid-2002 to account for the increasing numbers of people travelling abroad to marry. Estimates prior to mid-2002 have been rebased using Census data which determines the marital status of the resident population regardless of country of marriage and therefore the time-series is consistent. Estimates for mid-2002 to mid-2010 are also published excluding the adjustment for marriages abroad to meet user need.

Between mid-2009 and mid-2010, estimates of the number of people marrying abroad (both non-residents marrying in England & Wales and residents marrying abroad) increased the married population of England & Wales by 74,000 (48,000 married males and 26,000 married females). For both males and females, the previous marital status of about three quarters of those marrying abroad was estimated to be single (never married), with just under one quarter to those previously divorced, and the remaining proportion to those previously widowed.

Since mid-2002, there have been a net estimated 550,000 people added to the married population following marriages abroad. Across the decade, previous marital status of those marrying abroad shows a very similar pattern to those in mid-2010.

The estimated number of people marrying abroad has varied since mid-2002 (Figure 3), with the highest number of marriages abroad (net) estimated to be 81,700 in mid-2008 and the lowest estimated at 36,600 in mid-2004. In the year to mid-2010 there were an estimated 74,000 marriages abroad.

Figure 3: Net estimated marriages abroad, mid-2002 to mid-2010

Source: Office for National Statistics

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(28.5 Kb)

Estimates of marriages abroad are derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS) and are therefore subject to sampling error. [Further information on the methodology used to estimate the number of marriages abroad](#) can be found on the ONS website.

International comparisons

Population estimates by marital status are not available for the UK as a whole as figures for mid-2010 are not produced for either Scotland or Northern Ireland. Differences in the provision of population estimates by marital status across UK countries, and impacts for users, are described in [Population estimates by marital status - methods and availability across UK countries](#) on the ONS website.

The latest available population estimates by marital status for Scotland are for mid-2008 when 48.9 per cent of the adult population were married, 34.7 per cent were single, 8.3 per cent were divorced and 8.1 per cent were widowed. These proportions are very similar to those seen for England & Wales.

Direct comparisons by marital status among European and other countries worldwide are difficult as countries have varying categories of legal union. However, it is possible to compare the proportions

of the adult population who are married among countries for which data are available. Comparisons based on data available from Eurostat¹ for 2010 show the proportion of the adult population of England & Wales who are married (48.2 per cent in 2010) is one of the highest in Europe, where married populations range from 34.0 per cent of the total adult population in Sweden to 49.5 per cent in Romania (See Background Note 8).

The long-term decline in the married population as a proportion of the adult population of England & Wales (from 53.1 per cent in 2001 to 48.2 per cent in 2010) is also seen across Europe. For example, the married population of Latvia declined from 43.3 per cent of the total adult population in 2001 to 37.2 per cent in 2010, while the fall over the same period in Belgium was from 46.3 per cent to 41.0 per cent. A similar trend is also seen in the United States of America where, according to the US Census Bureau, the overall percentage of adults who were married in the United States of America declined to 54.1 per cent in 2010 from 57.3 per cent in 2000².

Notes for International comparisons

1. [Eurostat - European Commission population statistics database](#)
2. [U.S. Census Bureau Reports Men and Women Wait Longer to Marry, November 2010](#)

Guidance on reliability in the context of likely uses

These population estimates by marital status refer to legal marital status; whether an adult is single, married, widowed or divorced. Those aged under 16 years old are assumed to be single. In terms of legal status, separated couples are considered to be married, and cohabiting couples retain their legal marital status whether that is single, married, widowed or divorced. The estimates include an adjustment to account for marriages abroad.

Users should be mindful of the limitations of the definitions used to produce these estimates. The number of opposite-sex cohabiting couples living in the UK has increased from 2.1 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2010¹ so some users may prefer to use surveys to provide estimates of the cohabiting and married population if this better suits their needs. Surveys are also able to provide estimates for geographies other than England & Wales combined, such as for the UK or for local authorities.

