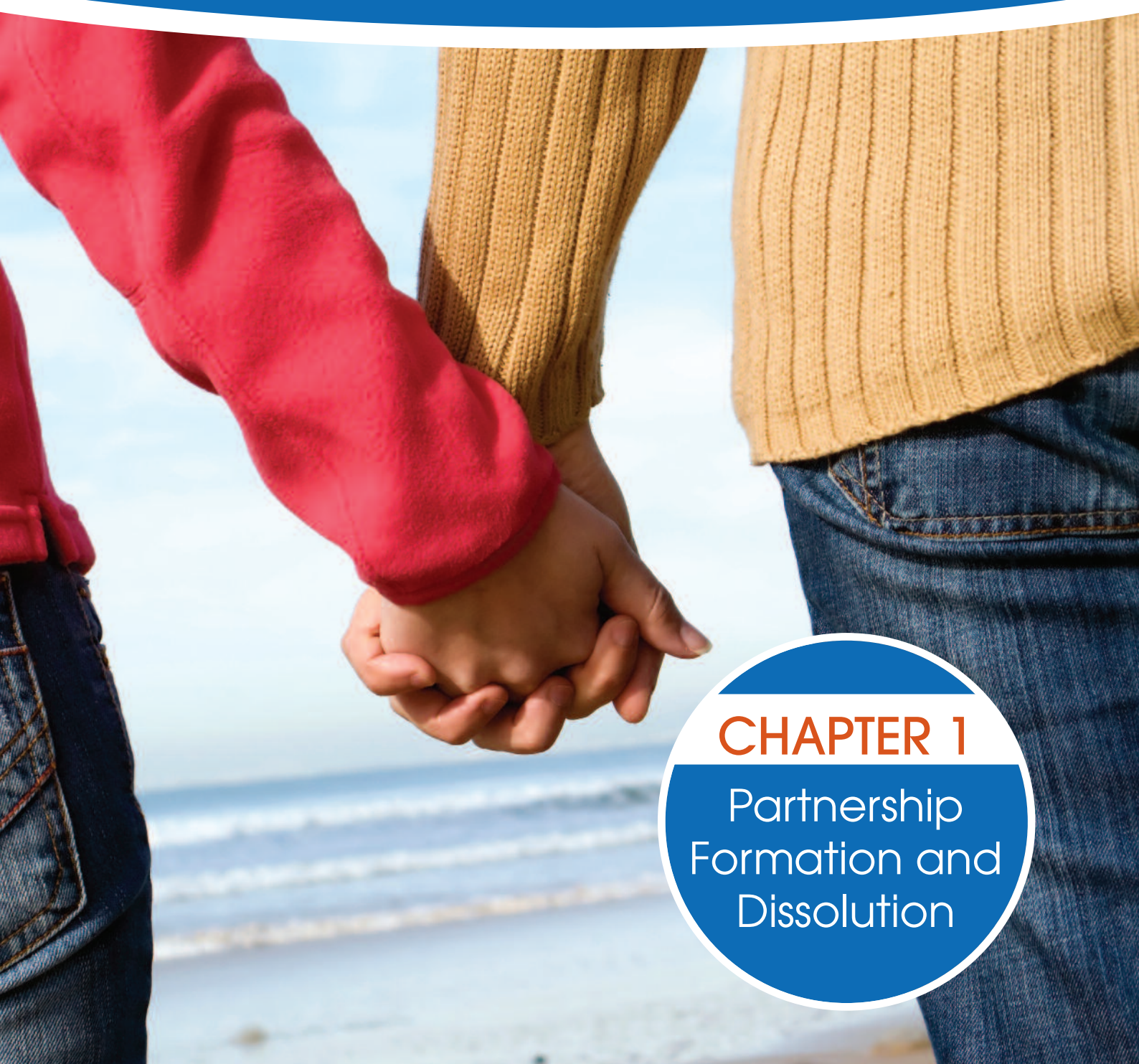


# Understanding 21st Century Relationships

A Compendium of Key Data

Gareth Lloyd and Rebecca Lacey



## CHAPTER 1

Partnership  
Formation and  
Dissolution

# Understanding 21st Century Relationships

## A Compendium of Key Data

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### **About OnePlusOne**

OnePlusOne is a UK charity that strengthens relationships by creating resources that help families and frontline workers tackle relationship issues early.

We help couples and parents through a range of web-services, while our online learning equips front line workers with the skills to offer timely and effective face to face support to families.

Everything we do is based on the latest research evidence. Our research builds the knowledge base on relationships and, by sharing what we know, we influence policy and the creation of services that work.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1: Partnership Formation and Dissolution

**“The number of marriages taking place annually has been in decline since the early 1970s”**



# Chapter 1:

## Partnership Formation and Dissolution



Changes in the forms of partnerships and families have been prominent social trends in the UK and other developed countries, and these changes are a constant source of interest to policy makers, the public at large and researchers. In particular, the numbers of marriages are in decline, and the growth in unmarried cohabitation in the last 40 years has been striking. Cohabitation, as an informal type of partnership, is difficult to document in the population (unlike marriage, where official records can be relied upon).

This does not necessarily mean that relationships are in decline however. Declining marriage numbers and increasing cohabitation estimates suggest that of those people entering their early 40's, many have entered into some form of partnership (almost as many as the most married generations of the 20th century). If these trends continue, there are likely to be further surprising changes: there are already indications in recent years of a decline in the proportion of marriages ending in separation or divorce by the fifth anniversary. In this chapter OnePlusOne explores the important statistical changes and trends that reflect partnership formation and dissolution, and considers some of the attitudinal – as well as legislative and regulatory – changes that may have underpinned them.



## How to use this chapter



### In reading this chapter the following considerations may be useful to keep in mind:

The structure of this chapter is designed to lead the reader through the changes in partnership formation that have occurred over the last 40 years. Firstly, headline data will be presented on partnership formation and dissolution, along with the societal and possibly legislative changes that may have underpinned these. Marriage is then explored in greater detail, with particular attention given to the decline in the number of marriages taking place in England and Wales. Possible explanations are explored in terms of the rising acceptance and use of less formal cohabitations. Finally, statistics and demographics in divorce are considered.

Raw statistics do not always give a full explanation for why patterns of partnership formation and dissolution have changed over the last 40 years; they could even be misleading in some cases. This is because not all changes are reflected by officially recorded statistics, particularly with respect to the numbers of people who are cohabiting.

In writing this text, the authors have been cautious when speculating about the causes of the trends shown, and so should the reader.

The data presented in this chapter comes from a range of different sources. In many cases data are from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and refer to England and Wales only, and this may include some very recent data that is classified by ONS as

provisional. In other cases however (for example in international comparisons), data comes from across the UK. Data may also come from research surveys which often use samples (see definition below) of the population.

To help the reader by highlighting interesting opportunities to consider trends and statistics in greater depth, talking points and focus points are included throughout. Talking points encourage the reader to consider the wider issues that might underpin some of the effects and trends shown. Focus points provide greater detail on one aspect of the data.



**Talking points** encourage the reader to consider the wider issues that might underpin some of the effects and trends shown.



**Focus points** provide greater detail on one aspect of the data.

Further research and updated data are also indicated throughout the chapter.



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Be aware to check for **future updates** on data.

## How to use this chapter



### Here are some of the key terms that will be used throughout this chapter:

**Rates:** a measure designed to describe the likelihood of an event's occurrence in different populations over a certain period of time, or density of occurrence within a population. Rates calculated in this way are not affected by fluctuations in the size and demographic makeup of the eligible population, so may be a more accurate reflection. For example, in this chapter rates of marriage and divorce are presented. However rates of marriage and divorce in the eligible population (see below for definition) and rates among the general population are also presented.

**Eligible population:** when considering rates of events, the population in which that rate is defined is important. It is possible to look at rates in the entire population that you are interested in (called crude rates), but rates among eligible individuals only may be more informative. For example, marriage rates can be considered in terms of only those individuals who are eligible for marriage (i.e. they are aged 16 years and over and not already married).

**Marriage rate:** the number of marriages within a single given year divided by the total population who are eligible for marriage and multiplied by one thousand. Marriage rates are presented as the number of marriages per one thousand eligible people.

**Crude marriage rate:** the number of marriages within a single given year divided by the total population of the country of interest and multiplied by one thousand. Marriage rates are presented as the number of marriage per one thousand people.

**Divorce rate:** the number of divorces within a single given year divided by the total married population and multiplied by one thousand people.

**Crude divorce rate:** the number of divorces within a single given year divided by the total population of the country and multiplied by one thousand people.

**Mean:** The mean is widely referred to as the average, and is calculated by adding a group of numbers together and dividing by how many numbers there are in that group.

**Median:** A different estimation of an average. The median can be found by arranging a set of figures in order from lowest to highest and identifying the middle one. For example, to find out the median of many people's heights, you could write them all down in a line in ascending order: the median would be the height at the halfway mark. The median can, in some cases, be a better indicator of the most 'typical' value in a data set compared with the mean/average because it is not affected by extreme high and low values as the mean can be.

**Sample:** often it is impossible to get information about an entire population because it is too big. Population-wide statistics are available in some circumstances (for example, from census data) but more often a sample of the population must be used. This is a sub-set of the population that is carefully chosen to represent the wider population as closely as possible.

**Demographics:** the statistical characteristics of a population. Commonly examined demographics include gender, race, age, disabilities, home ownership, and employment status.

**Cohort:** a group of individuals who share a particular characteristic or experience and who are followed over time as part of a cohort study. For example, we could define a cohort as a group of individuals born in the UK in a particular year and follow their development over the course of their lifespans.

**Marriage cohort:** a particular type of cohort especially useful when considering marriage. Here we would look at a group of individuals who married within a given period of time and follow them over time to track the outcome of their relationships. Different marriage cohorts can be compared to see how marriage has changed over time.

““ *People in England and Wales are marrying later in life* ””

## Headline Data

- The number of marriages taking place annually in England and Wales has been in decline since the early 70s, with 241,100 marriages recorded in 2010<sup>1</sup> compared with 404,737 in 1971.
- Marriage rates indicate that the UK is in line with trends in other developed countries, and is neither especially high nor low in terms of marriage rates. In 2009, 21 of every 1,000 men in the general population were married, and 19 of every 1,000 women in the general population were married.
- The decline in marriage may be due to couples choosing to live together rather than marry: in 2004, there were approximately 142,300 cohabiting couples in England and Wales. This had risen to approximately 285,300 in 2011.
- Surveys of social attitudes suggest that cohabitation is no longer seen as socially unacceptable.
- In the 1960s fewer than 1 in every 100 adults were estimated to be cohabiting at any given time; 40 years later this had risen to 1 in every 6.
- Compared with the decrease in the number of marriages over the last 40 years, the number of divorces has remained relatively stable, with 119,589 divorces recorded in 2010 compared with 119,025 in 1972.
- The proportion of married people who divorce before reaching their 50th anniversaries has increased by around a third since 1979; in 2005 it was at just over 45%.

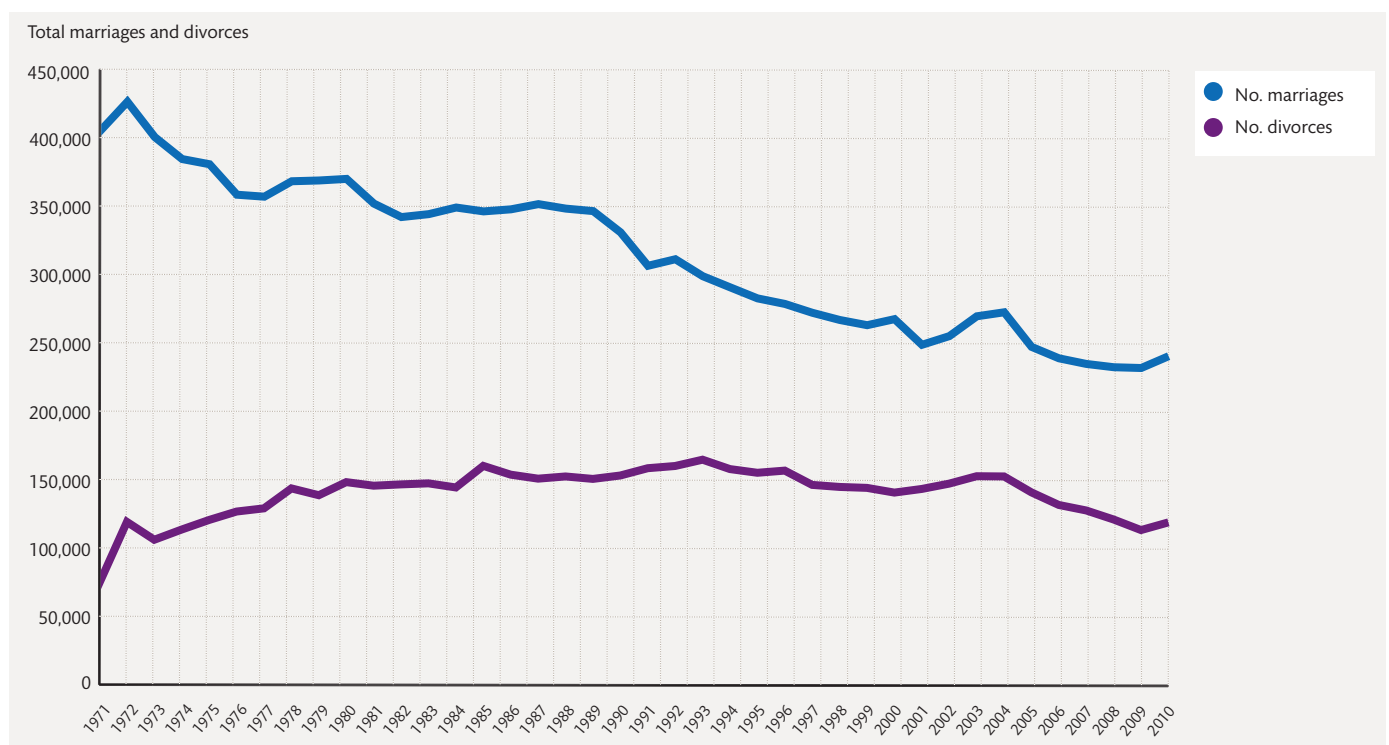
1. Provisional data



## Trends in partnership formation and divorce

Numbers and rates of marriage and divorce over time provide a broad overview of some patterns of change in England and Wales, and also offer a point of comparison with other countries. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) tracks marriages and divorces taking place in England and Wales on an annual basis. OnePlusOne uses these figures to consider how the patterns of formal partnership formation and dissolution have changed over time, though it is important to remember that official marriage and divorce records are less informative about informal relationships.

**Chart 1.1 Trends in marriages and divorces, 1971-2010, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2011)

Marriage numbers in **Chart 1.1** refer to those which were registered in England and Wales. The divorce figures shown refer to the number of decree absolutes (the legal document which ends a marriage and permits the individuals to remarry) given in each year.

There has been a fall in the number of marriages in England and Wales over the last 40 years, with the early 1970s marking a high point in the number of marriages (404,734 marriages in 1971) and a gradual decline seen after this point. The 1950s to the 1970s were termed the 'golden era' of marriage worldwide (Festy 1980) reflecting even higher numbers and near-universal acceptance of marriages, with couples marrying at a relatively young age. Peak periods for marriage in the UK specifically were during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the latest provisional marriage figures show that there were only 241,100 couples marrying in 2010 in England and Wales; a significant decline compared with



peak marriage periods (though less significant if compared with pre-peak periods). Despite the reduction in marriages seen over the past 40 years, marriage is still the most common partnership form (see **Charts 1.5** and **1.6**), and the rate of decline in number of marriages is slowing over time. Between the early 1970s and 1990s the number of divorces in England and Wales remained relatively stable compared with the decrease in marriages, though there was a period of increased divorce in the early 1970s.

