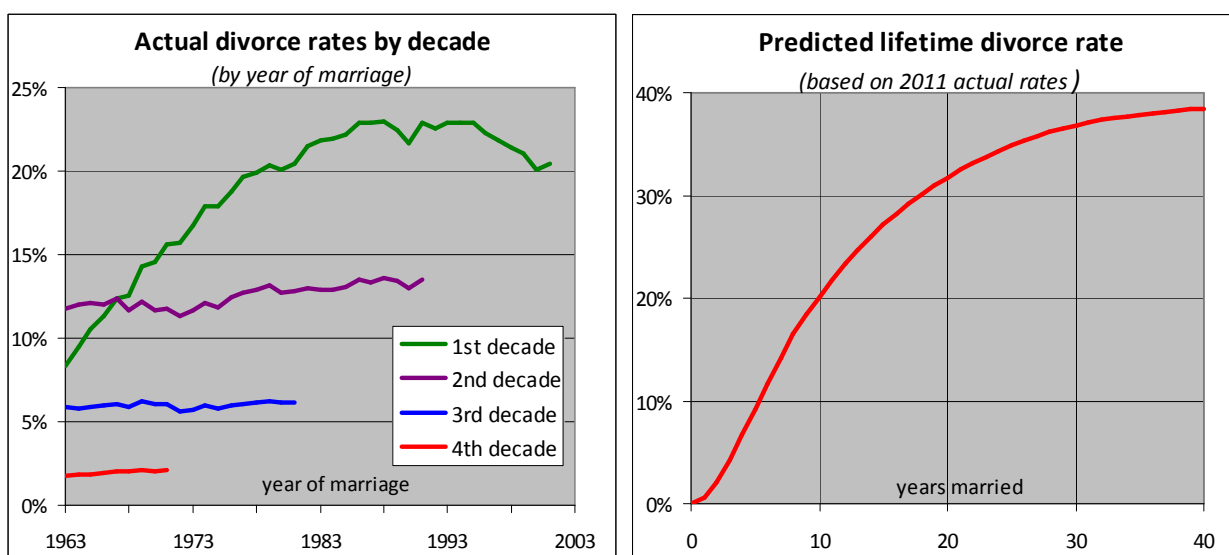




## What is the divorce rate?

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- **Based on current rates of divorce, 39% of couples marrying today will divorce.** (The recent figure of 42% from Office for National Statistics excludes overseas weddings)
- **Almost all variation in divorce rates comes during the first decade of marriage,** including the huge increase in divorces post-1969 divorce reform and the recent reduction from the 1993 peak.
- **After surviving the first decade, couples face near-enough identical risk of divorce,** regardless of whether they married in the 1960s, 70, 80s or 90s.
- **Divorce is concentrated in the early years,** peaking between years three and six. There has never been any evidence for a “seven year itch”.
- **In later years, divorce risk tails off substantially.** Only one in five divorces occur after 20 years of marriage and just one in a hundred occurs after 40 years of marriage. The over-hyped rise in over-60s “silver surfer” divorces is due to an increase in the age at which couples marry and not higher divorce rates.
- **Attempts to strengthen marriage must focus on the first ten years,** including the choices couples make before getting married, because this is the period with both highest divorce rates and greatest variation.

## Introduction

### Divorce rates are complicated!

Most people want to know the risk of divorce over the life of a marriage. Calculations of past divorce rates can be based on historic data and trends. Calculations of future divorce rates have to rely on an extrapolation from current trends. So any figure for lifetime divorce rate can only ever be an estimate because the actual divorces have yet to happen.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) produce excellent comprehensive annual data on marriage and divorce numbers and rates for England & Wales. The ONS figure most often quoted by the media when referring to the *divorce rate* is the *number of divorces* divided by the *population of married people*. This is a historic figure. The divorce rate for 2011 is 10.8 divorces per '000 married people. In other words, 1.08% of all marriages ended in divorce during 2011. If this annual rate were repeated every year, then the average marriage would last 93 years: i.e. 1000 divided by 10.8.

But this big figure tells us little about how divorce changes with either length of marriage or time. **Using new data commissioned by The Marriage Foundation from ONS**, I have produced a database of historic annual divorce rates for each year of marriage by mapping divorces by duration of marriage onto marriages during the relevant year. Although not as precise as the month-on-month method used by ONS, this simpler year-on-year method produces reliable results that are near-enough identical.

