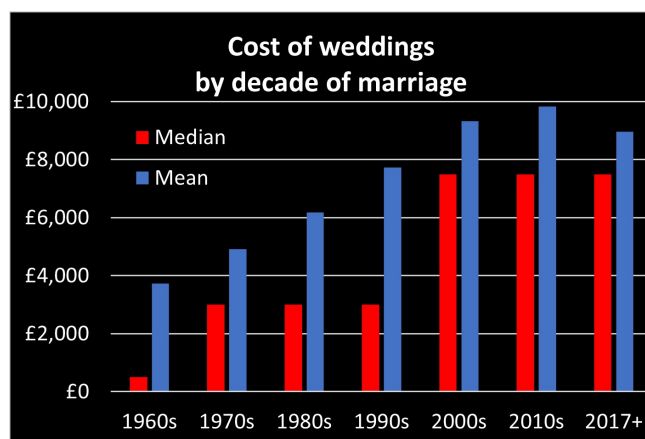




Wedding Guests and Costs

Harry Benson, February 2022

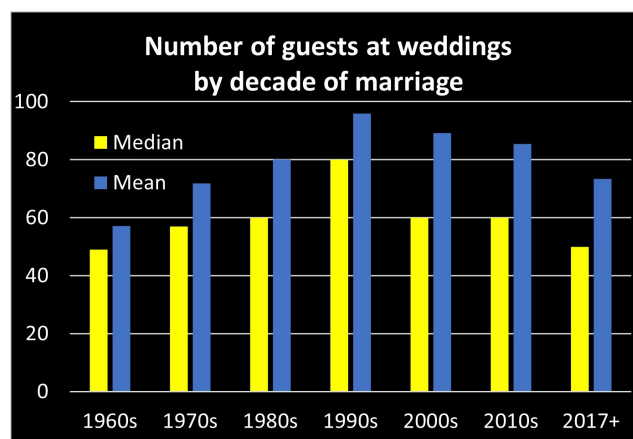
- It is widely believed that the average cost of a wedding now exceeds £30,000.
- We commissioned the polling company Savanta ComRes to survey 2,000 adults aged 30 and above who had ever married, asking them how much they spent on their (first) wedding in today's money and how many guests attended. For costs, we gave respondents a series of ranges rather than asking for a specific figure which we felt was too difficult.
- The median cost of a first wedding – based on today's prices – has risen steadily since the 1960s and is now in the range £5-10,000, most likely below the mean cost of £9,000.
- The median number of guests at a first wedding has risen from 50 in the 1960s, peaking at 80 in the 1990s, and is now back down to 50 in the recent years since 2017.
- There is evidence that wedding size affects future divorce risk. Taking other factors into account in regression analyses, early divorce risk is significantly higher following weddings where costs are very high (more than £20,000) or where number of guests is very low (1-10).
- Our findings are consistent with previous research. Expensive weddings can be bad for marriages due to risk of debt and over-emphasis on the party. More guests can be good for marriages because they affirm the choice to commit to one person and rule out other choices.



The median cost of first weddings – based on today's prices – has risen from under £1,000 in the 1960s, to £1-5,000 in the 1970s to 1990s, and up to £5-10,000 since the 2000s.

Using mid-range estimates, the mean cost – which overstates the average because of high top end costs – has risen from £3,700 in the 1960s to £8,900 in the recent years since 2017.

Just 4% of weddings in our sample since 2000 cost £30,000 or more.



The median number of guests at first weddings has risen from 50 in the 1960s, peaked at 80 in the 1990s, and is now back down to 50.

The 53% of weddings with 60 guests or fewer are fairly evenly distributed. Thereafter 21% of weddings had 61-100 guests, 18% had 101-250 guests, and 8% had 251 or more guests.

The most common wedding size was around 50 or 100 guests, each of which comprising 12% of all weddings.

Introduction

According to the website Hitched, the average UK wedding costs an eye-watering £31,974 (*Hitched 2019*).

This high perceived cost acts as a major barrier to marriage. In a Marriage Foundation survey conducted last year, almost one in three young unmarried adults aged 18-30 said they would be more likely to marry if the typical wedding was 'cheaper, smaller, and didn't have to include a big meal' (*Benson 2021*).

We have long suspected that this figure in excess of £30,000 is hugely inflated by the wedding industry who survey only its biggest spenders.

In our follow-up survey of 2,000 adults aged 30 and above who had ever married, we asked two questions about the wedding day of their first marriage:

- In today's money, roughly how much would you estimate the entire wedding celebration cost for your first marriage? This cost is for the day itself, not including stag/hen do, clothes, gifts, honeymoon, etc
- Roughly how many friends and family came to your wedding for your first marriage?

The distribution of the sample meant that we had some 1,100 weddings that took place before the year 2000 and 900 weddings that took place afterwards.

Through the responses to other questions in the survey, we were not only able to track trends in wedding size by decade of marriage, we were also able to explore any possible links between wedding size and subsequent divorce.

Previous US research has found that the most expensive weddings and those with fewer guests were associated with higher risk of divorce, net of all other factors (*Francis-Tan & Mialon 2015*).

The economists in that study suggested expensive weddings may incur debts that put pressure on the subsequent marriage. Having more guests affirms the risky choice to choose one person and give up all other choices.

So far as we know, this is the first UK study to investigate these links.

Results

The cost of first weddings by decade of marriage is reported in the following table. Means are calculated using the mid-estimate of each cost range. Typically means with 'long tails' overstate the average because very high cost weddings can skew the mean. Thus the £8,957 mean cost of the most recent weddings likely overstates the real average, which is somewhere in the range £5-10,000.