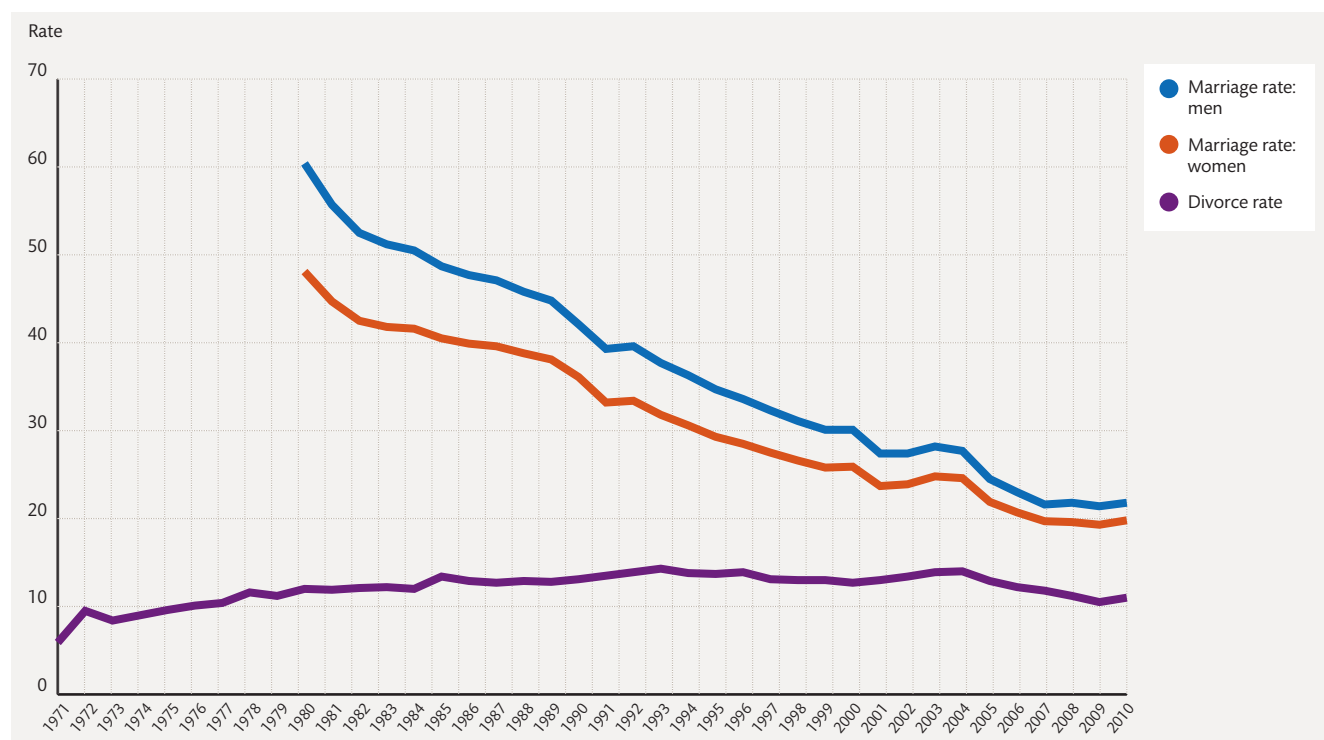
Marriage and divorce figures are linked to some extent: fewer marriages may also mean fewer divorces, and this may be a reason for the trend shown in the last decade. The increase in the early 1970s is likely to be due in part to the implementation of the 1969 Divorce Reform Act in January 1971, which effectively enabled a clearing of the 'backlog' of divorce petitioners who wanted to divorce earlier but were unable to under the previous legislation (Haskey 1995), and there is some evidence from economists that this may have been the case (Binner and Dnes 2001; Gonzalez and Viitanen 2006).

This change in law meant that couples could apply for divorce on the sole ground of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage. Irretrievable breakdown could be proven by citing one of five facts (adultery, desertion, unreasonable behaviour, separation after two years with the agreement of both partners, or separation after five years at the request of one partner). Since the mid-1990s the number of divorces in England and Wales has reduced, though the most recent figures suggest a small rise. In 2009, there were 113,949 divorces in England and Wales, but this rose slightly in 2010 to 119,025.



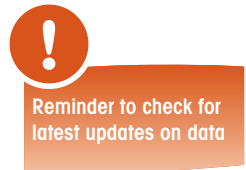
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**Chart 1.2 Marriage and divorce rates, 1971-2010, England & Wales**



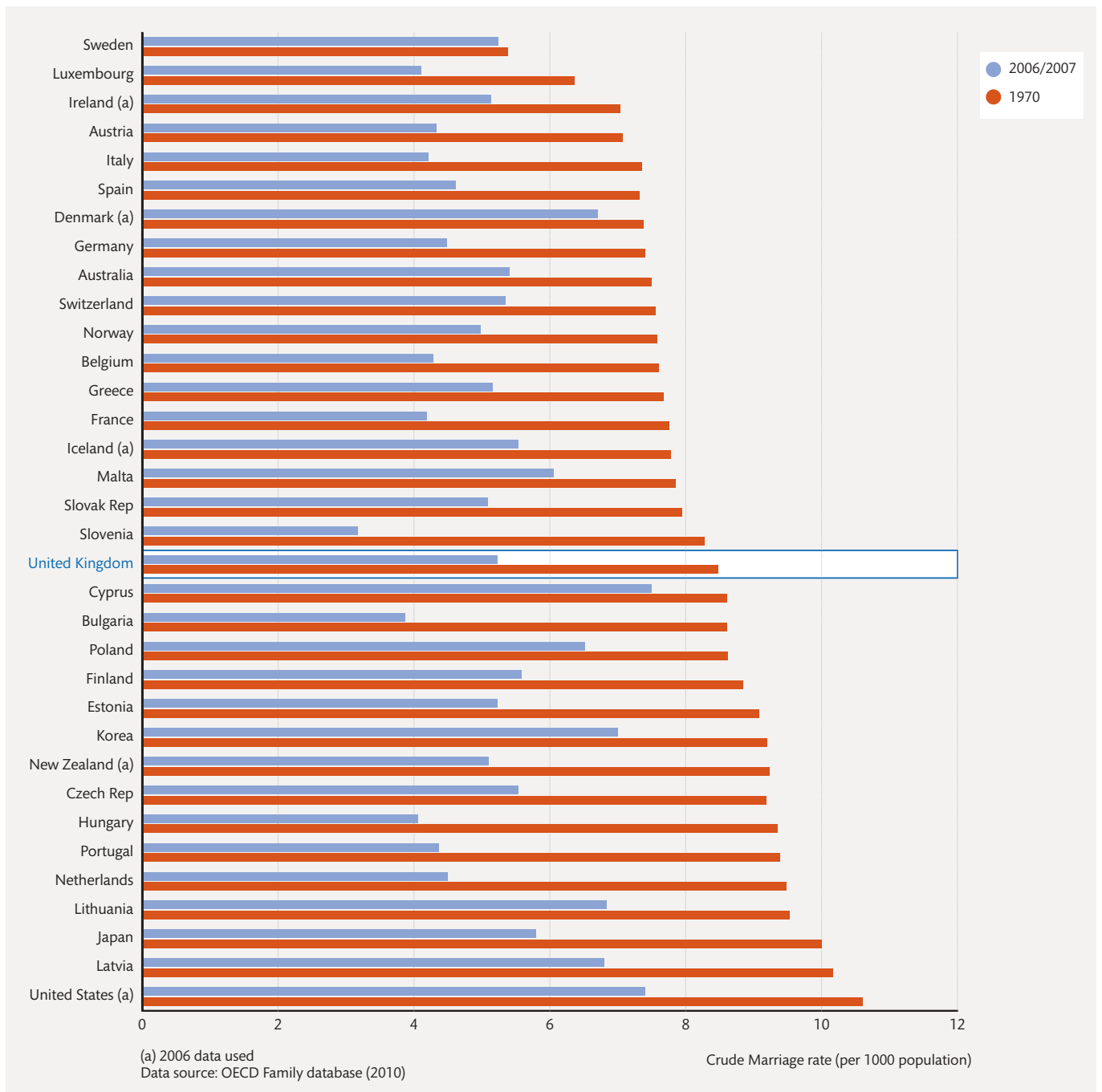
Data source: ONS (2011) *Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage*; ONS (2010) *Historic marriage tables*

**Chart 1.2** shows trends in marriage and divorce rates between 1971 and 2010 in England and Wales. These rates suggest similar trends to the numbers of marriages and divorces shown in **Chart 1.1**. Since 1971 there has been a slight rise in divorce rates, and over the past five years or so divorce rates have declined. The 2009 divorce rate (10.5 divorces out of every 1,000 married population) was the lowest seen since 1977. However, this rose slightly in 2010 to 11.1 divorcing people per thousand married population.



Marriage rates have steadily declined over the past 40 years. In 1971, 75.1 out of every 1,000 eligible men (see definition at the start of this chapter)

**Chart 1.3 International comparison of crude marriage rates in 1970 and 2006/07**



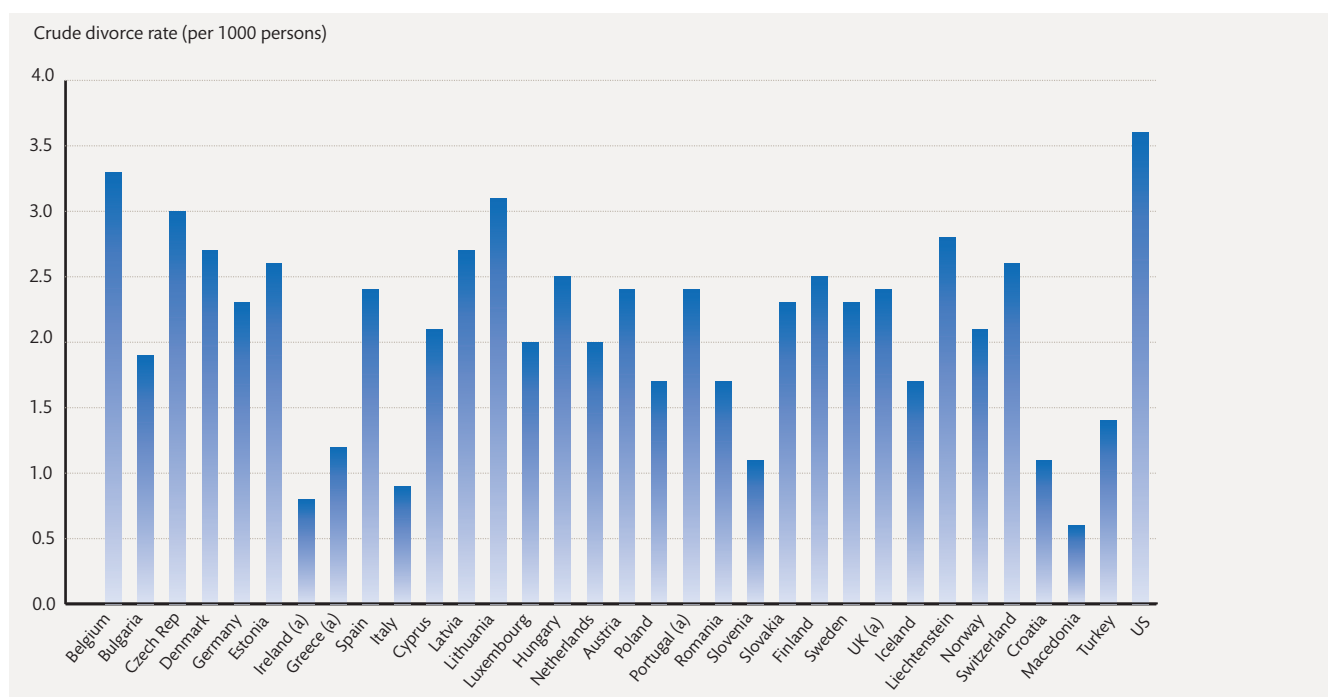
and 57.7 out of every 1,000 eligible women were married. By 2009, this had dropped to 21.3 out of every 1,000 eligible men and 19.2 out of every 1,000 eligible women. The reduction in marriage rates that has occurred over this period may be due in part to couples choosing to cohabit before marriage (or as an alternative to marrying), which also results in delayed marriage. There are many other possible reasons for this decline; for example, possible changing social attitudes to marriage, or the perceived costs involved. Figures on cohabitation are considered later in this chapter; however, as mentioned previously, marriage is still the most common partnership form (see **Charts 1.5** and **1.6**).

The trend data shown so far provides an overview of changing patterns of marriage and divorce over time in England and Wales, but do not provide a point of reference with other UK countries. For this we may look at rates of marriage and divorce in the UK and abroad. Rates are especially useful in these comparisons because countries have vastly different population sizes and age distributions, and examining rates (rather than raw numbers) can account for these differences. Rates therefore allow us to make a meaningful comparison between two countries in terms of how many marriages and divorces occur.

The crude marriage rate refers to the number of marriages per 1,000 members of the general population in a single year. This means everyone in the population, and not just those who are eligible for marriage.

The trends presented so far in this chapter in England and Wales also seem to have occurred in other countries. In all countries shown, the crude marriage rate has reduced substantially between 1970 and 2006/07.

**Chart 1.4: Crude divorce rates: comparison with European countries and the United States, 2008**



(a) 2007 data. Data source: European data: EUROSTAT(2011); US data: Center for Disease Control (2008)

Looking specifically at the UK, the crude marriage rate has reduced from 8.5 marriages per 1,000 population to 5.2 marriages per 1,000 population in 2007, though a similar reduction is shown in many of the other countries included in the chart. These estimates for the UK are lower than earlier figures presented because the crude rate is within the entire population rather than the population which is eligible for marriage as shown in **Chart 1.2**.

Crude divorce rates are calculated per 1,000 population of all ages rather than per 1,000 married population. These rates therefore provide an interesting viewpoint on numbers of divorces. Instead of showing these rates as adjusted for numbers of marriages, they give an overview of the likelihood of divorce amongst the general population. Given that divorce can be a disruptive and difficult life event, crude rates show what proportion of a country's population may experience these negative events during a given year. **Chart 1.4** shows an international comparison of crude divorce rates between European countries and the United States. The UK is in the upper half of the countries shown in terms of crude divorce rates, with a rate of 2.4 out of every 1,000 in the country's population. The United States has a higher divorce rate than the European countries shown at just over 3.5 divorces per 1,000 population.



## Talking point

### ***Changing sequences in relationships***

The decline of marriage could be taken to suggest the people of England and Wales are falling out of love with the idea of formalising their partnerships. However, it is difficult to assess society's relationship with matrimony from the official statistics provided by marriage records. Instead it is necessary to look at other more in-depth findings on marriage, including duration of marriage and characteristics of those who marry; these are considered in further detail in the following section.

It is also necessary to consider the sequencing of people's relationships and the increasing popularity of informal partnerships. This means how and when people move from informal relationship statuses into cohabitation or marriage, and whether they eventually divorce or separate. Rising levels of cohabitation in particular have been a significant change, and this change will be considered in terms of how it has impacted upon marriage and divorce in England and Wales in the following sections. For example, pre-marital cohabitation may mean that people marry later in life, and statistics will be shown that examine this possibility.

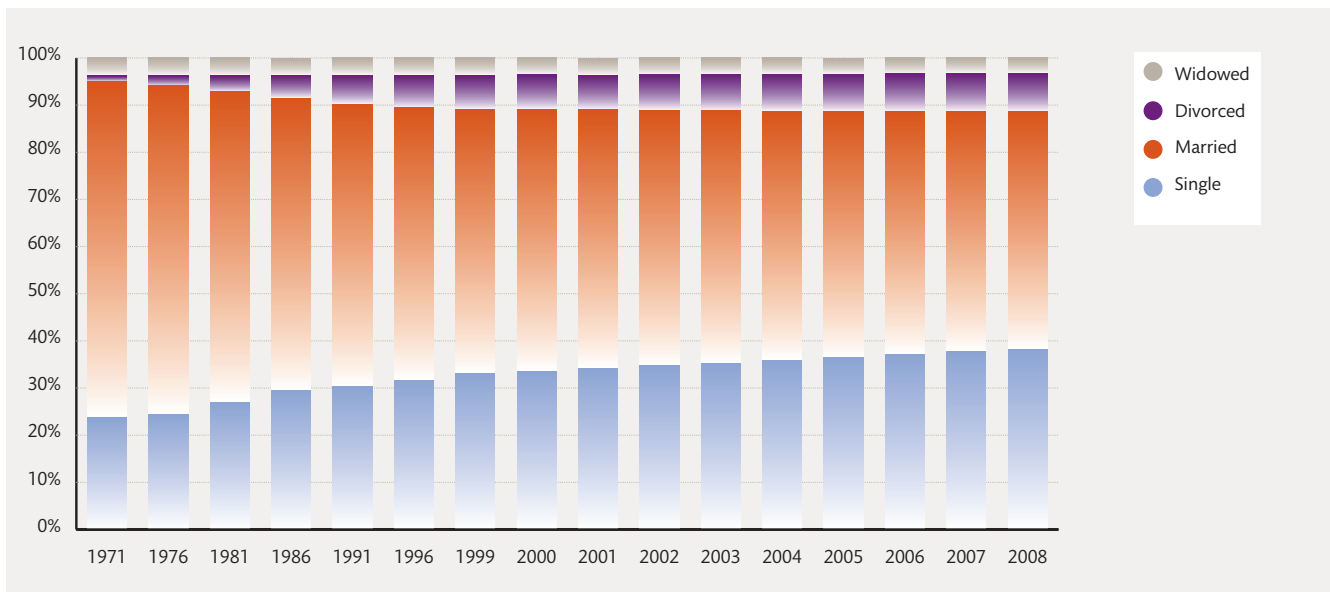
As mentioned previously, there are difficulties in estimating the proportion of the population who are in cohabiting relationships, as this is not easily captured by official statistics. In 2009, it was estimated that 10% of the male and female population aged 16 years and over were in a cohabiting partnership (General Lifestyle Survey 2011). Beaujouan & Ní Bhrolcháin (2011) used data from the General Household Survey to suggest that while marriage was in decline, similar numbers of people had still experienced some form of partnership before the age of 40. Though people tend to enter into relationships later in life, many have entered into some form of partnership (almost as many as married when marriage was at the height of its popularity during the 20th century).