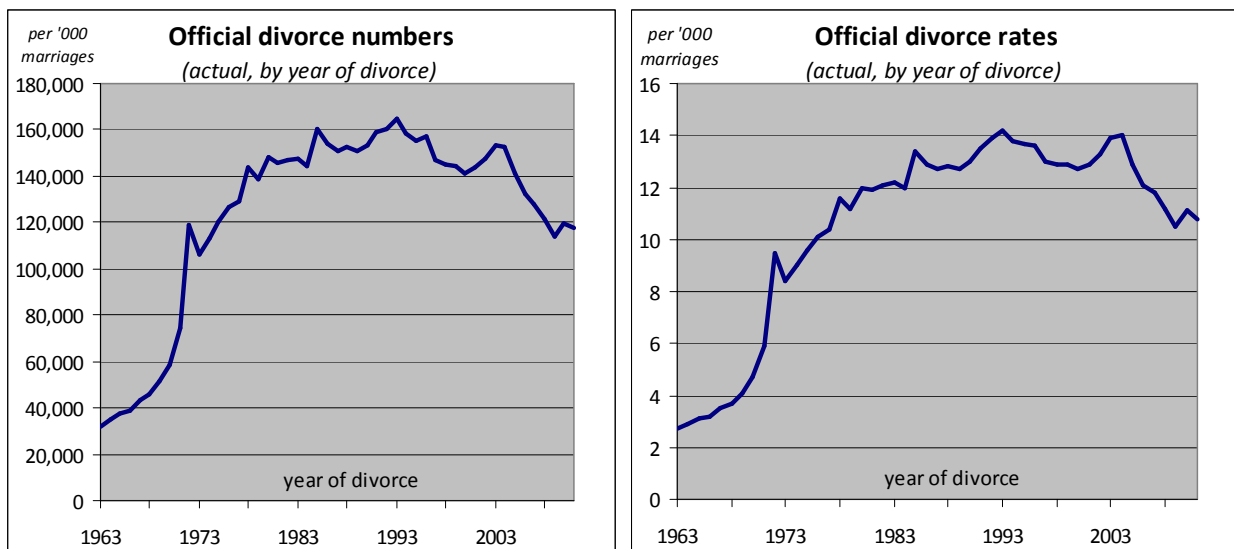
Calculations in this paper are either “actual” or “predicted”. “Actual” divorce rates look at the proportion of couples who marry in a particular year and have actually divorced. “Predicted” divorce rates then estimate couples who will divorce in the future based on the latest “actual” divorce rate for each given year.

## Official divorce numbers and rates

**The two charts** below show how the number of divorces and the rate of divorce in England & Wales have changed since the 1960s.

Divorce increased rapidly prior to 1980, then remained within a narrow band for the next two decades. After peaking in 1993, it was only from 2003 that divorce rates began to fall sharply.

Although the uncertainty of economic recession may well be a factor in deterring some couples from divorce, note that the fall in divorce pre-dates the recession by four years.



## Overseas weddings

Annual data on marriages and divorces in the UK are collated by ONS. However in recent years, an increasing number of couples marry overseas. These additional overseas weddings are not typically recorded in the domestic data on either marriage or divorce rates published by ONS.

Because of their growing numerical significance, ONS have started estimating the number of overseas weddings. In 2010, for example, an estimated 74,000 people got married overseas. This could increase the total number of weddings by as much as 30% compared to the 241,100 domestic weddings registered in England & Wales. Because many, perhaps most, people marrying overseas marry each other, ONS estimate that additional weddings equate to 40-80% of people marrying overseas (ONS, 2008).

I have therefore included an additional 50% of that 74,000 figure as an adjustment to the domestically registered marriages. This adjustment equates to an extra 15% of marriages in 2010. Figures for previous years have also been adjusted based on ONS estimates.