Cost of First Weddings

| Decade | Median | Mean |
|--------|-----------|--------|
| 1960s | < £1,000 | £3,729 |
| 1970s | £1-5,000 | £4,914 |
| 1980s | £1-5,000 | £6,189 |
| 1990s | £1-5,000 | £7,727 |
| 2000s | £5-10,000 | £9,326 |
| 2010s | £5-10,000 | £9,832 |
| 2017+ | £5-10,000 | £8,957 |

Note: mean is based on mid-prices

The number of guests by decade of marriage is reported in the following table. The median is the most appropriate figure here, averaging 50 guests in most recent weddings.

Number of Guests

| Decade | Median | Mean |
|--------|--------|------|
| 1960s | 49 | 57 |
| 1970s | 57 | 72 |
| 1980s | 60 | 80 |
| 1990s | 80 | 96 |
| 2000s | 60 | 89 |
| 2010s | 60 | 85 |
| 2017+ | 50 | 73 |

The following chart shows the distribution of weddings since 2000 by cost, showing that 35% of weddings cost under £5,000, 61% cost under £10,000, 12% cost more than £20,000 and just 4% cost more than £30,000.



The next chart shows the distribution of weddings since 2000 by number of guests, showing that 53% of weddings have 60 or fewer guests, 26% have between 61 and 120 guests, 12% have between 121 and 240 guests, and 9% have more than 240 guests.



Both low and high cost weddings are surprisingly well distributed across the employment spectrum.

Although only 4% of higher managers – the top group – have low cost weddings, the next two highest groups account for 47% of low cost weddings.

Similarly, whereas 4% of those not in work have high cost weddings, 31% of high cost weddings fall outside the top two employment groups.



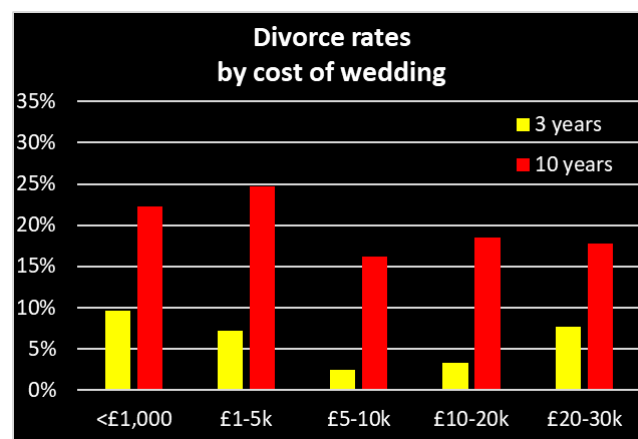
Divorce rates and Wedding Size

In a series of regression analyses, we were able to look at the relationship between wedding size and divorce, after taking into account a range of other factors, such as age at wedding, employment status, reasons for marrying, where couples met, and whether they completed marriage preparation or signed a pre-nup.

Among weddings taking place since the year 2000, we found that 8% of marriages ended in divorce in the first three years following expensive weddings (costing between £20,000 and £30,000). This was above the overall divorce rate of 5% across the sample.

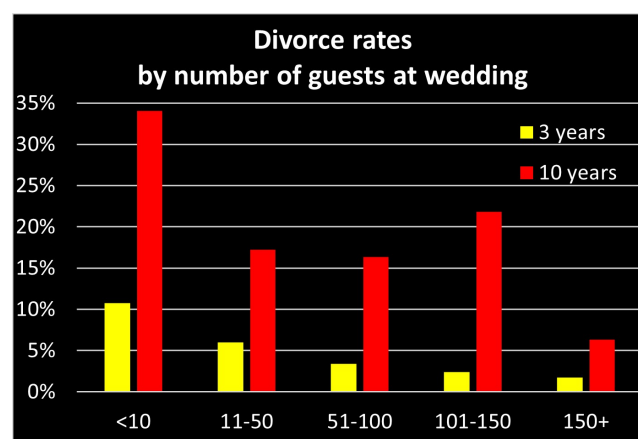
Taking other factors into account, this difference was statistically significant over the first three years of marriage but disappeared thereafter.

Although early divorce rates also appear higher for the lowest cost weddings, the difference is accounted for by other factors.



We also found that 34% of marriages ended in divorce in the first ten years following small weddings (with 10 guests or fewer). Again, this was close to double the overall divorce rate of 18% across the sample.

Taking other factors into account, this difference was statistically significant over ten years of marriage, but not before.



While these differences are statistically significant, we should be cautious in overinterpreting them as sample numbers are small.

Conclusion

In what may be the first nationally representative sample of its kind, we find that the average cost of a UK wedding is nowhere near the figure of £30,000 often quoted in the media. Just 4% of weddings in our sample cost more than £30,000.

We asked 2,000 adults who had been married at some stage – and in most cases still were – how much they had spent on their wedding ‘in today’s money’ and how many guests came to the wedding.

- The average cost of a wedding in recent years is in the range £5-10,000 and most likely less than £9,000.
- The average number of guests attending a wedding is 50, back to levels previously seen in the 1960s.

Though numbers are small, there is evidence that expensive weddings raise the risk of early divorce and having more guests reduces the risk of divorce, net of other factors.

Note

All figures in this report are weighted to provide a nationally representative sample.

References

- Benson, H. (2021). Wedding costs and the marriage gap. Romford: Marriage Foundation.
- Francis-Tan, A., & Mialon, H. (2015). “A Diamond Is Forever” And Other Fairy Tales: The Relationship Between Wedding Expenses And Marriage Duration. *Economic Inquiry*, 53, 1919-1930
- Hitched (2019) National Wedding Survey