# Marriage

Having considered the trends in numbers of marriages in England and Wales (and in comparison with other countries), it is also useful to examine further patterns within these statistics. For example, who are those members of the population most likely to marry, and how long do marriages last on average?

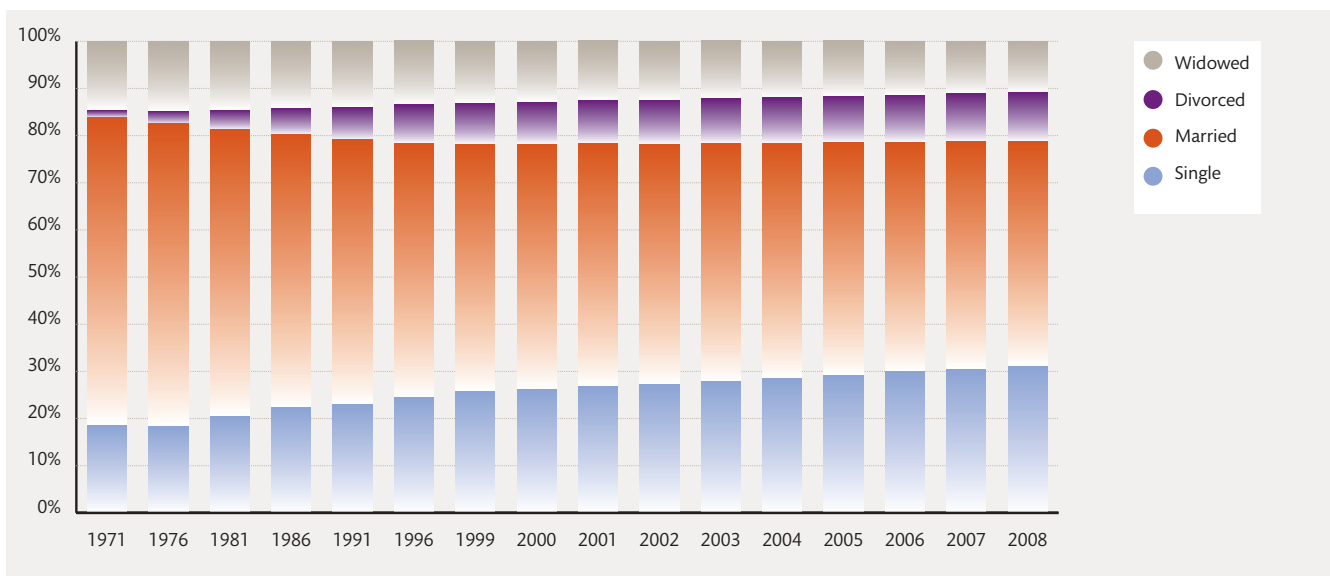
Trends in legal marital status in England and Wales are considered first. These statistics show, proportionally, how many males and females in England and Wales are living in married couples.

**Chart 1.5 Legal marital status of male population aged 16 and over, 1971-2008 mid-year estimates, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2009) *Population: age, sex & legal marital status, 1971 onwards: Population Trends*

**Chart 1.6 Legal marital status of female population aged 16 and over, 1971-2008 mid-year estimates, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2009) *Population: age, sex & legal marital status, 1971 onwards: Population Trends*

**Charts 1.5** and **1.6** show the legal marital status estimates for the male and female population respectively between 1971 and 2008. These proportions only take into account those who are aged 16 years and over and also include those who married abroad. The figures shown here are estimates because they are a combination of data from the national UK population census and the ONS.

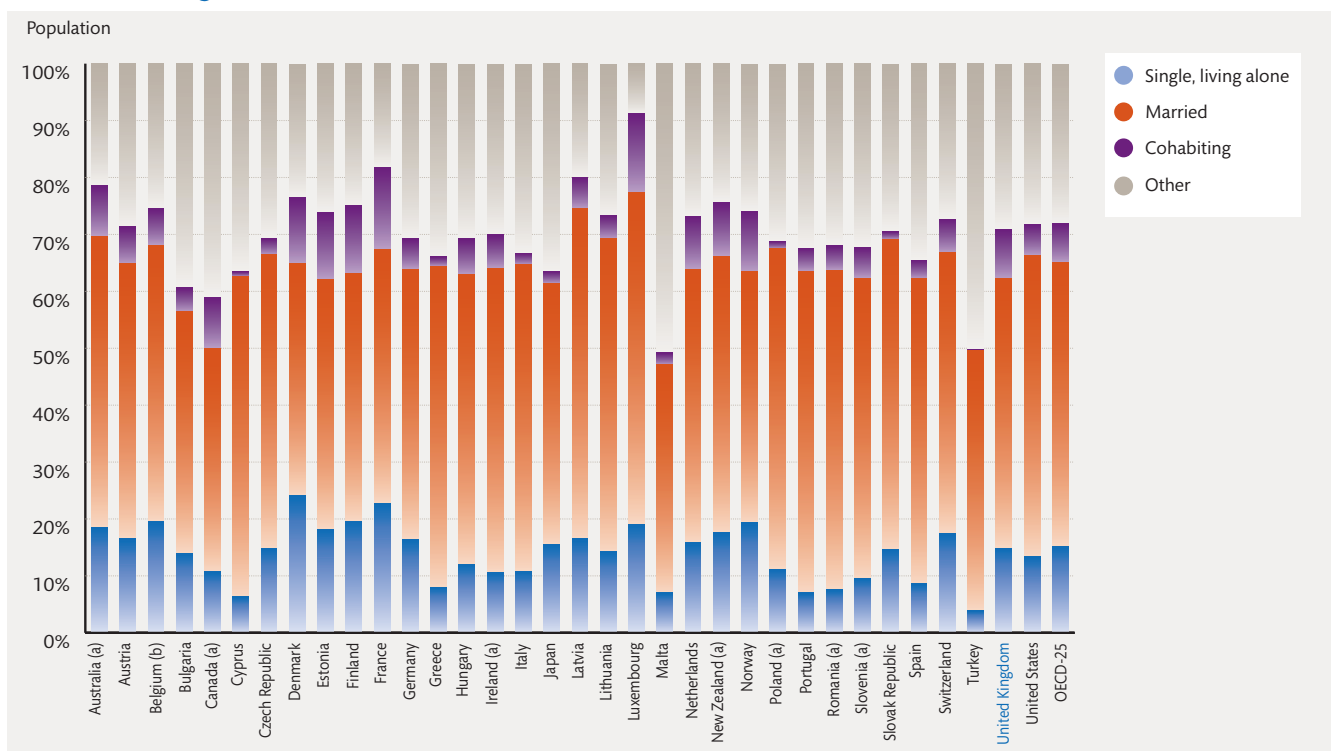


These official figures take only legal marital status into account, so do not include those who are separated, dating or cohabiting (further information on cohabitation is presented later in this chapter).

Looking firstly at **Chart 1.5**, the most striking trend is the increasing proportion of those who are single (never married) and the relative decrease of those who are married; this is in line with trends in numbers of marriages over the past 40 years (see **Chart 1.1** for example). Looking at the most recent data there are some gender differences, including a greater proportion of individuals in the female population who are widowed, and a greater proportion of men who are single.

International comparisons of marriage statistics present a wider perspective on these trends. International data is available on the proportions of populations who are classified as a particular marital status.

### Chart 1.7 International comparison of legal marital status of population aged over 20, 2001



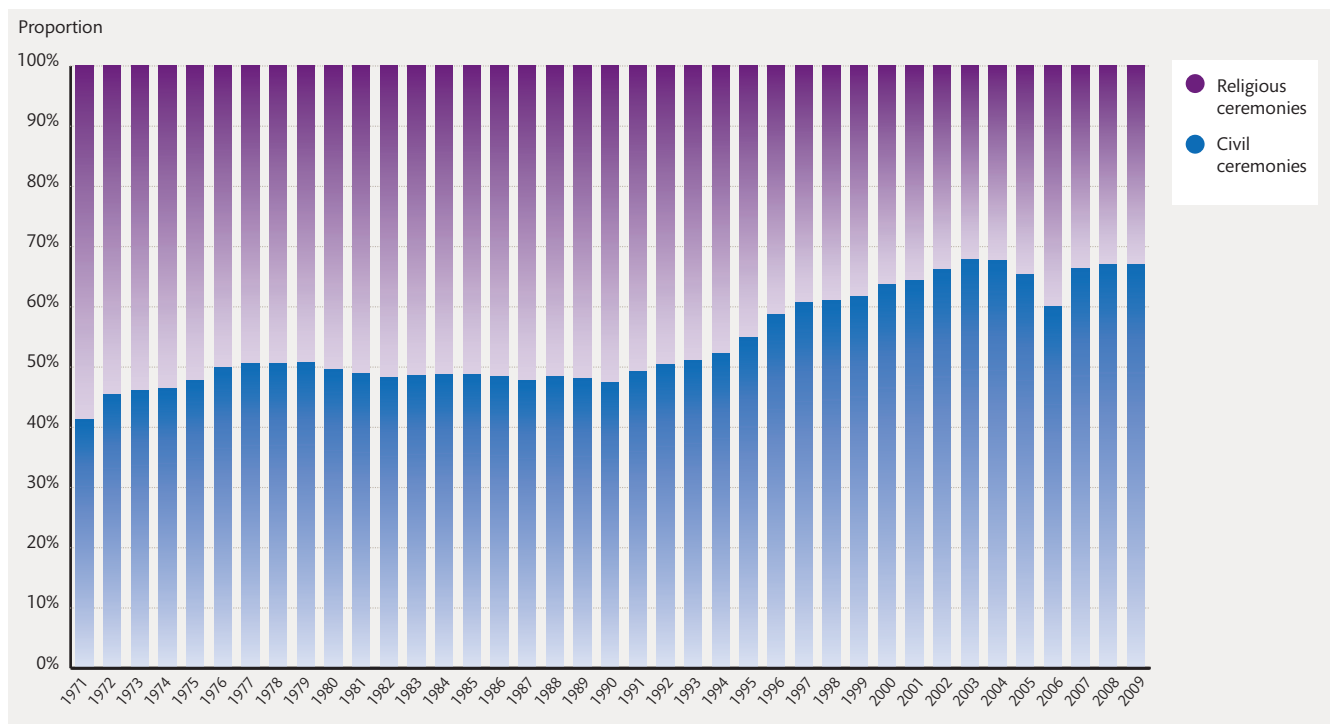
(a) 2006 data; (b) 2007 data; Data source: OECD (2010)

International and European comparisons of legal marital status demonstrate how the UK compares to other countries. **Chart 1.7** shows an international comparison of legal marital status for the population of each country aged 20 years and over, and includes data on OECD countries (those which are included in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

Of the countries shown, Northern European and Australasian countries have the highest proportions of single people who live alone. Southern European and Eastern European countries appear to have the highest proportion of married people aged 20 years and over. The proportion of the population who are cohabiting is relatively low in some countries (such as, for example, Turkey, Cyprus and Japan). The UK is close to the average on proportions of single, married and cohabiting individuals (particularly the US, though the UK has more cohabitation).

Who marries in England and Wales? It is possible to explore this question from multiple angles from official statistics and records. One area to consider is religious affiliation; for example, the ONS records numbers of religious and civil ceremonies that are held, and this may provide a crude measure of whether one or both members of the couple held religious beliefs.

**Chart 1.8 Trends in type of marriage ceremony, 1971-2009, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2010)

Turning to the types of ceremonies which marrying couples choose to have in England and Wales, **Chart 1.8** shows significant changes in the type of marriage ceremonies performed over the past 40 years. Up until 1991 religious ceremonies were the most common type of marriage ceremony, accounting for more than 50%. However from the early 1990s civil ceremonies have steadily become more common, and in 2009 67.1% of marriages were civil. Provisional data for 2010 show a further increase in civil marriages to 68.2%.



One reason for the steady increase in civil ceremonies since the 1990s may be the Marriage Act 1994, which permitted couples to marry in approved premises other than churches and registration offices. Another reason may be that fewer people in England and Wales are identifying as members of any religious group. One tentative speculation is that there may be links between rising levels of secularisation, cohabitation and civil (rather than religious) marriage ceremonies, and perhaps lower overall levels of marriage. While this may be a logical suggestion (given that religious affiliation promotes marriage over cohabitation and, indeed, religious over civil ceremonies) this is not possible to examine from trend data alone. It is also not possible to say from these data whether participants in religious ceremonies did in fact identify as belonging to any religion; indeed it is possible to participate in a religious ceremony without holding strong religious beliefs.

Another approach to examining the characteristics of those who marry in England and Wales is to look at age. Data is available to examine age at marriage, and it is also useful to compare these trends with those for relationship dissolution.

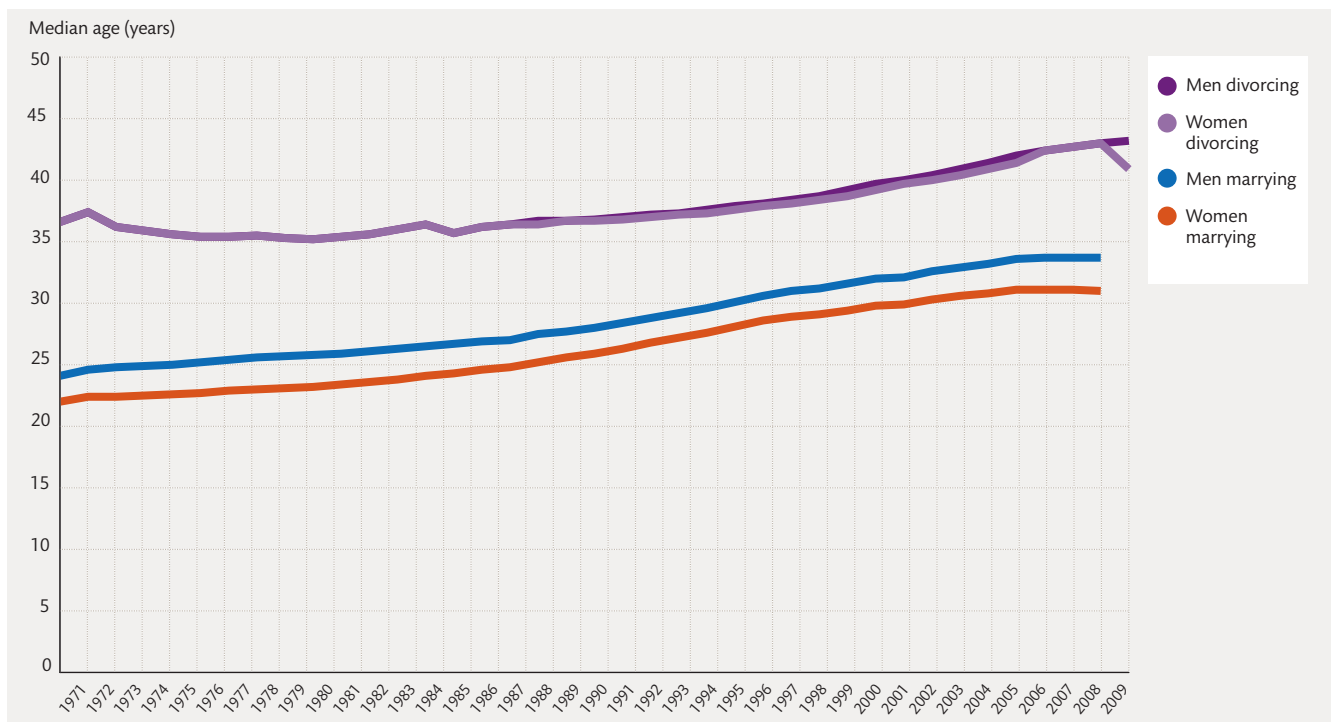


## Focus on...

### **Defining religious and civil ceremonies in ONS data**

ONS statistics define religious ceremonies as the following: Church of England, Church of Wales, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist, Calvinistic Methodist, United Reformed Church, Other Christian bodies, Jewish ceremonies and other. Civil ceremonies are those which occur within register offices or other approved premises.

**Chart 1.9** Trend in median age at marriage and divorce, 1971-2009, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2011) *Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage*.