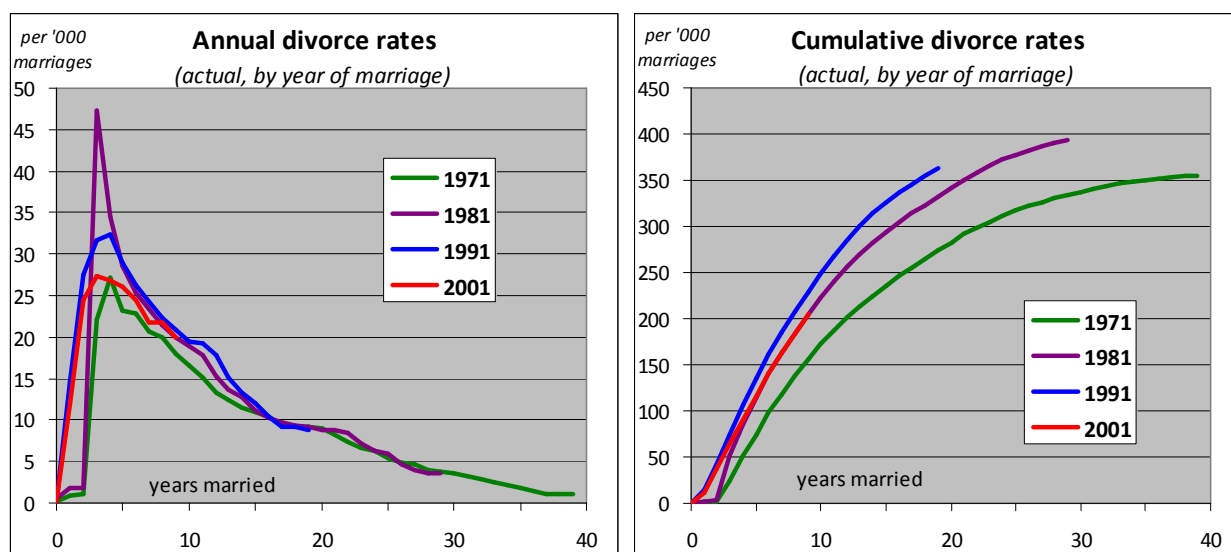
## Annual divorce rates

Using the data commissioned by Marriage Foundation from ONS, I have calculated divorce rates by duration of marriage and year of marriage.

The two charts below compare divorce rates amongst couples who married in the years 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001.

**The left chart** below shows the persistent concentration of divorce in the early years of marriage, tailing off gradually after peaking in years three to six. Although divorce rates in these early years have changed from cohort to cohort, it is striking that divorce rates after about ten years of marriage appear to have converged onto a common trajectory.

**The right chart** below shows the cumulative rate of divorce. This gives an early indication that cumulative divorce rates may have peaked (2001 trajectory is lower than 1991) and that lifetime risk for these year groups will end at just over 35% for the 1971 cohort and 40-45% for the subsequent cohorts.



## Divorce risk during the early years of marriage

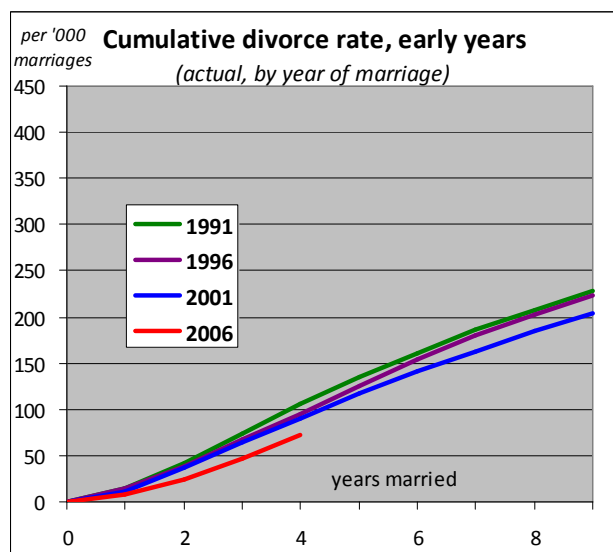
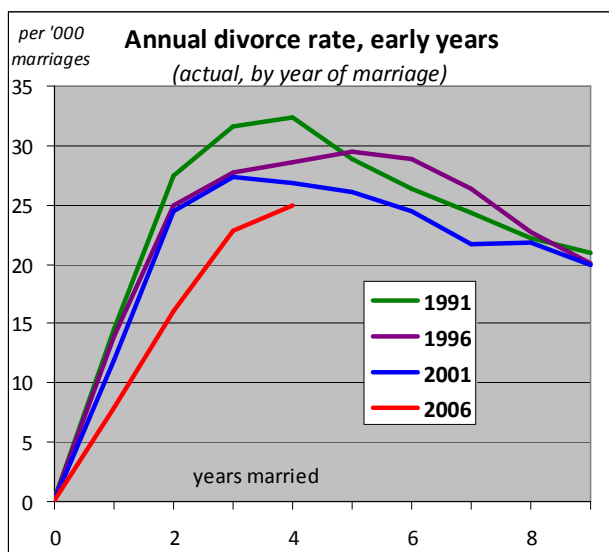
Recent marriage cohorts have fewer years worth of data. But the actual data from these early years gives us the best indication of current trends in divorce. The charts below show this in more detail.