The Civil Partnership Act 2004, which came into force in December 2005 allowed same-sex couples in the UK to register their relationship for the first time. A civil partnership dissolution can be obtained after 12 months in either a registered civil partnership or a recognised foreign relationship for 12 months. The population estimates by marital status do not currently take account of civil partnership formations or dissolutions. Those who have formed, or formed and dissolved, a civil partnership are classified according to their marital status prior to forming that civil partnership. The total number of people forming civil partnerships in England & Wales between the Act coming into force in December 2005 and the end of 2010 was nearly 86,000.

Estimates of the number of same-sex civil partners living in England & Wales have been produced using both surveys and administrative sources about the number of civil partnerships formed and dissolved each year. These estimates put the number of civil partners living in England & Wales between 63,000 and 102,000 people. Omitting civil partners from the population estimates by marital status is most likely to affect the population of those who have never married, because most civil partnerships are formed between couples who have never been married. [More information on civil partnership statistics](#) can be found on the ONS website.

An adjustment is made to the population by marital status to account for marriages abroad. Information from the International Passenger Survey (IPS) is used to estimate the total number of England & Wales residents who travelled abroad to marry and the total number of overseas residents who travelled to England & Wales to marry. As for all survey based estimates, these estimates of marriages abroad, derived from the IPS are subject to sampling error. Nevertheless, research prior to the introduction of this method for accounting for marriages abroad indicated that it would improve the accuracy of the marital status estimates. This research can be found in the Population Trends report 'Marriages Abroad: 2002-2007'². Detailed information on the methodology used to take account of marriages abroad can be found in the [Population Estimates by Marital Status Methodology Paper](#) on the ONS website.

Notes for Guidance on reliability in the context of likely uses

1. [Families and Households 2010 tables](#)
2. [Population Trends report Marriages abroad: 2002-2007 \(page 47\) \(1.81 Mb Pdf\)](#)

Data and further information

Links:

- [Mid-2010 Population Estimates by Marital Status Including Marriages Abroad \(164.2 Kb ZIP\)](#)
- [Mid-2010 Population Estimates by Marital Status Excluding Marriages Abroad \(164.9 Kb ZIP\)](#)

Next publication:

Autumn/Winter 2012 - following Census-based total population estimates

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Background notes

1. [Mid-2010 population estimates by marital status for England & Wales](#).
2. There are four tables accompanying this release:
 - population estimates by marital status, single year of age and sex for England & Wales for mid-2010 including marriages abroad (formatted),
 - population estimates by marital status, single year of age and sex for England & Wales for mid-2010 excluding marriages abroad (formatted),
 - population estimates by marital status, single year of age and sex for England & Wales for mid-2010 including marriages abroad (unformatted),
 - population estimates by marital status, single year of age and sex for England & Wales for mid-2010 excluding marriages abroad (unformatted).
3. Population estimates by marital status for Scotland up to and including estimates for mid-2008 have been published by National Records of Scotland. Following user consultation on the [Demography Statistical Work Programme](#), this publication is currently not being updated. Demand for these estimates will be reviewed in 2013/14. Further information can be found at [Marital Status Population Estimates Scotland](#) on the GRO Scotland website.
4. Population estimates by marital status for Northern Ireland are not produced.
5. [An Overview of Population Statistics](#).
6. This is the first release of mid-2010 population estimates by marital status for England & Wales. No revisions of this dataset have been made. Any future revisions to these estimates will be made in line with the [ONS revision policy for population statistics \(54 Kb Pdf\)](#).

Information on past revisions to population estimates by marital status is available in the [Quality and Methodology Information paper \(201 Kb Pdf\)](#).
7. European countries included in the 'International comparisons' are those for which data from 2001 and 2010 were available on the Eurostat website at the time of writing namely; Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland.
8. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the [Media Relations Office](#).

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