The figures shown in **Chart 1.9** refer to all marriages regardless of whether they are first or subsequent marriages. Trends show the median age (see definition at start of chapter) at marriage and divorce between 1971 and 2009. It can be seen that there has been a rise in the age at marriage from 22.0 years in 1970 to 30.8 years in 2009 for women and from 24.1 years in 1971 to 33.4 years for men. Partly as a consequence of the rising age at marriage there has also been a rise in the age at divorce for both men and women from 36.6 years in 1971 for both men and women, to 43.2 years



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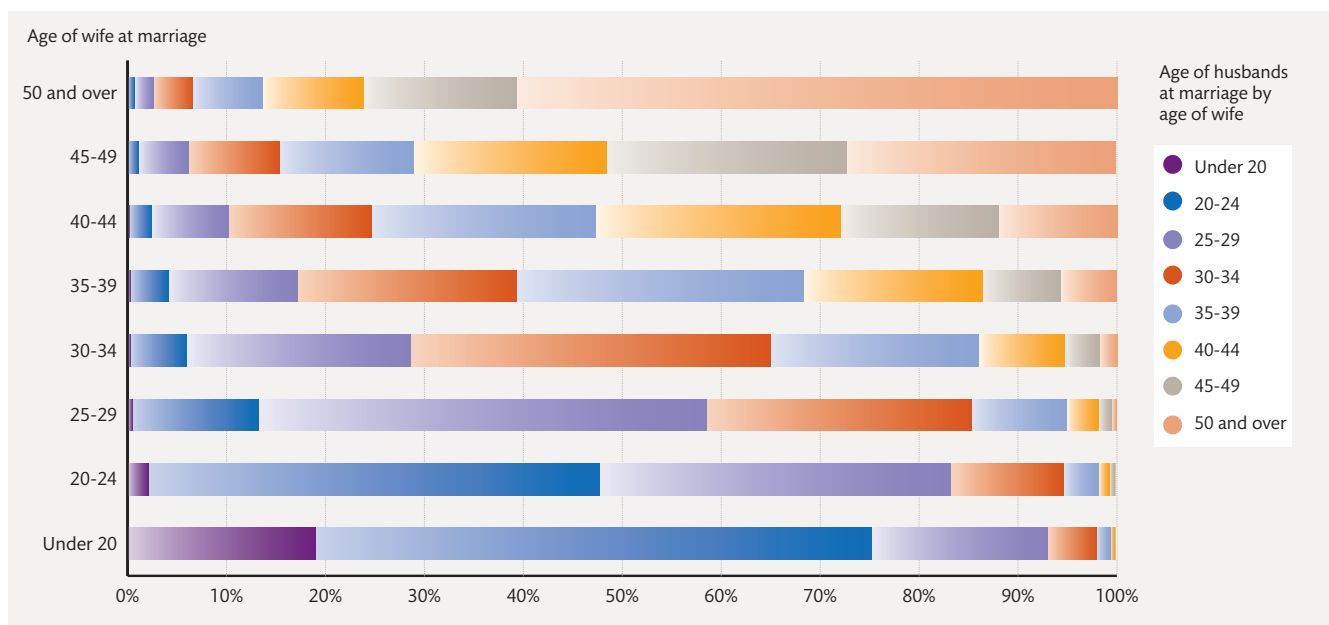
for men and 40.9 years for women in 2009. Provisional data for 2010 show similar median ages to the previous year, 33.2 for men and 30.8 for women.

The rise in marital age may be due in part to increasing preference for cohabitation prior to marriage. As discussed previously, more people in England and Wales are cohabiting prior to marriage than ever before, and doing so is becoming increasingly accepted as a stage in the development of a partnership. With this said, not all who cohabit eventually choose to marry; statistics and attitudes on cohabitation are discussed later in this chapter.

### Talking point

There are indications that people who marry at a younger age are at a greater risk of divorcing. There may be multiple reasons for why this is the case: one well-established worldwide socio-demographic factor is that those who marry young simply spend more of their lives with their partner and therefore have a longer period in which they may divorce. Another is that age of marriage also appears to be associated with other socio-demographic factors such as income and education, which may have an impact on the likelihood of divorcing. Younger people may also have less relationship experience, perhaps leading to a higher likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce.

**Chart 1.10 Age of husbands at marriage by age of wife, 2009, England and Wales**



Source: ONS, 2009

**Chart 1.10** displays a breakdown of the relative ages of men and women who marry. These figures refer to the age at which people were married, and break these down further in reference to the age of the person they married. For example, do men usually marry women who are older, younger or the same age as them?

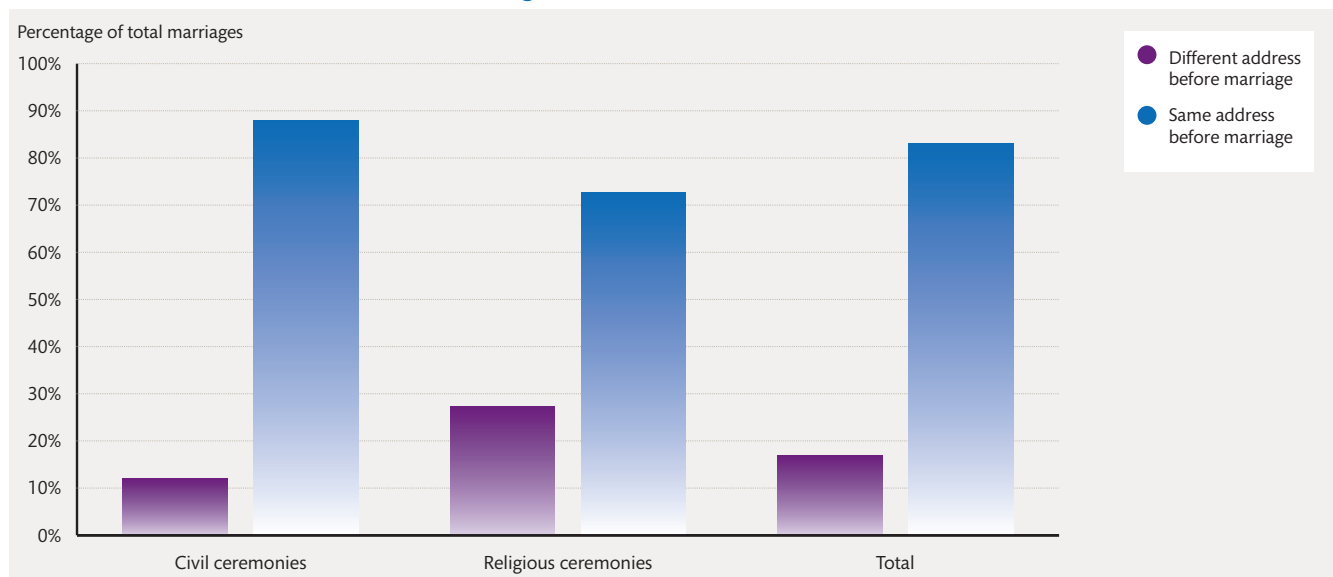
To read the chart, it is easier to concentrate on one horizontal bar at a time. Each of these represents the population of marrying women within a single age bracket. The coloured sections of the bar then show the ages of the men that those women marry. For example, of women who marry under the age of 20, nearly 60% married men aged 20-24. There are notable patterns in the data. Women tend to marry older men; notably, many women tend to marry men one age bracket older than themselves. As both men and women get older, this pattern becomes less pronounced.

## Cohabitation

Cohabitation has become increasingly common in the UK. Though official statistics did not capture the number of cohabiters at the time, in the 1960s fewer than one in every 100 adults were estimated to be cohabiting; 40 years later this had risen to one in every six (Murphy, 2000). The data shown in this section demonstrate the marked increase in cohabitation observed up to the present day. 40 years later this had risen to one in every six (Murphy, 2000). The data shown in this section demonstrate the marked increase in cohabitation observed up to the present day.

In the majority of cases couples cohabit before marriage. There are also some indications that marrying couples who opt for a religious ceremony are less likely to have cohabited beforehand.

### Chart 1.11 Proportion of marriages by cohabitation status prior to marriage and type of ceremony, 2009, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2011) *Marriage statistics*



### Focus on...

#### Over 50s

In **Chart 1.10**, most over 50s married others who were also over 50, though this may be due to the way that these groups are defined in these data. Over 50s represent a much larger subset of the population in both genders than the other categories (which represent smaller age brackets), so it may be unsurprising that more pairings occur between individuals who are both in this age group.



Further research at  
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**Chart 1.11** shows the proportion of those marrying in 2009 that cohabited prior to marriage (as indicated by having the same address before marrying) by the type of marriage ceremony. It can be seen that the majority of both civil and religious ceremonies were among those who cohabited prior to marriage, although having different addresses prior to marriage was more common for those having a religious ceremony. As described previously, premarital cohabitation is now a common precursor to marriage and often considered a normal stage in the development of a relationship.

There have been important changes in the numbers of family types (defined in these data by individuals or couples with or without children) in England and Wales, and these can be shown over an fifteen-year period.



## Talking point

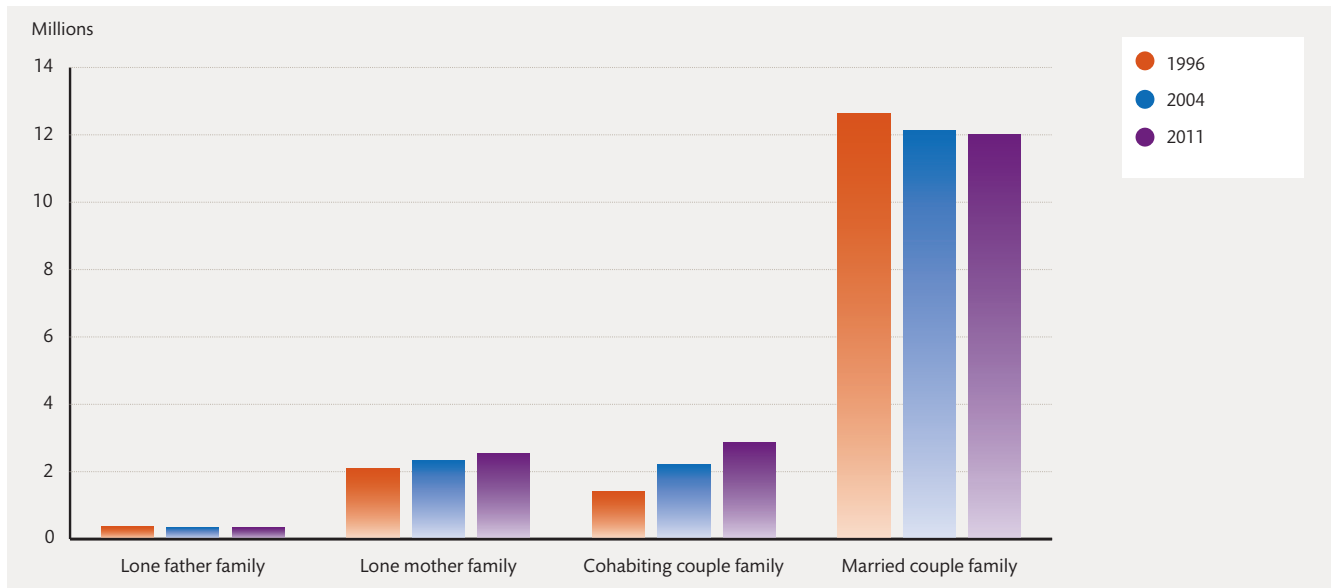
### *Relationship stability and partnership forms*

Much of the data discussed in this chapter relates to the stability of married relationships as evidenced by if and when divorce occurs. There are fewer official data exploring relationship stability in other partnership forms. However, one question which has been raised by policy makers and researchers is which type of relationship is the most stable overall. Research has been conducted to explore this specific question. Wilson and Stuchbury (2010) examined census data to ascertain whether couples who were married or cohabiting in 1991 remained together in 2001. Of married couples surveyed in 1991, 82% were still together in 2001. Of those couples who were cohabiting in 1991, 61% were still together in 2001, of these couples around two thirds had converted their status into a marriage.

These data suggest that marriage is the most stable partnership form overall. However the underlying mechanisms and processes behind this finding are not clear from statistics such as these alone (see the later Talking Point in this section on Marrying and Cohabiting). There are methodological issues in comparing cohabiting and married couples. For example, there is likely to be more variation in a sample of cohabiting couples (in terms of duration of relationship, shared assets, and so on) than married couples who have already reached a key milestone in their partnership through making a commitment to get married.

A 2010 report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies also attempted to assess stability in cohabiting as compared to married couples (Goodman & Greaves, 2010). This showed that though there were clear beneficial effects of marriage in terms of increased stability, these were lessened by the impact of other socio-demographic factors such as parental education and socio-economic status. The authors also suggest that overall relationship quality might predict who chooses to marry: that people in relationships may self-select into marriage based on confidence in their own relationship.



**Chart 1.12 Trends in family types; 1996, 2004 and 2011, England and Wales**

Data source: ONS (2011)

Differences between numbers of family types in 1996, 2004 and 2011 are shown in **Chart 1.12**. The most striking change over time in these data is the increase in number of cohabiting couple families and decrease in number of married couple families. (See later chapters for data on the proportion of births outside of marriage.) In conjunction with the prior trends in cohabitation, there has been a decrease in the number of families with married parents. There are a similar number of families with lone mothers as there are cohabiting couples, with both categories including just over two million families each in 2004. The number of lone mother families has also increased slightly since 1996. Lone father families represent a much smaller group, and this has shown a very small decrease over time.



Further resources at  
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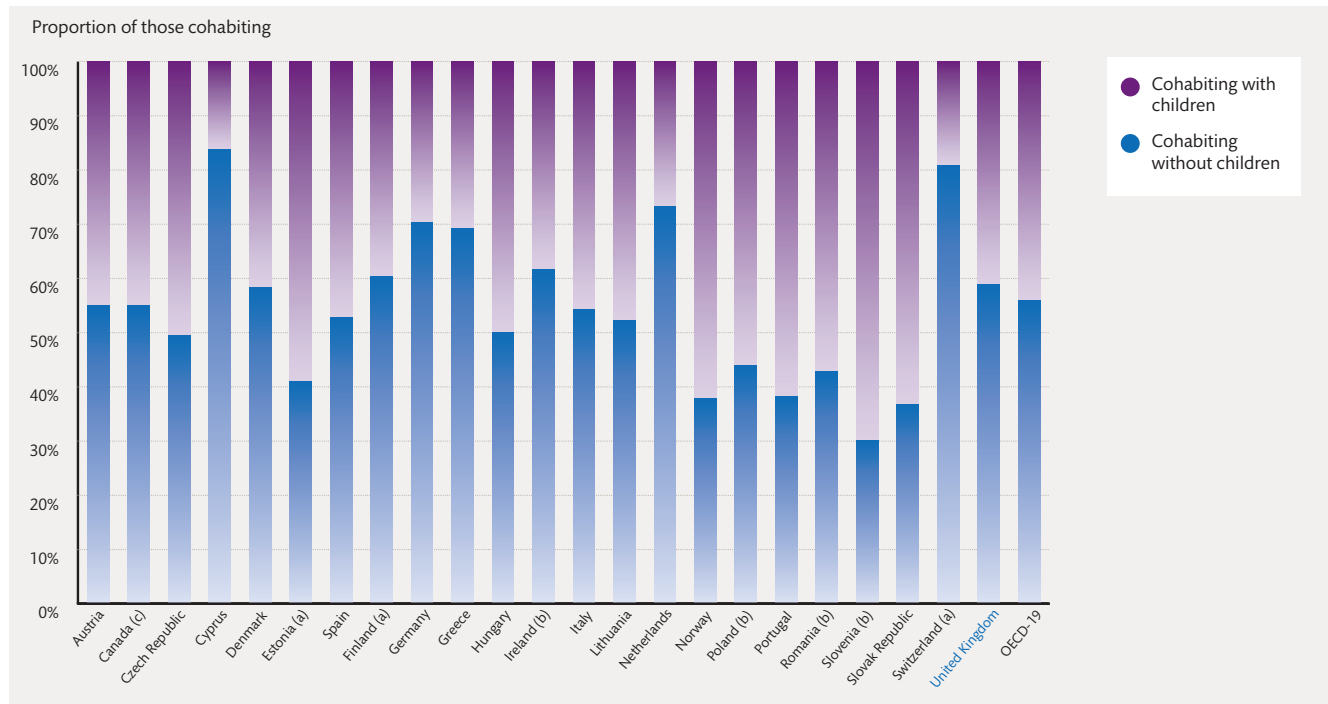
## Talking point

### *Marrying and cohabiting*

Cohabitation is often seen as an alternative or precursor to marriage (Kiernan, 2001), and cohabitation as a precursor to marriage has very much become established as part of the marriage process (Hunt 2009).

Stanley et al (2006) however discusses some of the possible implications of the rise of cohabitation, characterising the process as 'sliding versus deciding.' One possible effect of cohabitation is that more people may 'slide' through stages of commitment without considering the possible long-term implications, with some of the challenging aspects of living together becoming evident before the partners are prepared for them.

As identified earlier, the rates of relationship breakdown appears to be greater in cohabiting couples when compared to married couples. However some research comparing cohabitation and marriage has shown that the risk of relationship breakdown in cohabitation is very similar to that in marriage (see Beaujouan & Ní Bhrolcháin, 2011 for a review), when particular moderating factors such as income and education level (and other socio-demographic characteristics) are taken into account. Differences between married and cohabiting couples are further explored in the next Talking Point on page 22.

**Chart 1.13 Proportion of cohabiting couples with children, European comparison**

(a) 2000 data; (b) 2002 data; (c) 2006 data  
Data source: OECD Family Database (2010)

NB Data for those aged 20yrs+

European countries vary significantly in terms of numbers of cohabiting couples who have children. **Chart 1.13** shows the proportion of the cohabiting population (aged 20 years and over) with and without children across European countries. Some caution should be exercised when comparing proportions between countries as data from different years have been used in some cases.