By looking at cohorts every five years – couples who married in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006 – **the left chart** shows clearly how divorce consistently peaks in years three to six before tailing off. Similar patterns are repeated for previous cohorts going back to 1963 (not shown).

- This actual data dismisses any notion of a “seven year itch”.
- The noticeably lower divorce rates for the 2001 cohort, and especially the 2006 cohort, show that recent marriages are becoming more stable in these early years. Our previous report highlighted that this lower divorce risk is due to fewer divorces granted to wives and is entirely responsible for the 20% overall fall in divorce rates since the peak in 1993 (Benson, 2012).

**The right chart** shows more clearly the cumulative fall in divorce rates for recent cohorts.

- After a decade of marriage, the 2001 couples have 3% fewer divorces than their counterparts from 1991 and 1996.
- After only five years of marriage, the 2006 couples are already doing better.



## Divorce risk during the later years of marriage

To get actual data on divorce rates in the later years of marriage means looking at couples from older cohorts.

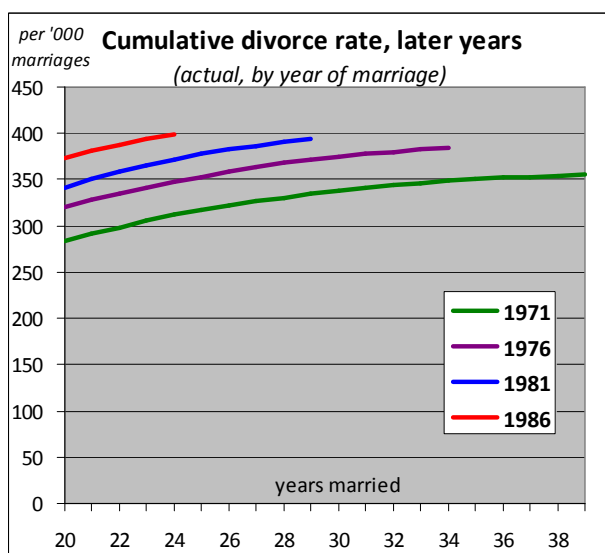
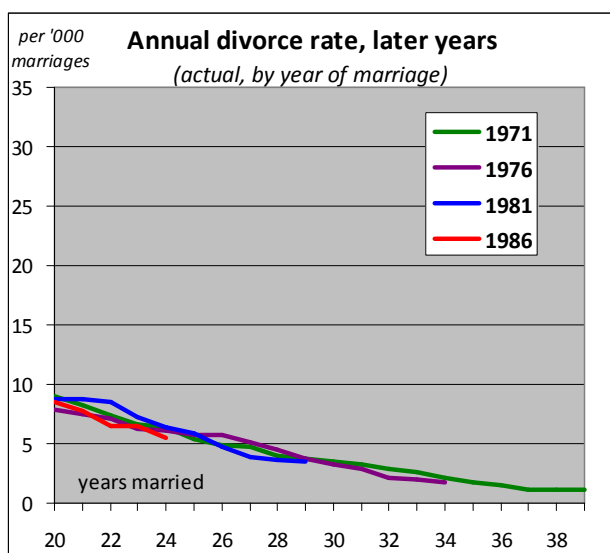
For example, there is now 40 years of data for couples who married in 1971 whereas there is also 25 years of data for couples who married in 1986 (of which I happen to be one).

