



Marriage Foundation

Actual divorce rates down by up to half

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September 2018

- Analysis of ONS data shows that divorce rates have fallen by up to half among newlyweds.
- On current predictions, couples who have married any time in the last ten years face a 37 per cent predicted lifetime risk of divorce, a rate not seen since 1973.
- Once couples have been married for ten years, divorce rates become highly predictable, declining gradually with every year married. This means that after the first decade of married life, divorce risk has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s.
- Furthermore, during the first decade of married life where divorce rates have risen since the 1960s and fallen again since the 1990s, most of this variation is attributed to divorces granted to wives. Throughout, there has only been a small steady rise in divorces granted to husbands.
- Recent marriages have become more stable because, as social pressure to marry reduces, those men who do marry are more committed. Hence fewer unhappy wives are filing for divorce.
- Our analysis of divorce rates uses actual marriage and divorce data and the same divorce rate model used by ONS. However we think our marriage data better reflects the true number of weddings in England and Wales because we adjust for the additional 10-15 per cent of 'marriages abroad' estimated by ONS.

Divorce rates, as reported annually by the Office for National Statistics, represent the proportion of all married couples, or couples in a particular age group, who divorced during the past year.

However this 'year of divorce' method tells us little about trends, because it doesn't take into account how long the couples who divorced had been married.

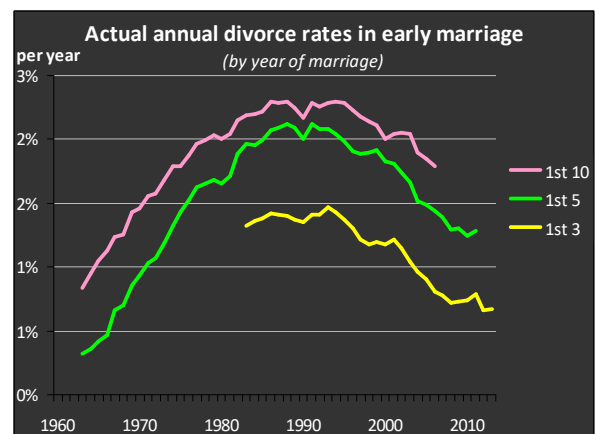
Our model instead tracks divorces by 'year of marriage' using ONS data (*ONS various*). This allows us to follow couples who married in, say, 1970 or 1990 or 2010 and compare, for example, how divorce rates have changed during the early years of marriage and also among marriages of longer duration.

Finally we can apply the most recent divorce rates to estimate lifetime predictions, using the same method as ONS.

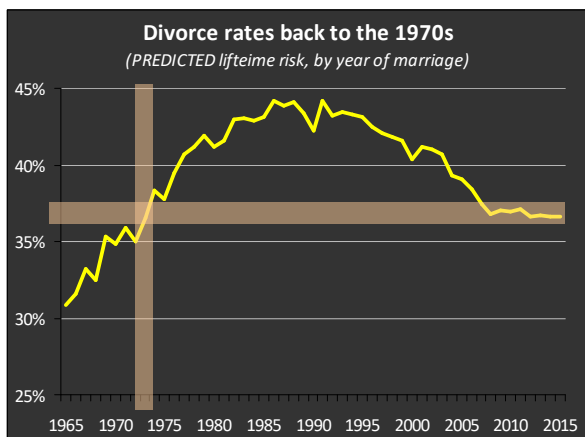
Analysis of ONS data shows that divorce rates have fallen by up to half among newlyweds.

First xxx years of marriage	Latest year of marriage	Divorces during that period	Comparison with peak year for divorces		Change in divorce rate
			Year	Divorces	
Three	2013	2.0%	1993	4.4%	-54%
Five	2011	6.4%	1991	10.6%	-39%
Ten	2006	17.9%	1988	23.0%	-22%

During the first three years of marriage, actual divorce rates of couples who married in 2013 are **down 54%** compared to those who married in 1993, the peak. Over five years, divorce rates are **down 39%**. Over ten years they are **down 22%**.



On current predictions, couples who have married any time in the last ten years face a 37 per cent predicted lifetime risk of divorce, a rate not seen since 1973.



Couples who married in the 1970s already have forty-odd years of actual divorce data behind them. So we can be really confident that their final predicted lifetime divorce rate will be close to their actual lifetime divorce rate to date.

However couples who married more recently have a lot less data to go on. So to predict their lifetime divorce rates, we have to assume that their future divorces are in line with current trends, which is clearly a lot more uncertain.

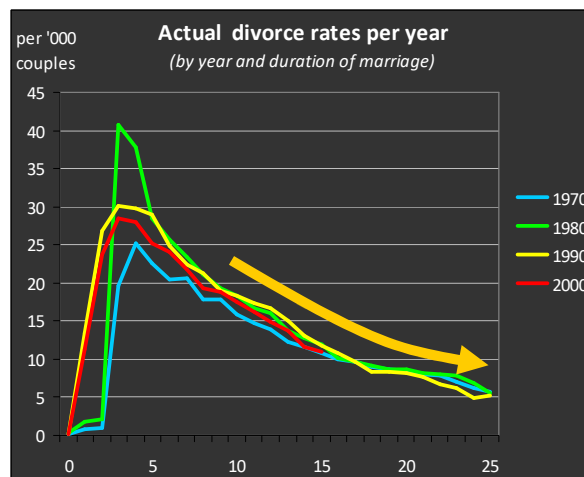
Nonetheless, it is highly probable that the decline in early divorce rates since the 1990s will lead to a lower lifetime divorce rate for couples today.