Many Eastern European countries had a high proportion of cohabiting couples with children, with Slovenia having the highest (69.8% of cohabiting couples have children). Cyprus had the highest proportion of childless cohabiting couples, although it should be noted that there are relatively few cohabiting couples in Cyprus (perhaps due to the country's high religiosity). Within the UK, 41.2% of cohabiting couples had children and this proportion is similar to that seen for Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Finland. Married couples are more likely to have children than cohabiting couples in all countries shown except Norway.

With the statistics shown in this section suggesting that cohabitation is on the increase in the UK, surveys of attitudes also suggest that opinions about cohabitation are also becoming more positive. Respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS; a social statistics survey that has been carried out by the National Centre for Social Research on a near-annual basis since 1983) were asked what they thought about couples cohabiting with children. This was done by examining whether respondents agreed with two statements on cohabitation. Whether they agreed or disagreed with these statements is shown in **Charts 1.14** and **1.15**.



## Talking point

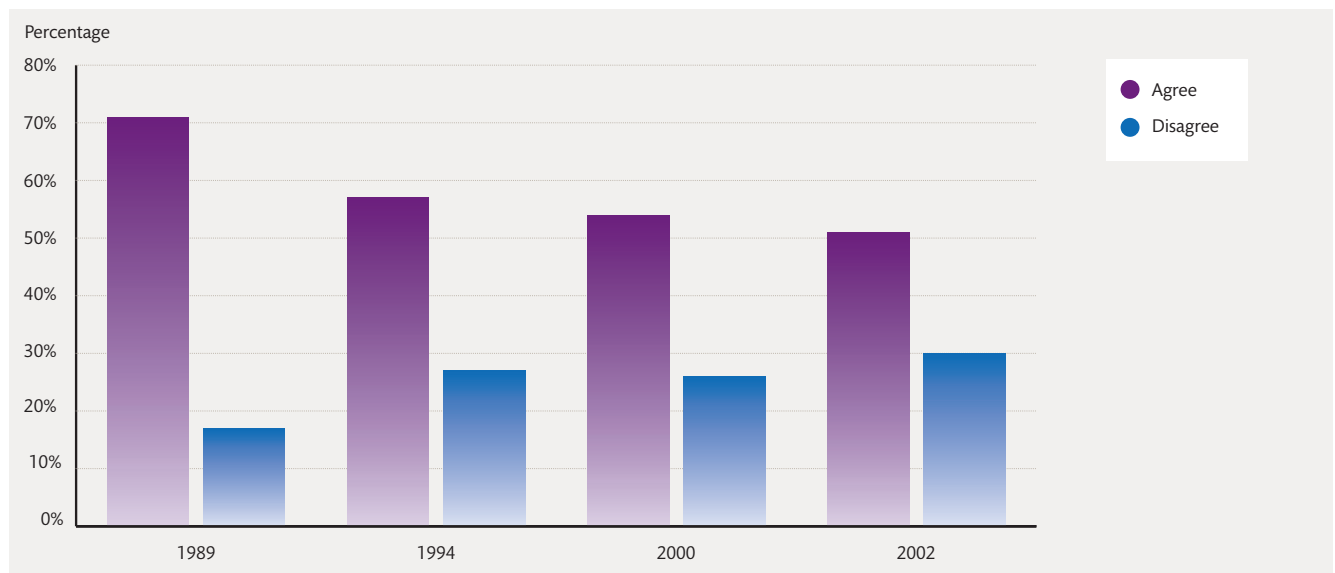
### What makes Norway different?

Norway is an example of a country where the population has embraced cohabitation. Bernhardt et al. (2007) note similar attitudes to cohabitation in Sweden, though Sweden is not one of the countries listed in **Chart 1.13**. Noack (2001) examined cohabitation in Norway, and noted that the percentage of women aged twenty to thirty-nine cohabiting in Norway was more than twice that of Great Britain. Furthermore, as is shown by the data presented in **Chart 1.13**, Norway is the only country in Europe where cohabiting couples are more likely to have children than married couples. Why is Norway distinct in these statistics? Both culture and policy may have contributed to the high proportion of extramarital births. Cohabiting couples in Norway who have lived together for two years or more or have children together have many of the same rights (in terms of taxation, pensions and social security) than as married couples.

Norway also has distinct traditions in the formation of committed relationships. Notably, the link between cohabitation and marriage is distinct in Norwegian custom: marriages in Norway are considered, by tradition, private affairs. When a couple have agreed to the marriage and obtained the agreement of their respective families, they would immediately be considered married within their community. For this reason, a period of cohabitation before formal marriage is more acceptable than in some other countries, and it may be that this acceptance of cohabitation has led to an associated acceptance of extramarital childbearing.

The first statement used to assess cohabitation attitudes was *people who want to have children ought to get married*. Responses to this statement are shown in **Chart 1.14**. Agreement on this issue was high in 1989, with just over 70% agreeing and less than 20% disagreeing (a small number of respondents were unsure or had no strong feelings on the issue, though these are not shown in the chart). In 2002 responses were very different; only 50% agreed with the statement, and around 30% disagreed. The number of unsure or noncommittal responses was also higher (again not shown in chart).

**Chart 1.14 “People who want to have children ought to get married.”**  
British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), 1989-2002



Source: National Centre for Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey 1989 - 2002

The second statement was that it makes *no difference to children whether their parents are married to each other or just living together*. Agreement with this statement is shown in **Chart 1.15**. Responses on this item also showed increasing support for parenthood outside of marriage, and this support has increased over time (although to a lesser extent over time than the previous statement); in 2004 just under 45% of respondents agreed with the statement, and less than 30% disagreed.



## Talking point

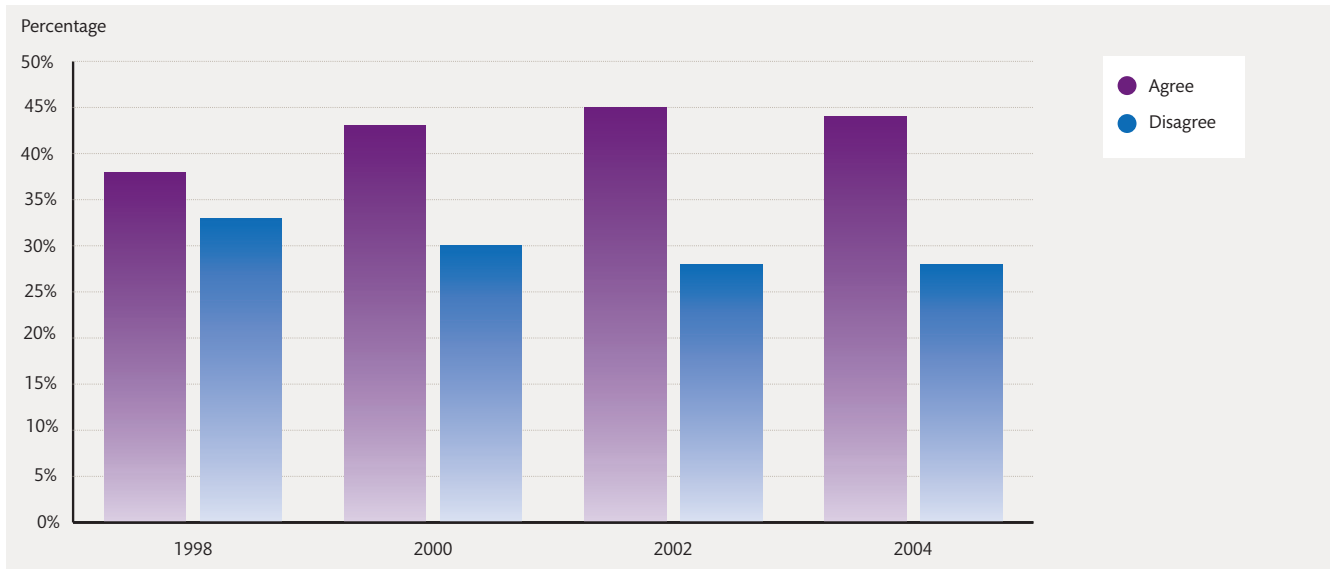
### **Who marries and who cohabits?**

A 2011 study for the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Crawford, Goodman, Greaves, & Joyce, 2011) considered the characteristics of parents in the UK in the Millennium Cohort Study who marry compared with those who cohabit. Key findings included:

- 40% of cohabiting couples had lived together for less than two years, compared with only 8% of married couples.
- Fewer than 60% of Black Caribbean mothers studied were married when their child was born, compared with about 70% of mothers who were White.
- In stark contrast, nearly all mothers who are Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian were married when their child was born.
- Mothers of all religious faiths were significantly more likely to be married than cohabiting compared with mothers of no religion.
- Married fathers were twice as likely as cohabiting fathers to have a professional occupation, and married couples had higher income than cohabiting couples. For example, at the time of their child's birth, married couples were around twice as likely to be in the highest household income quintile and over three times less likely to be in the lowest household income quintile.
- Married couples were more likely to own or have a mortgage for their home.
- Mothers in cohabiting couples were much more likely to have been a teenager when giving birth for the first time: 17% of mothers in cohabiting couples first gave birth before they were 20, compared with 4% of married mothers. 33% of married mothers were over 30 at the time of their first child's birth, compared with 23% of cohabiting mothers.
- Married couples were much more likely to have lived together for a longer period of time prior to their child's birth than cohabiting couples: over half of married couples had lived together for more than six years prior to the birth of the child, compared with 16% of cohabiting couples.
- Mothers in married couples were much more likely to report that their pregnancy was planned; this was the case for 76% of married mothers compared with 49% of cohabiting mothers.



**Chart 1.15** “It makes no difference to children whether their parents are married to each other or just living together,” BSAS, 1998-2004.



Source: National Centre for Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey 1989 - 2004

This is a shift from attitudes only six years before, when agreement was around 37% and disagreement 33%. This issue has left more people sitting on the fence than the issue explored in **Chart 1.14**; more respondents gave unsure or noncommittal responses to the statement depicted in **Chart 1.15** (just under 30% in 2004).



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“Opinions about cohabitation are becoming more positive”



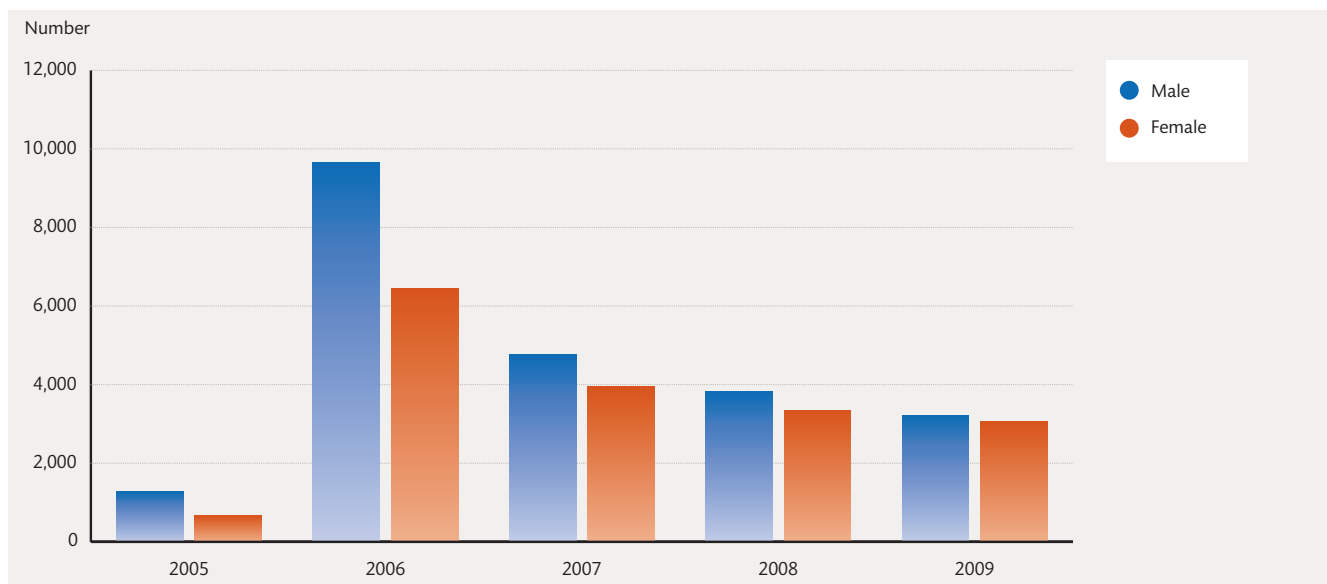
## Civil partnerships

The introduction of the Civil Partnership Act 2004 in December 2005 provided those in same-sex relationships with the right to formalise their union legally by becoming civil partners. Those entering into a civil partnership become entitled to a range of benefits through formally registering their partnership. These include tax benefits (including the ability to share assets as gifts between partners without attracting inheritance tax), the same rights as married couples at divorce, the ability to adopt children and to request parental responsibility of a civil partner's children (Ross et al. 2011).



Reminder to check for latest updates on data

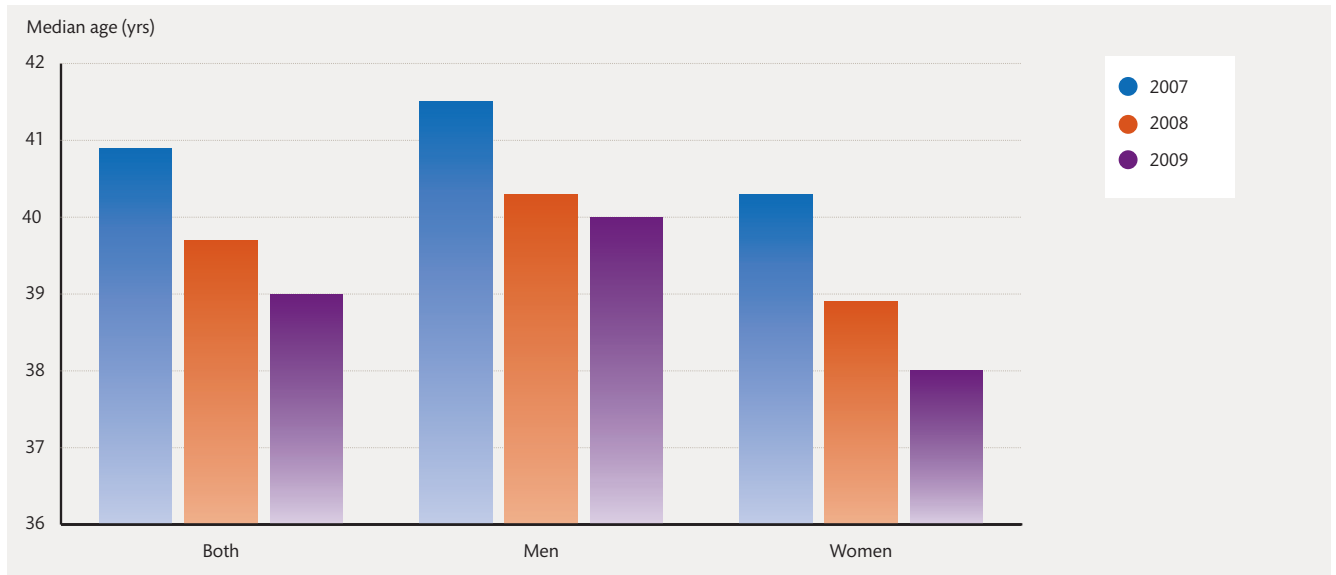
**Chart 1.16** Number of civil partnerships formed, 2005-2009, UK



Data source: ONS (2009) *Civil partnerships*

The number of civil partnerships formed since the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act are shown in **Chart 1.16** above. These figures only show civil partnerships formed within the UK and do not include those people usually resident within the UK who formed their partnerships abroad. The numbers of men and women who formed civil partnerships in 2005 was relatively low compared to more recent figures, reflecting the implementation of the Act late in December (the first date partnerships could be formed was 19th December 2005). The number of civil partnerships formed has since levelled-off, and provisional data in 2010 shows that 3,226 lesbian and 3,119 gay partnerships were formed.



**Chart 1.17 Median age at civil partnership formation, 2007-2009, United Kingdom**

Data source: ONS (2009) *Civil partnerships*

As with the numbers of civil partnerships formed annually in the UK, the median age of partners in civil partnerships also continues to shift year-by-year after initial introduction of the Civil Partnership Act in 2004.

**Chart 1.17** shows the median age of men and women at the time they form a civil partnership. It can be seen that there has been a decline in the median age at partnership formation between 2005 and 2009. This may reflect couples who had been together for some time (and were therefore older) forming partnerships soon after the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act at the end of 2005. Across all dates at which these statistics were recorded, men forming civil partnerships have tended to be older than women, with the median age around two years higher in 2005-2009.