What is striking from **the left chart** is how the trajectories track one another.

- It therefore appears that, in the later years at least, divorce rates tend to follow much the same trajectory, regardless of cohort.

**The right chart** however gives an indication of where each cohort is likely to end.

- Actual lifetime divorce risk for 1971 couples is unlikely to exceed much more than 35%.
- Couples who married in 1981 or 1986 still face a small additional risk, taking their likely final lifetime divorce rate to somewhere around 40-45%.



## The myth of the “seven year itch”

A greater insight into how divorce rates have varied over time can be seen by looking at particular durations of marriage.

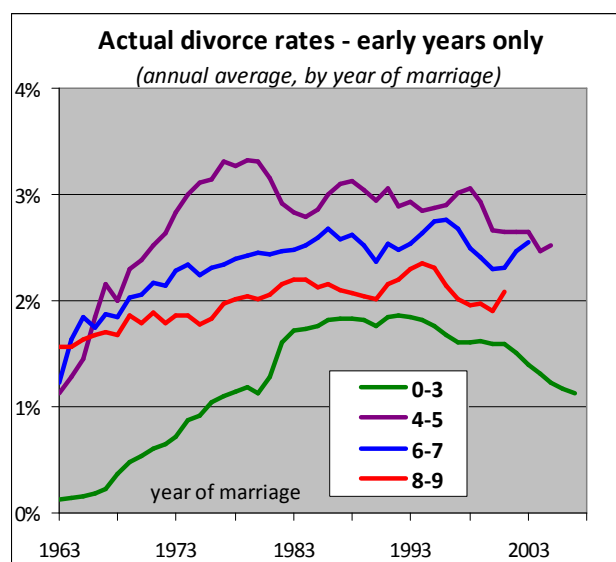
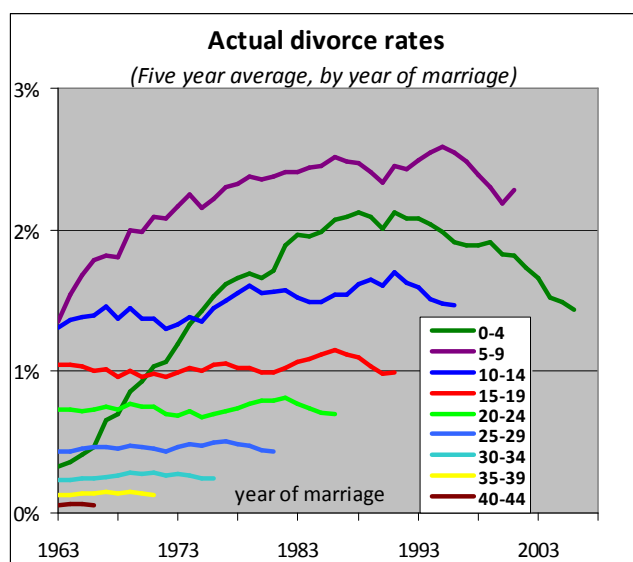
The left chart below looks at divorce rates during each five year period of marriage.

- There has been remarkable consistency in divorce rates once couples pass 10 years of marriage – the blue line and below. In this respect, the divorce risk faced by couples who married in the 1960s seems no different from couples who married in the 1970s or 1980s.
- Nor is there evidence of any significant increase in divorce rates in the later years of marriage from, say, 30 years onwards – the light blue line and below.
- Divorce rates peak during years five to nine – the purple line. Thereafter divorce risk is consistently lower with every passing year of marriage.
- Divorce rates during the early years of marriage have reduced sharply since the 1990s. This finding was explored in a previous report from Marriage Foundation (Benson, 2012).

The right chart below looks at divorce rates during the first ten years of marriage.

- Divorce rates are low and falling in the first few years of marriage – the green line (four year aggregate because of a change in data collection in the early 1980s).
- Divorce rates have been consistently highest during years four and five – the purple line.
- If there were a “seven year itch”, we should expect divorce rates to spike from year six onwards. This is not the case. Divorce rates in years six and seven – the blue line – are below their peak, falling further in years eight and nine – the red line.

There is therefore no particular “seven year itch” and never has been.