Our estimates, using the same model as ONS, are that today's couples face a 37 per cent lifetime risk of divorce. Only couples who married prior to 1973 have done better.

The worst year for marriages is 1986 – coincidentally my own year of marriage! – where 44 per cent of couples are predicted to divorce.

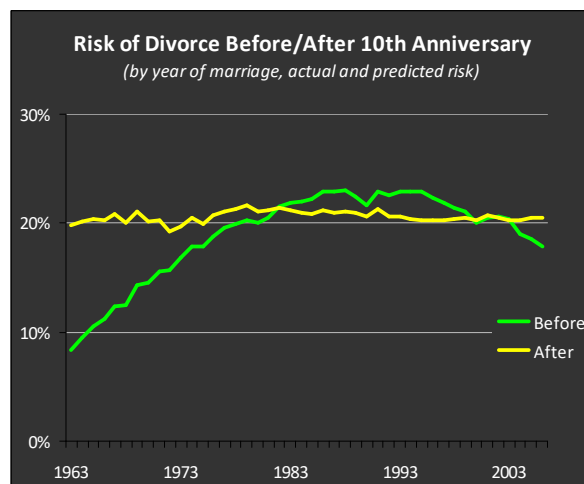
NOTE: Our lifetime estimates are slightly lower than those of ONS (ONS 2015a) because when we compare the number of divorces with the number of marriages in a given year, we include an estimate of 'marriages abroad'. This amounts to a non-trivial 10 to 15 per cent of additional weddings per year (ONS 2008, 2017).

Once couples have been married for ten years, divorce rates become highly predictable, declining gradually with every year married. This means that after the first decade of married life, divorce risk has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s.



Whatever year couples marry, from the 1960s onwards, divorce rates have peaked between years 3 and 7, tailing off steadily thereafter.

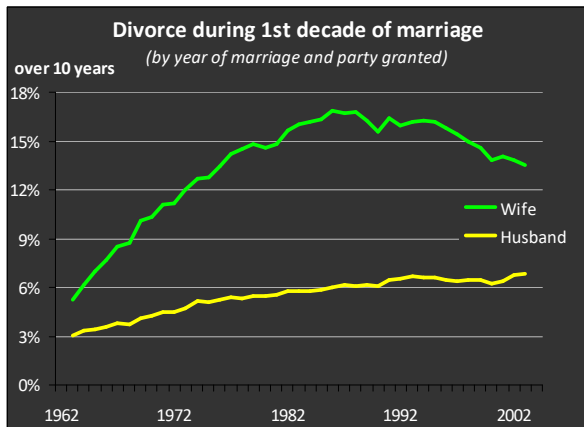
But from about year 10 onwards, divorce rates tend to follow much the same trajectory.



This should explain the remarkable finding that divorce risk after the first ten years of marriage – combining actual divorces to date for each year of marriage with the predicted divorces from that point onwards – has remained at almost exactly 20 per cent since the 1960s.

All of the change in divorce rates to date is down to what happens during the first decade of married life.

Furthermore, during the first decade of married life where divorce rates have risen since the 1960s and fallen again since the 1990s, most of this change is attributed to divorces granted to wives. Throughout, there has only been a small steady rise in divorces granted to husbands.



Divorces are either granted to the husband or to the wife. Our model allows us to calculate actual divorce rates attributable to either (ONS 2012, 2015b).

During the first decade of married life, there has only been a gradual increase in divorce rates attributable to divorces granted to husbands. This rate has stabilised at 6 per cent since the early 1980s.

However rates attributable to divorces granted to wives has changed far more markedly, rising sharply from 6 per cent among couples who married in the mid-1960s, peaking at 17 per cent among couples in the late-1980s, and then falling to 13 per cent among couples in the 2000s.

Recent marriages have become more stable because, as social pressure to marry reduces, those men who do marry are more committed. Hence fewer unhappy wives are filing for divorce.

Were changes in divorce rates due to economic pressures, it would be reasonable to expect divorce rates attributable to both husbands and wives to go up or down in sync. But they haven't.

Our explanation is down to gender differences in the way men and women commit. Women's commitment tends to be based more on attachment and bonding (Rhoades et al 2010).

The attitudes and behaviours of wives may therefore be more independent of economic circumstances. This might explain why divorces granted to unhappy husbands have remained so stable for so long.

However there is good evidence that men's commitment tends to be based more on whether they 'decide' or 'slide' into a relationship (Rhoades et al 2006).

Men who 'decide', who have made a clear decision to commit, tend to be happier and more stable. Men who 'slide' tend to be less clear, less happy and less committed.

The rise in divorce rates through the 1960s and into the 1970s could be explained by falling commitment among men – and more 'sliders' – following the introduction of birth control and opportunity for risk-free cohabitation.

What has changed in the past few decades is the growing acceptability of cohabitation and reduced social pressure from family and friends for couples to marry.

This is what we think is behind the fall in divorce rates among divorce granted to wives.

Those men who do marry are increasingly 'deciders' who mean it. Hence more happy wives and fewer divorces granted to wives in the early years.

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