“Couples may be choosing to live together rather than marry”



### Focus on...

#### **Other partnership forms**

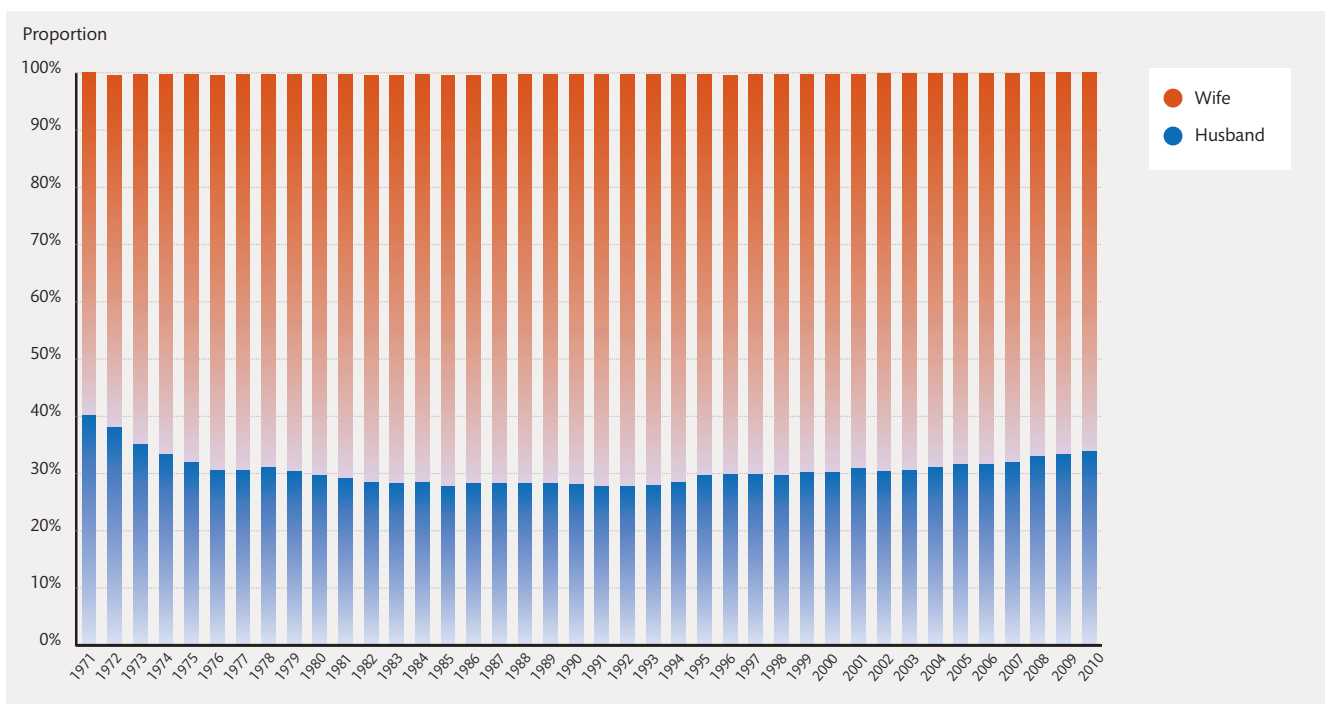
Although the most common forms of partnership are discussed in this report, there are a number of other partnership forms present in the UK. These include those defined as ‘closely involved’ (as used in the Millennium Cohort Study; MCS) and those ‘living apart together’ (this is where partners are not living together for various reasons such as work demands).

## Divorce

Legislative, demographic and perhaps attitudinal changes have meant that the proportions and numbers of men and women applying for divorces have shifted since the 1970s. Social attitudes and the law are closely related: changing attitudes may pave the way for legislative change by governments. However, legislative and regulatory change may also affect attitudes by making things which were previously stigmatised more acceptable.

As noted earlier, marriage numbers and rates do not give the whole picture on relationship formation, and similarly, divorce statistics do not tell us everything about relationship breakdown. Breakdown and dissolution of informal relationships cannot be captured by official registration statistics. This is particularly important given the previously discussed findings on the increasing acceptance of cohabitation.

**Chart 1.18 Trends in divorce petitioners, 1971-2010 England and Wales**



Data source: ONS (2011) *Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage*

**Chart 1.18** shows that since the 1970s there has been an increase in women applying for divorce in England and Wales. This change largely occurred between 1971 and 1980: in 1971, 59.4% of petitioners were women, and in 1980, this had risen to 70%. Although the proportional difference has reduced slightly over time, there are still more women who applied for a divorce in 2010 (66.2%) compared to men.





## Focus on...

### ***Divorce: reform and cultural change***

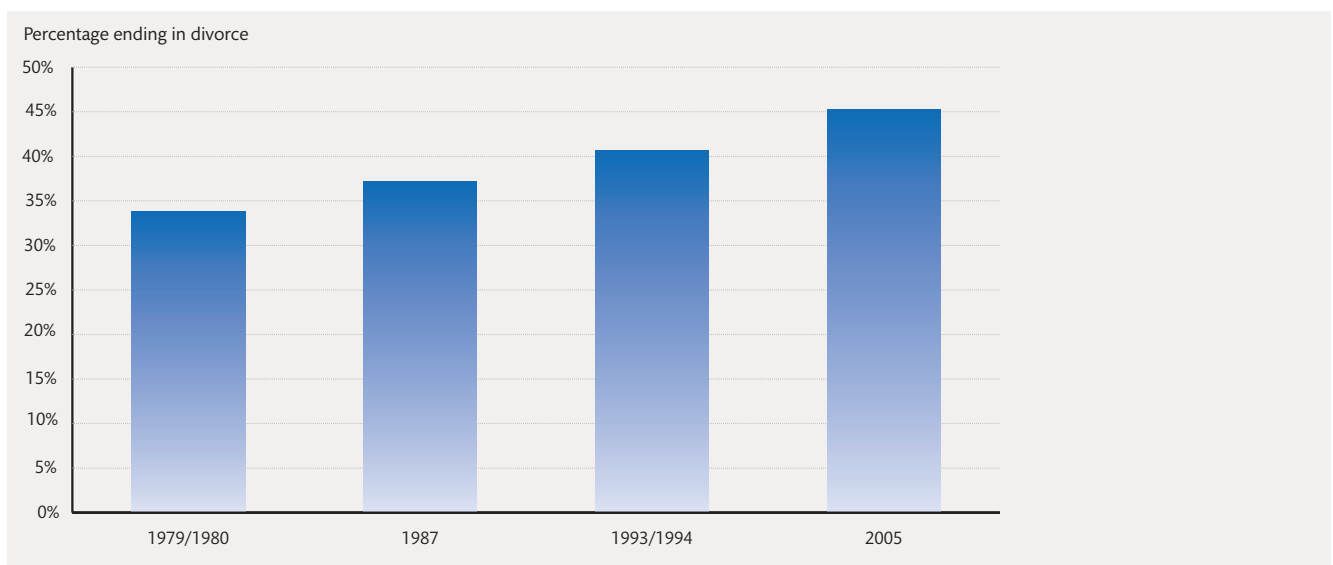
Changing patterns of divorce in England and Wales have probably been driven by shifting attitudinal and legislative changes, and these have almost certainly interacted with one another over time.

It is likely that increasing acceptance of non-traditional attitudes to marriage and divorce is one factor. Divorce has perhaps become less stigmatised, and this may be in part due to decreasing levels of religiosity in England and Wales. A related change may be that expectations of marriage (and partnership in general) have also shifted over time.

Legislative change has also been important. In 1971 the divorce reform act (which was passed by parliament in 1969 but only came into effect two years later) permitted couples to apply for divorce on the basis of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage. This could be proven by citing one of five facts: adultery, desertion, unreasonable behaviour, separation after two years with the agreement of both partners, or separation after five years at the request of one partner. Crucially, a single partner in the relationship may also apply for divorce individually, though only after five years. These reforms gave greater rights to both men and women in terms of petitioning for divorce.

Additionally, some of the trends shown in **Chart 1.13** may be related to changing gender roles in society, with more women delaying both marriage and parenthood to remain in full-time education and establishing themselves in the labour market. This meant increasing numbers of women earning their own incomes and becoming increasingly financially independent of their partners; the Equal Pay Act of 1970 also stipulated that women should be paid the same amount as men for doing the same job. It may be that these factors made divorce financially more viable than before as women were increasingly able to support themselves and their families (Bynner et al. 2003).

**Chart 1.19** Proportion of marriages ending by 50th anniversary due to divorce, 1979-2005, England & Wales



Data source: Wilson and Smallwood (2008)

The estimated proportion of couples who experience divorce in the first 50 years of marriage has increased between 1979 and 2005.

**Chart 1.19** shows the estimated proportion of marriages ending in divorce before couples reach their 50th wedding anniversary.

The years along the bottom of the chart refer to the year of marriage, and accordingly this chart compares *marriage cohorts*. These figures are calculated based on current divorce rates to predict what may happen in the future, taking into account mortality and migration; see Wilson and Smallwood (2008) for more information on how these have been calculated.

Of those couples marrying in 1979/1980 approximately one third were estimated to have divorced by their golden (50th) anniversary whereas it is estimated that 45.3% of couples marrying in 2005 will have divorced by this point.



Further research at  
[www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk)

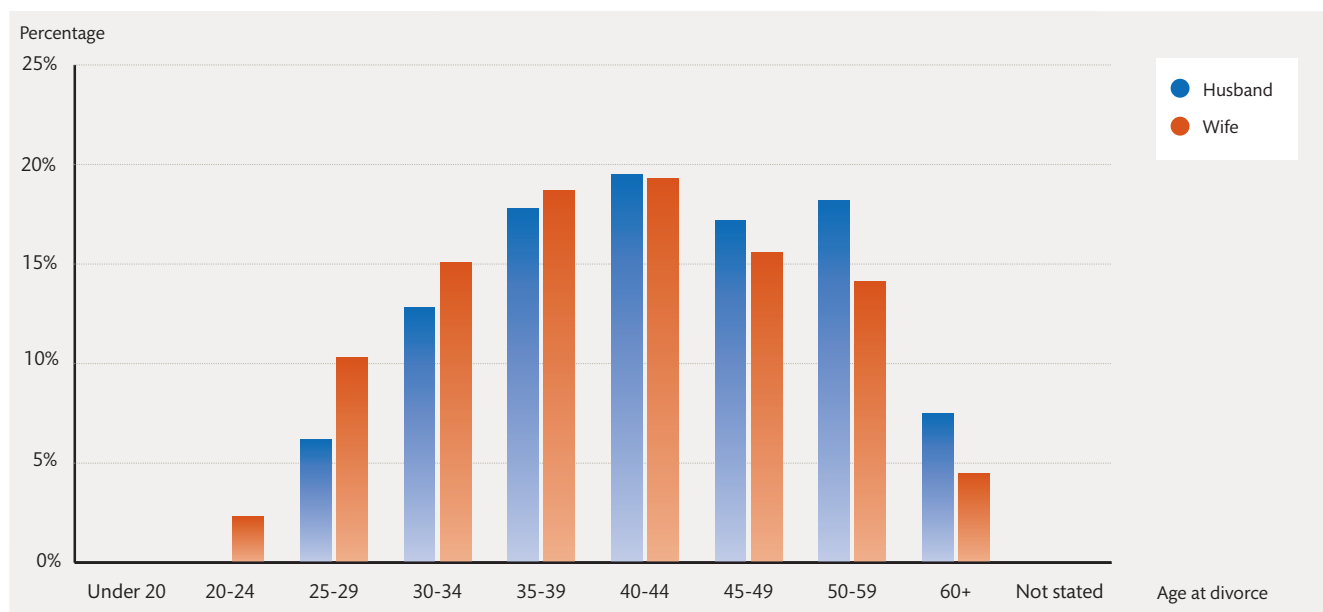
## Talking point

### **Predictions: stock and flow**

The predictions in **Chart 1.19** paint a similar picture to that shown in **Chart 1.2**; that is, despite the significant decreases in marriage rates over the past 40 years, divorce rates have remained fairly stable, perhaps suggesting that a greater proportion of marriages would now end in divorce. This is a question of flow and stock however; the number of divorces that occur every year are a measure of flow, in that they show the amount of change occurring year on year. Stock measures look at the sizes of the married and divorced populations, and projections by the ONS suggest that as the stock of the married population becomes smaller, the flow of divorces will inevitably slow. It is largely for this reason that projections by the ONS suggest that divorces may level off to 96,000 per annum by 2033, and that the same may happen with the estimated proportion of marriages ending in divorce.

A further effect of a reduced married population might also be that this group becomes more homogenous; that is, containing less variation. The couples who stay together – do not join the flow of couples of who divorce – will presumably have qualities that keep them together over time, and part of OnePlusOne's goal in the coming years is to examine exactly what qualities these might be.

**Chart 1.20 Age at divorce, 2009, England & Wales**



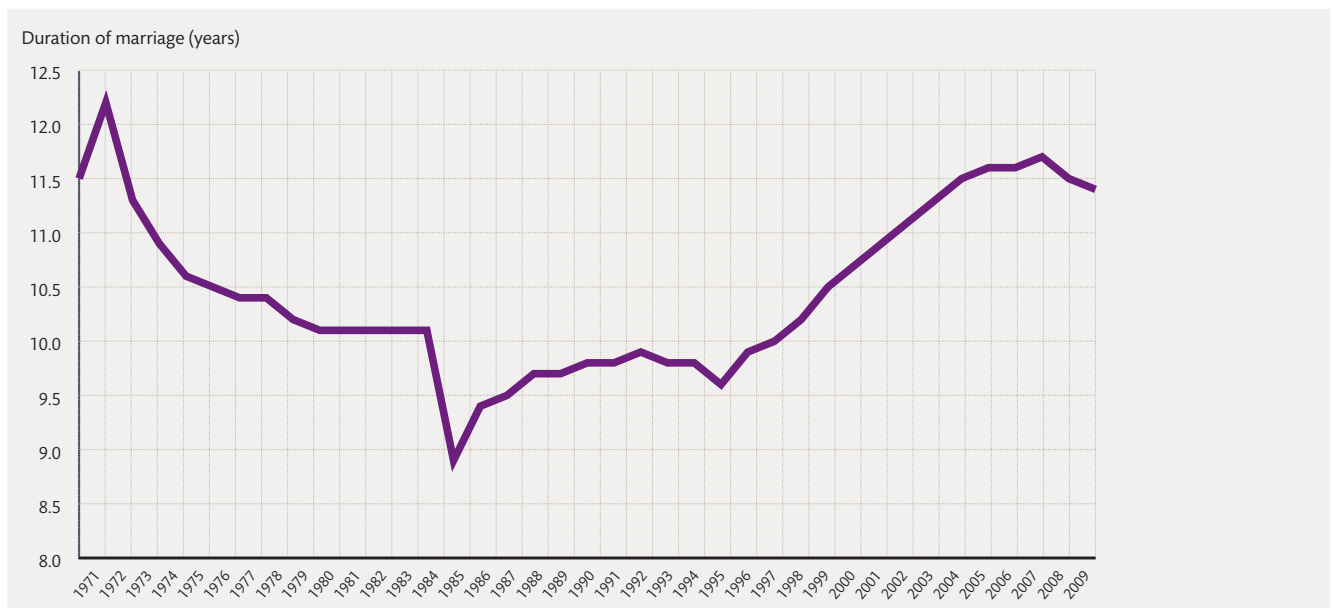
Data source: ONS (2011) *Divorce statistics*

The proportion of divorces for both genders increase steadily with age, peaking at the ages of 35 to 44. This is shown in **Chart 1.20**. There is then a decline with increasing age: fewer between the ages of 45-49 divorce, and this trend continues beyond the age of 60. Note that although the proportion of divorcees aged between 50 and 59 appear to be high, this group represents a wider age bracket.

There are few significant gender differences in terms of age at divorce. There is however a slightly greater tendency for women of younger age to divorce compared with younger men; for example, a higher proportion of women than men divorce between the ages of 25-29. A larger proportion of older men also divorce as compared with older women, though as shown in **Chart 1.10**, men tend to marry younger women, and so will likely re-partner with women of younger ages than themselves.

While age at divorce provides an indicator of where marital breakdown may occur in a person's lifespan, of greater interest may be how long marriages are shown to last.

**Chart 1.21** Trend in median duration of marriage at time of divorce, 1971-2009, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2011) *Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage*

The median duration of marriage at the time of divorce has changed over the past 40 years, as is shown in **Chart 1.21**. Time of divorce is defined here at the point at where the decree absolute is obtained.

The length of time that couples had been married when their divorce became official was similar in 1971 (11.5 years) to 2009 (11.4 years). There was a significant slump in median marriage duration between these two times however, with an especially sharp dip shown around 1985.

It is likely that this was in part due to changes in UK legislation: specifically the Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984. The Act reduced the



minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce from three years to one year. Petitions for divorce still could not be filed within the first year of marriage however. Median duration of marriage in 1984 was 10.1 years, though after this change in legislation it fell to 8.9 years in 1985. Median duration of marriage then increased steadily up to 2005 and has remained relatively stable since.