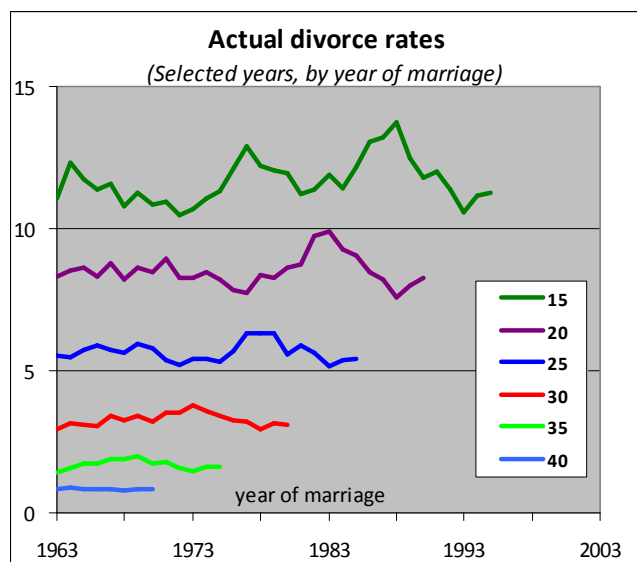
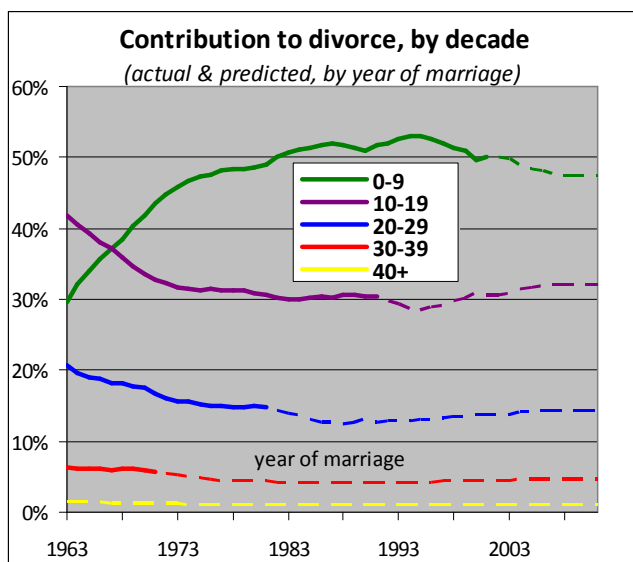
## The over-hyped “silver surfer” divorces

ONS recently reported a rise in divorces amongst over-60s – the so-called “silver surfers”. Amongst this age group, the rate of divorce has increased from 1.3 divorces per ‘000 married couples in 2001 to 1.6 per ‘000 in 2011, a rise of 23%.

However this increase has little or nothing to do with length of marriage. **The left chart** below shows the contribution of each decade to predicted lifetime divorce rates.

- Around half of all divorce accrues during the first decade of marriage – the green line – and has done since the mid-1970s.
- A steady 80% of all divorces have take place during the first two decades of marriage – green and purple lines combined (not shown).
- Only 6% of divorces occur after thirty years of marriage – red and yellow line combined (not shown) – and just 1% after forty years – yellow line only.

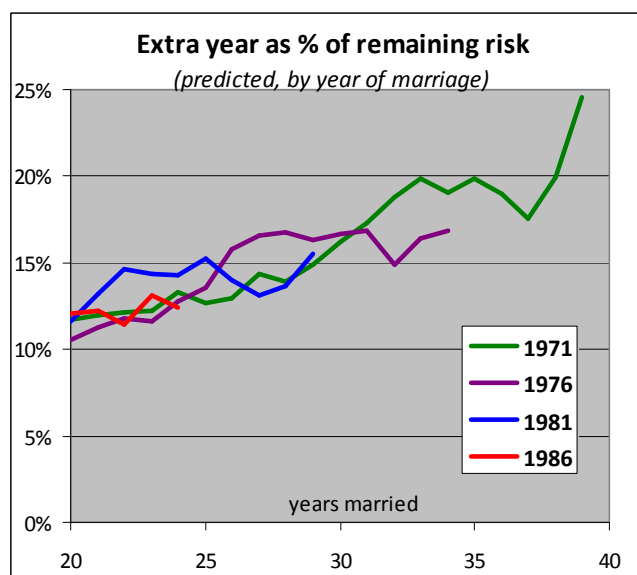
**The right chart** below shows clearly that there is no evidence of a rise in actual divorce rates for any duration of marriage beyond 15 years.