## Talking point

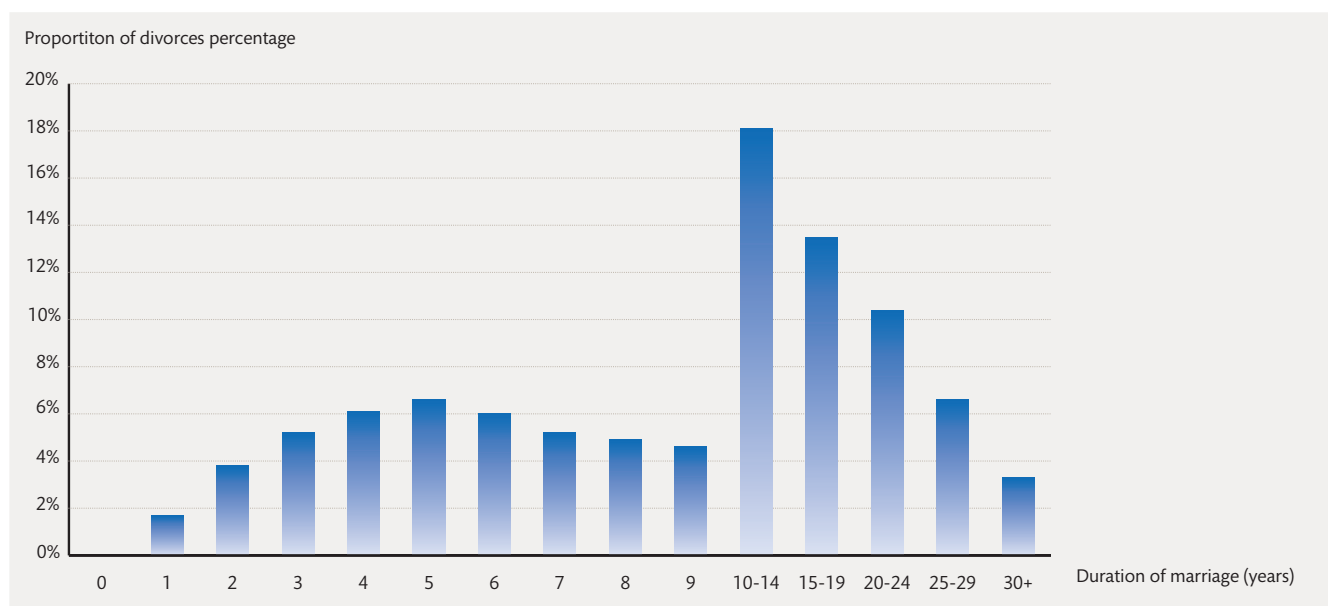
### **Marriage duration**

Trends in marriage duration are in line with what has been found in research studies showing that some couples experience a gradual decline in marital satisfaction and happiness within the first ten years of marriage (Kurdek 1999; Light and Omori 2010), though this is far from universal in all marriages. A possible decline in marital quality may be sufficient to force couples to consider divorce, but a range of other possible factors must be considered. Chapter 4 introduces and discusses the role of relationship quality in greater detail, including factors impacting upon general satisfaction and what may influence whether couples separate.

It is also likely that increasing levels of cohabitation before marriage have also affected trends in marriage duration, because increasing levels of cohabitation may mean that people with particular characteristics select into marriage. For example, fewer couples are marrying young, and couples who marry later may have a lower risk of relationship breakdown (Beaujouan & Ní Bhrolcháin, 2011). Pre-marital cohabitation may mean that only those more stable couples go on to marry.

Marriage duration may be affected by cohabitation in another way. Overall relationship duration may not be changing if pre-marital cohabitation periods are also considered, with couples marrying further along into their relationships than if they had not cohabited. Marriage may be delayed by couples choosing to cohabit.

**Chart 1.22: Duration of marriage at time of divorce, 2009, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2010) *Divorce statistics*

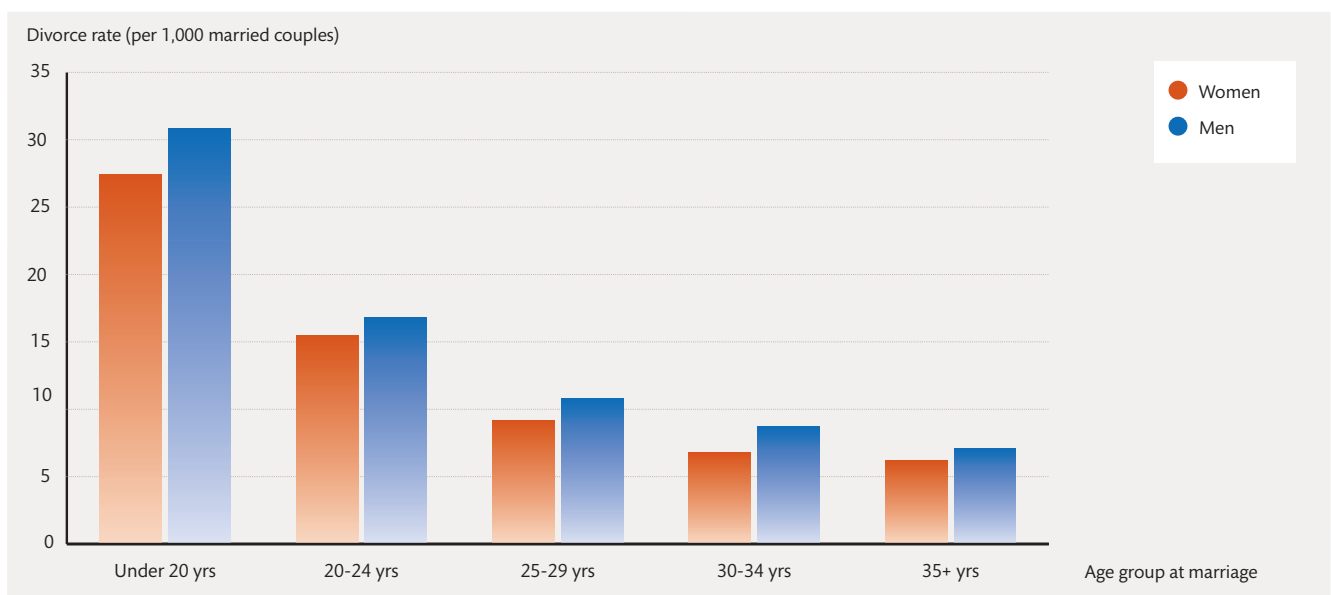


As previously discussed, the median duration of marriage at the time of divorce was 11.4 years in 2009. **Chart 1.22** shows greater detail by splitting the median duration of marriage at the time of divorce to show the proportion of couples who divorce at each stage of marriage. The annual figures for individual years of marriage are provided up until the ninth year. Above this, the years of marriage are banded in the way that the data are recorded by the ONS.

This chart shows that few divorces occur in very early marriage, with less than 2% occurring prior to the one-year anniversary (divorces in the UK can only occur after one year of marriage). The numbers then show increases in the following years up to a high point at the 5-year mark, after which there appears to begin a general decline. Many marriages end in divorce before reaching their tenth anniversary: in 2009, this was the case for 50,391 couples, representing 44.2% of total divorces.

As shown previously however, the median duration of marriage has increased in recent years, and the issues raised in the discussion of marriage duration trends also apply here. Marriage duration is not necessarily a reflection of total relationship duration, and increasing levels of premarital cohabitation may have a range of consequences; from people marrying at later stages of a relationship, to more people deciding not to marry at all.

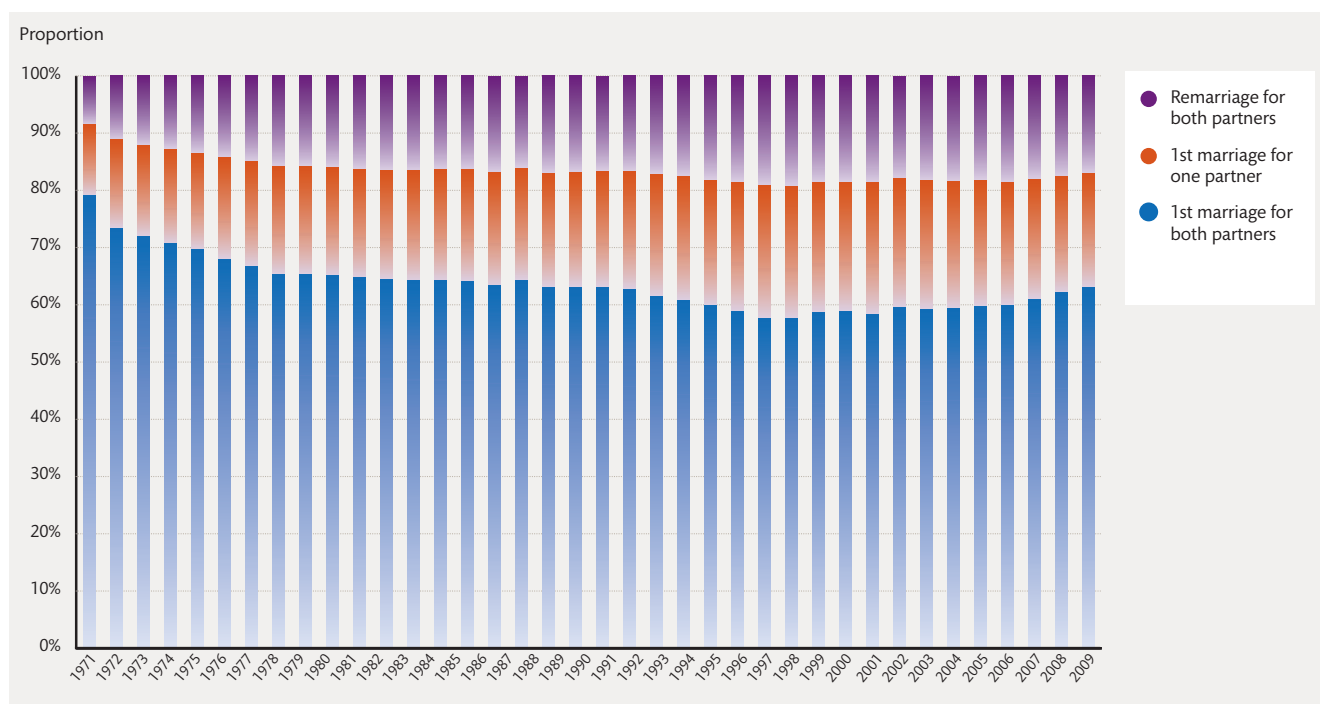
### Chart 1.23 Divorces by age at marriage, 2009, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2010) *Divorce statistics*

There are also minor gender differences in terms of divorces depending on when marriage occurred. **Chart 1.23** shows divorce rates broken down by the age of the husband and wife when they married. In general, more divorces occurred to people who married young.

One minor difference between men and women in these statistics is that despite the much smaller rates of people divorcing who married in later life, there is a slight tendency for more men than women to divorce. This is likely to reflect the increased tendency for women to marry older men (Hayes 1995), as is also suggested by **Chart 1.10** and accompanying text. Men are also less likely to remarry after divorce.

**Chart 1.24: Total marriages by previous marital status, 1971-2009, England & Wales**

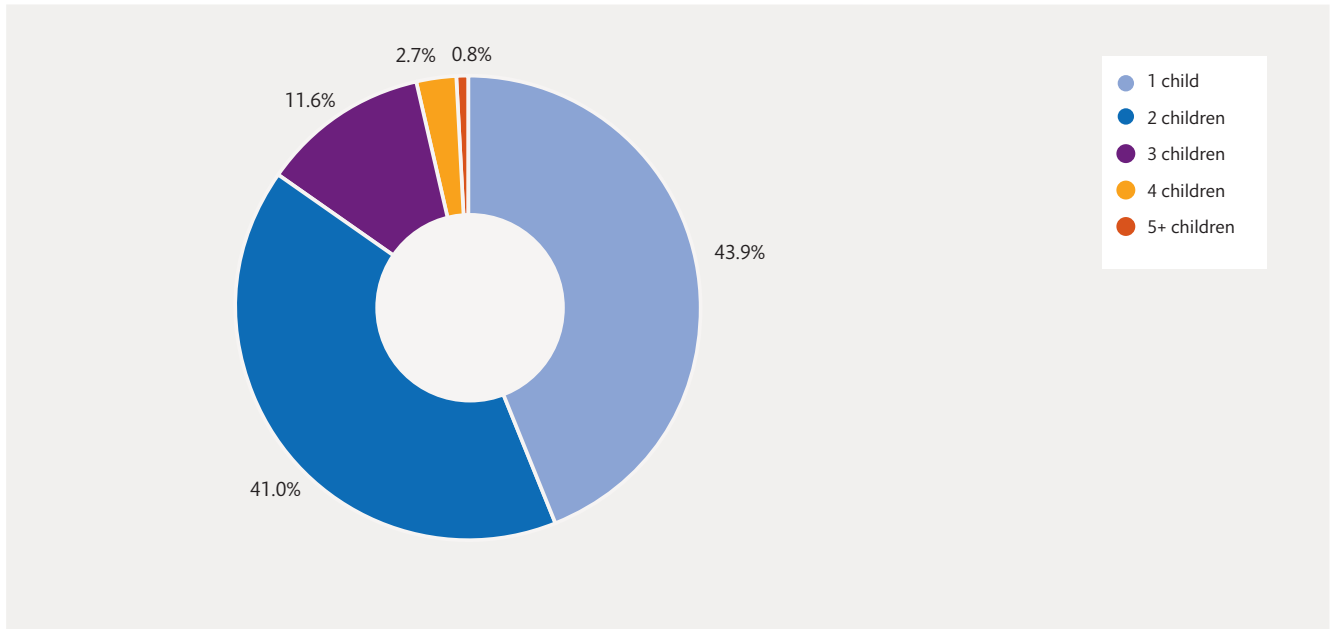
Data source: ONS (2010) Marriage statistics; ONS (2010) FM2 Marriage, divorce and adoption statistics

Many people remarry after divorcing. This is shown in **Chart 1.24** which depicts previous marital status of spouses when they marry over time. Over the past 40 years the proportion of first marriages for both partners has declined from a high of 79.1% in 1971 to its lowest point at 57.6% in 1996 and 1997. However, the proportion of those couples entering first marriages has increased since this point; in 2008, 63.1% of marriages were the first for both partners.

Again, perhaps reflecting increasing overall numbers of divorces, the proportion of couples getting married for whom it is a remarriage for at least one partner has increased, with the largest proportions seen in the late 1990s. Remarriages were perhaps supported by the 1971 legislative changes, as reflected in the increasing numbers of remarriages recorded in the early 1970s. In 2008, 19.9% of marriages involved the remarriage of one partner and 17.0% involved the remarriage of both partners. These figures appear to have stabilised over time. In the early 1970s the relative proportion of marriages that were not preceded by the previous marriage for either partner was much higher, but has since evened out over time.

Divorcing couples will, in many cases, have one or more children. Of the couples who divorced in England and Wales in 2008, **Chart 1.25** shows that most had one or two children (84.9%) and relatively few had three or more (15.1%).

**Chart 1.25** Number of children under 16 years of age per divorcing couple, 2008, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2010) *Divorce statistics*

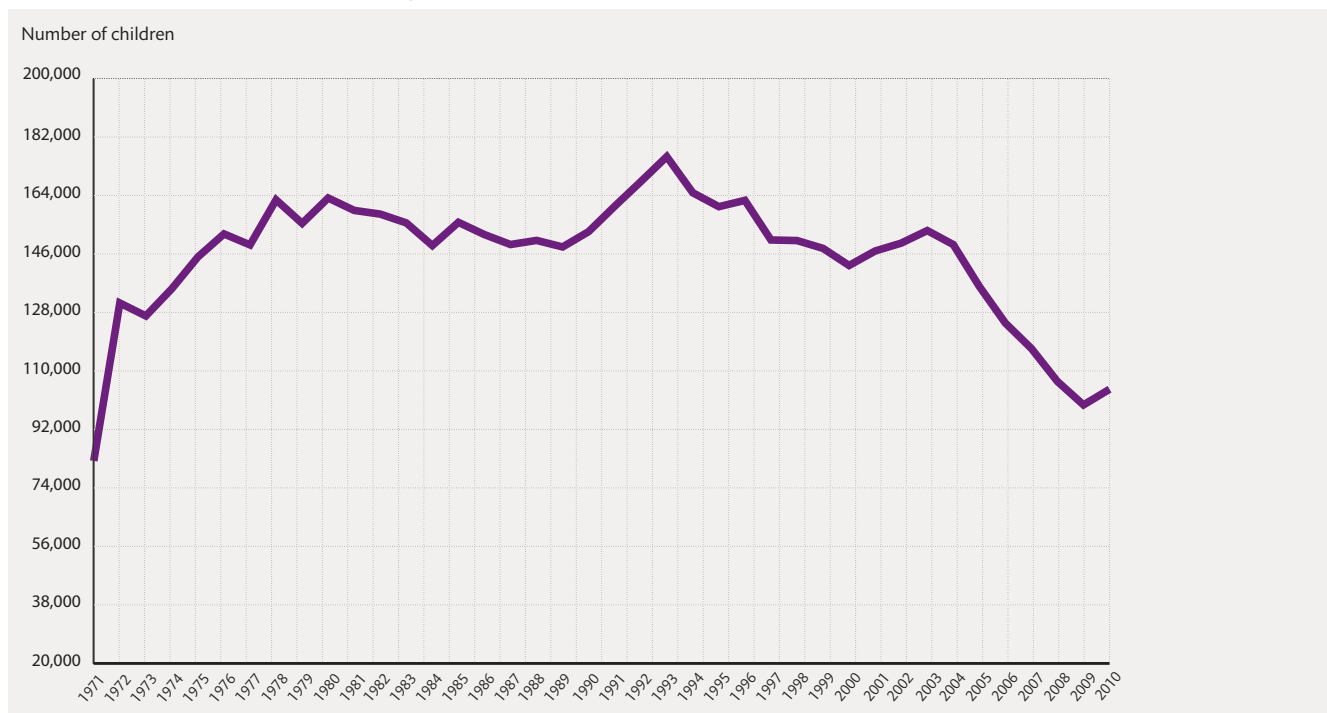


### Focus on...

#### ***Parenthood and divorce***

There is evidence from the research literature that the transition to parenthood is a risk factor for divorce (see reviews by Twenge et al., 2003, and Mitnick et al., 2009, which use meta-analysis to examine findings from across a number of studies). There are many reasons why couples may have only one child. One may be that couples who split up after having their first child would not go on to have subsequent children through that marriage, though a simpler explanation would be that the number of children a couple has together depends on how long their relationship lasts. What is the evidence on declining relationship quality after becoming a parent? One study of those covered in the previously mentioned reviews (Doss et al. 2009) examined the impact of becoming parents by following up married couples for eight years. Findings showed that both mothers and fathers reported a more marked deterioration in relationship quality and functioning than couples who did not have children during this period of follow-up. Other studies have also shown similar results, though others again have shown no differences when taking other factors into account (such as education levels and socio-economic status).

**Chart 1.26 Trends in number of children under 16 affected by divorce, 1971-2010, England & Wales**



Data source: ONS (2011) *Divorce statistics*

**Chart 1.26** shows the numbers of children under 16 affected by divorce in England and Wales. Children are included if they are treated as children of the divorcing couple and therefore may include children born outside the marriage, children from previous marriages, adopted and step-children. Over the past 40 years there has been an increase in the proportion of children who have experienced parental divorce, and this may have been linked with the general increase in divorces shown earlier in this chapter. In 1971, 82,304 children were affected by divorcing parents. This increased to a peak of 175,961 children in 1993, and in 2010 there were 104,364 children affected by divorce.



Further resources at  
[www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk)



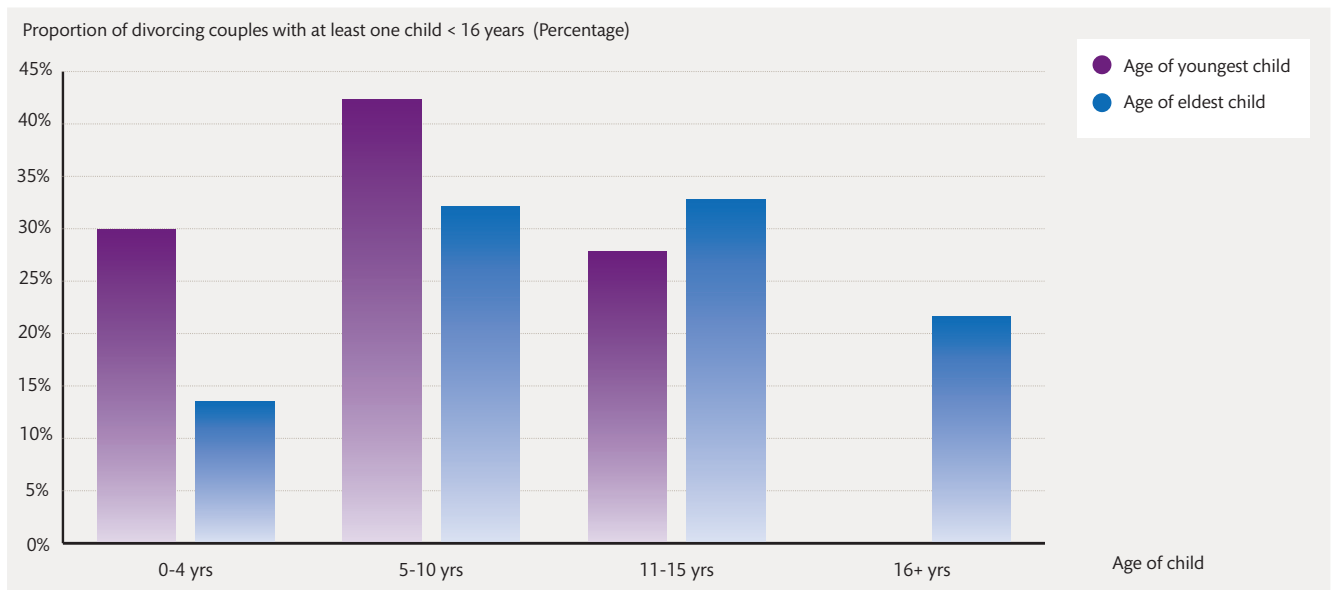
### Focus on...

#### ***Estimating numbers of children affected by divorce***

The number of children affected by divorce is likely to be substantially higher as these figures refer only to those reported at the time of divorce in each year; not to the cumulative number of children within England and Wales who have experienced divorce. Note also that these figures do not reflect the numbers of children affected by the separation of cohabiting parents, as it is difficult to assess the number of these incidences.

Evidence suggests that most children are negatively affected by parental breakup, at least for a short time; Coleman and Glenn's (2010) review showed strong associations between parental breakup and, for example, short-term ill health (both psychological and physical) and educational achievement. Some children may also experience these negative outcomes in the long-term, as shown by cohort studies which follow their development over time. However, children affected by divorce may not necessarily experience negative outcomes after their parents separate, and may even show improvement; whereas children living with parents in poor quality, but still 'intact', relationships may continue to be exposed to destructive conflict.

**Chart 1.27** Age of children of divorcing couples with at least one child less than 16 years of age, 2007, England & Wales



Data source: ONS (2010) *Divorce statistics*

What ages are the children of people who divorce? The largest group of children who had divorcing parents in 2007 were aged between 5 and 10. **Chart 1.27** demonstrates this by showing the age groups of children whose parents divorced in 2007. These figures do not take into account siblings and therefore represent the ages of all children with divorcing parents, regardless of whether they had older or younger siblings.

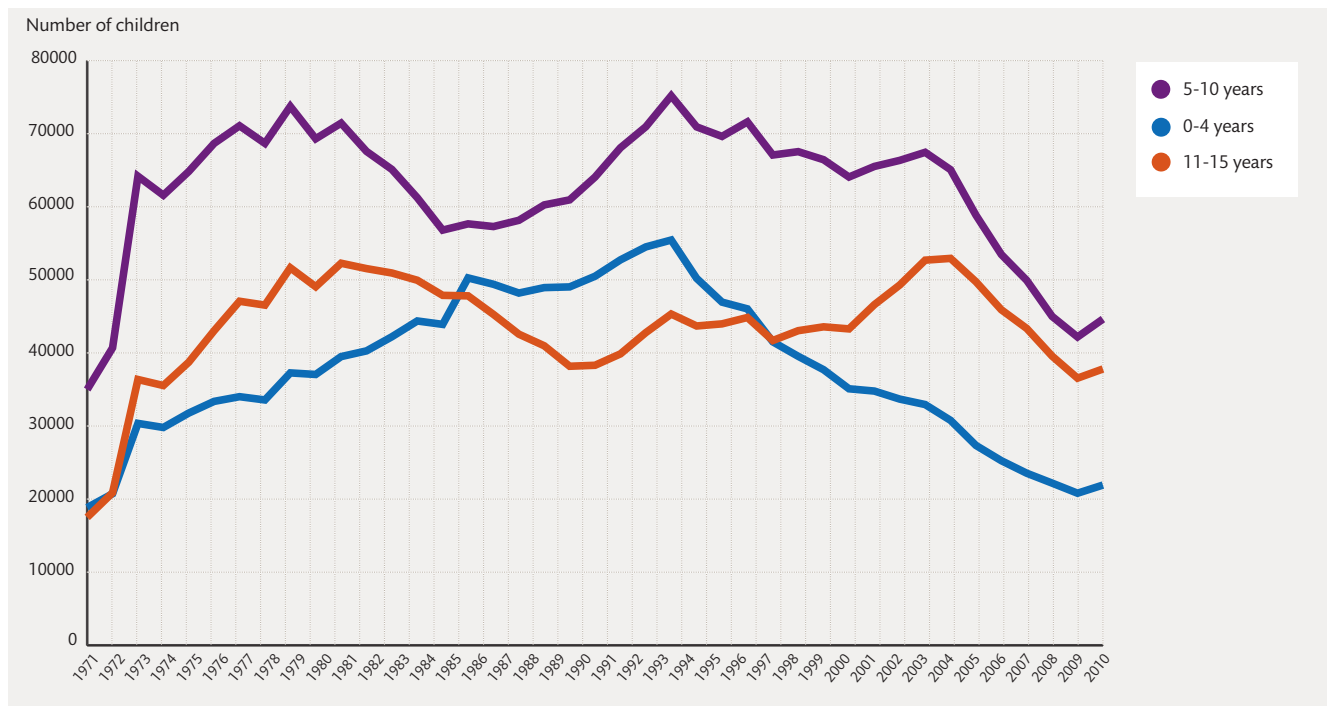
## Talking point

### **Divorce and children's ages**

Research studies have shown that a child's age when parents divorce can affect how well the child adjusts to the divorce, though not necessarily in a straightforward way. For example, Coleman and Glenn (2010) in a review of a wide range of evidence conducted for OnePlusOne suggested that younger children may find disruption of family life confusing but prove more able to adapt to changed family circumstances; older children on the other hand may face more problems adjusting to a new situation.

It is also possible that younger children may face a greater number of subsequent transitions. Children's ages are only one of a number of important factors in determining adjustment to divorce; also crucial are factors such as parenting quality, financial resources, and maternal mental health, along with communication and conflict within the family both before and after separation (Coleman and Glenn, 2010).

**Chart 1.28 Trends in ages of children of divorcing couples, 1971-2010, England and Wales**



Data source: ONS, 2010

Having examined the ages of children of divorcees, there are also distinctive patterns in how the ages of children affected by divorce have fluctuated over time. **Chart 1.28** shows trends in the ages of children of divorcing couples. In the main, these trends roughly follow those of the overall numbers of divorces, with declining numbers since the turn of the century. The highest numbers are in the 5-10 year age bracket; more couples divorce with 5-10 year-old children than do those with 0-4 or 11-15 year-old children (this may be compared to earlier figures showing median duration of marriages; see **Chart 1.21**).

There have however been fluctuations over time in these trends. Comparing **Chart 1.28** with **1.26** (showing the overall number of children affected by divorce), it may be observed how changing numbers in these trends combine to form the more consistent curve shown in **Chart 1.26**; for example, the dip in divorces involving 5-10 and 11-15 year olds in the 1980s was offset by the higher number involving 0-4 year olds.

## Talking point

### **Patterns in the ages of children**

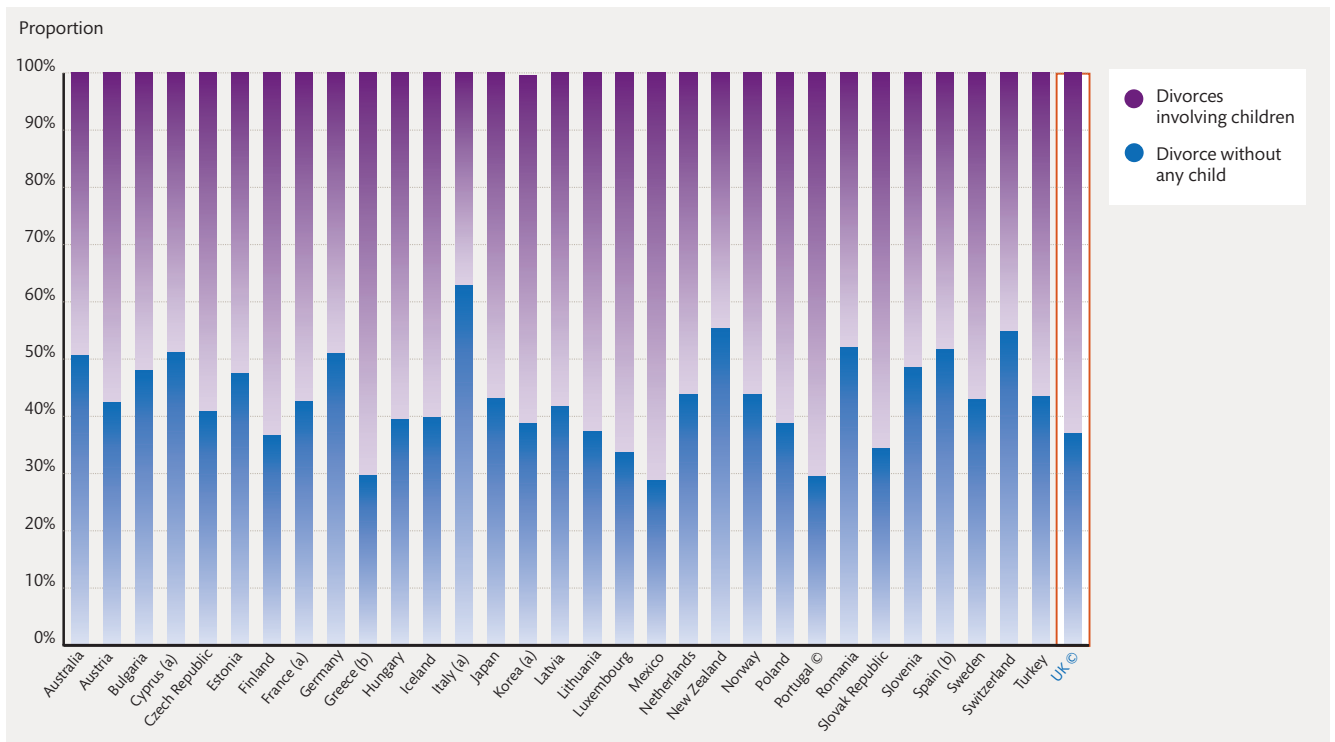
Looking at **Chart 1.28**, in the 1980s there was a dip in the number of couples divorcing with children aged 5-10 years but an increase in those divorcing with children aged 0-4 years. Why did more couples with babies and toddlers divorce during the 1980s than those with older children? There have been no formal investigations of this observation; one reason may be that the pattern occurred as a result of couples from the baby boom reaching a certain age, and the risk of divorcing becoming higher for these people. In this case the observed effect would simply be reflecting the ages of parents, though other explanations should be considered: for example the length of time following the introduction of the Divorce Reforms Act in 1969 (as implemented in 1971).

Countries differ significantly in terms of the proportion of divorces that involve children, with the UK having one of the highest proportions.

**Chart 1.29** shows an international comparison of the proportion of divorces involving and not involving children. Children in these data were those less than 18 years of age.

Italy has the highest proportion of divorces not involving children (and therefore the lowest involving children); this may be due to the country's low birth and divorce rates. Mexico has the lowest proportion of divorces not involving children (and therefore the highest involving children). With 32% of all divorces occurring in the country involving children under the age of 18, the UK has one of the highest proportions of the countries shown in the chart. Dependent children less than 18 years of age were involved in more than 50% of divorces occurring in the majority of countries shown in 2007.

**Chart 1.29 Proportions of divorces involving children: international comparison (2007)**



(a) 2006 data; (b) 2005 data; (c) 2003 data. Data source: OECD Family Database (2010)

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has considered overall trends in officially recorded marriage and divorce statistics, and more in-depth data on marriage, cohabitation and divorce. The number of marriages taking place annually in England and Wales has been in overall decline since the early 1970s, with marriage rates showing that the UK is neither especially high nor low in terms of marriage rates. The decline in marriage may be due to couples choosing to live together rather than marry; accordingly social attitudes towards cohabitation have become more positive as the incidence of cohabitation has increased. Changes in attitudes to cohabitation and numbers of people cohabiting have happened in parallel, but it is difficult to say which came first. In practice both changes probably promoted one another.

However compared with the decreasing rates of marriage over the last 40 years, the rates of divorce have remained relatively stable. Further chapters will consider how these changes may be related to household makeup and parenthood within the UK, and also how they impact upon (and may be affected by) the underlying quality of personal relationships.

“*Couples who marry later may have a lower risk of relationship breakdown*”



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# Notes

# Understanding 21st Century Relationships

## A Compendium of Key Data

Partnership Formation and Dissolution is the first chapter of **Understanding 21st Century Relationships: A Compendium of Key Data**.

Chapter two examines statistics on household structure and size in the UK. Parenthood is the focus of Chapter three, presenting data on conception and birth, and looking at how these statistics vary within the UK and worldwide. Chapter four examines relationship quality, and those factors which make some relationships endure while others fail. To obtain supporting resources visit the publications section of the OnePlusOne website [www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk) where you can also sign up to receive our free eBulletin.

OnePlusOne strengthens relationships by creating resources that help families and frontline workers tackle relationship issues early.

**Partnership Formation and Dissolution** forms the first chapter of Understanding 21st Century Relationships: A Compendium of Key Data. The full compendium marks OnePlusOne's 40 years researching what makes relationships work or fall apart.

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