The most likely explanation for the rise in “silver surfer” divorce is due to the steadily increasing age at marriage since the late 1960s.

To illustrate this, the average woman who married in 1975 aged 23 would now be reaching 60, after 37 years of marriage, one year earlier than women who married a decade earlier in 1965. The average man who married in 1978 aged 26 would now be reaching 60, after 34 years of marriage, two years earlier than men who married in 1968.

**The chart on the right** shows the contribution to divorce of that extra year’s divorce. After around 35 years of marriage, the apparent increase is 20%, similar to the 23% increase reported by ONS above.



## The consistency of marriage

Perhaps the most striking finding from this study is the sheer consistency of marriage once couples have survived the first ten years.

The two charts below illustrate how divorce rates vary during each five year period of marriage. This is actual data.

**The left chart** shows that divorce rates have varied greatly during the first five years and second five years of marriage.

**The right chart** shows that for every subsequent five year period, divorce rates have remained the same whether couples married in the 1960s, 70s, 80 or 90s.

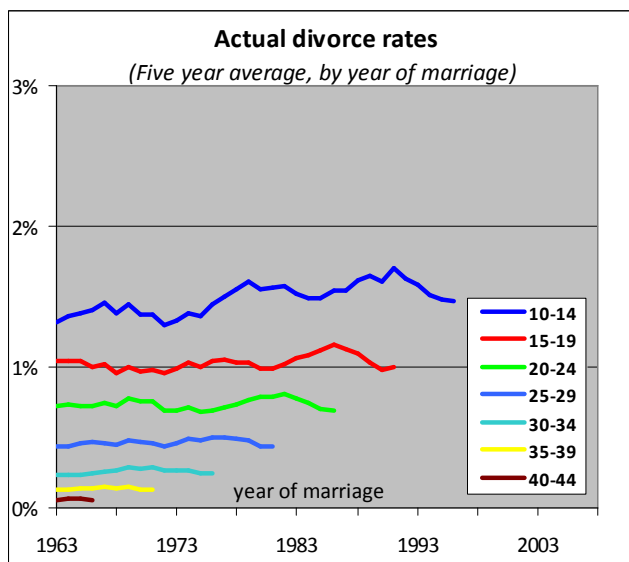
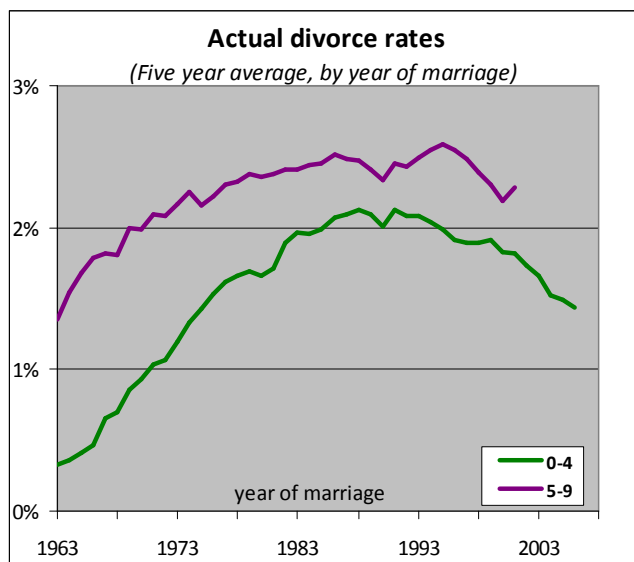
Although these findings might have been hard to predict in advance, they are entirely consistent with commitment theory (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). The phenomenon is best understood in terms of the care taken to choose a mate.

Prior to the 1960s, wise couples took their mate selection slowly, acquiring information about one another before making a decision to commit. The consequence of not taking care was obvious, in the absence of effective birth control. Few women were prepared to risk pregnancy in an unsuitable relationship that should never have started. Marriage prior to the 1960s therefore tended to be based on a clear intentional decision about the future.

After the 1960s – and the 1969 divorce law reform that made divorce easier – birth control introduced the possibility of unmarried cohabitation, stigmatised then, normalised now. However cohabitation brings with it an “inertia” or “premature entanglement” that removes other choices, making an unsuitable relationship more likely to continue and harder to end. Nor does cohabitation require such intentionality. Couples can “slide” into cohabitation, get trapped by “inertia”, then “slide” on into having babies and even getting married. These marriages based on “sliding” rather than “deciding” tend to be more fragile because the commitment was less clear in the first place (Stanley, Kline & Markman, 2006).

The variation in divorce rates during the first ten years of marriage largely reflects how well couples choose their mate. After ten years, couples have established a level of “inertia” or “constraints” (such as history, children, friends, life, future) that make marriage worth the perseverance through tough times. This is not all cake and roses. 20% of original marriages still fail after ten years, regardless of either year of marriage or age at marriage.

The consistent state in which the surviving couples find themselves after ten years thus reflects a good choice of mate and a common motivation to make their marriage work.





## Predicting divorce risk over a lifetime

And finally ... **The charts below** show the likely change in divorce rates for cohorts of couples getting married during 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011.

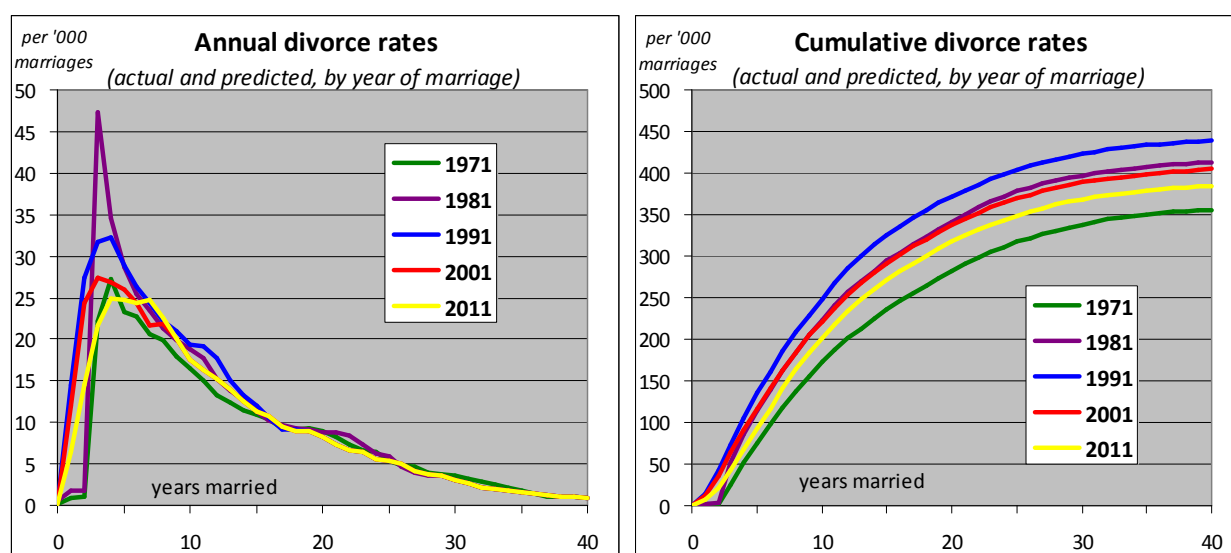
Data combines “actual” divorce rates to date with “predicted” divorce rates based on the most recent annual data – i.e. couples getting divorced during 2011.

The yellow lines represent the predicted trajectory of divorce for couples who married in 2011. This trajectory almost exactly mirrors that of couples who married in 1976 (not shown), a time when overall divorce rates were still rising.

Today’s newlyweds can therefore expect to experience overall levels of divorce risk not seen since the mid-1970s.

We can also predict that, regardless of what happens during their first ten years, 20% of today’s newlyweds will divorce thereafter. Barring a social or legal change that reverses the effect of the 1969 divorce reform, it seems implausible to expect divorce rates to vary much after ten years.

**Any policy attempts at reducing divorce must necessarily be concentrated in the first ten years, particularly in terms of how couples can make better choices in the first place.**



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