

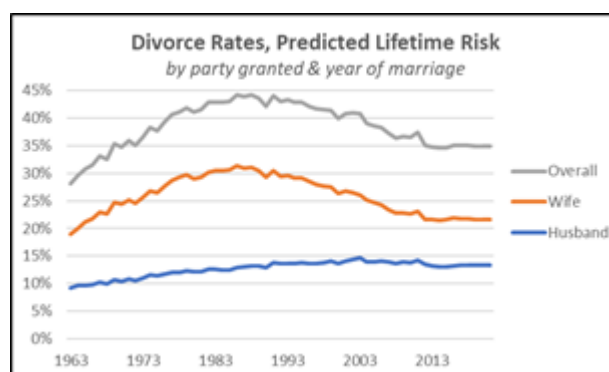
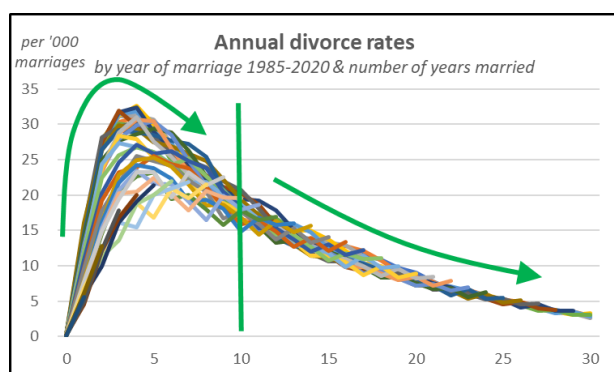


Marriage Foundation

What is the Divorce Rate?

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation

- 'What is the divorce rate' is a much harder question to answer than most people realise. Most commentary refers to divorces in a particular year – the 'year of divorce' method. But what we really want to know is what happens to marriages over time – the 'year of marriage' method.
- For years I have been keeping record of divorces by duration of marriage, by commissioning data specially from the Office for National Statistics. This allows me to map marriages that ended after – say – 1, 2, or 3 years with the number of marriages that began 1, 2, or 3 years ago. This means I can track what happens to couples who married in any particular year, which gives a far better indication of the real trends in divorce.
- Since the 1960s, divorce rates have followed a highly predictable pattern, rising through the earliest years of marriage, peaking in years 3-7, then falling gradually thereafter. Divorce rates therefore vary only during the first decade of marriage. After ten years, there is little to no variation, regardless of which year couples married from 1963 to the present day.
- Divorce rates overall rose for couples marrying in the 1960s, 70s and 80s and then fell for couples marrying in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. Divorce rates are now back to 1970 levels, down 21% overall from their peak for 1986 marriages, down 24% for couples in their first decade of marriage and down 48% for couples in their first 5 years of marriage.
- Most striking of all is that husband-granted divorce rates have barely changed since the 1970s. Almost all the change has involved wife-granted divorces in their first decade of marriage. This tells us that long term changes in divorce rate are not about women's economic independence (which should mean rates rise) or changes in age or economics (which should affect husband- and wife-granted divorces equally). Instead, the key driver is men's commitment. Rising rates of cohabitation and continuing social pressure to get married in the 1960s and 1970s meant increasing numbers of women marrying less-committed men. As marriage has become more optional since the 1990s, men who marry today are increasingly the more committed men who really want to do so. Hence fewer divorces initiated by women in their first decade of marriage.
- The overall lifetime risk of divorce is now 35%, the same as for couples marrying in 1970, down from 44% for couples marrying in 1986 who were the cohort with the most divorces ever.



How do we calculate divorce rates?

Almost all reporting on 'divorce rates' involves some comparison of the number of divorces in the most recent year divided by the number of marriages in the most recent year, or the number of adults in the population, or the number of adults who are married. This is called the 'year of divorce' method.

The problem with this method is that we're not really comparing like with like. Imagine a simple scenario where there are 100,000 divorces in two consecutive years. But in the first year, its mostly old marriages ending and in the second year, its mostly younger marriages ending. The headline 'divorce rate' would show no change. Yet a great deal is happening behind the scenes.

What we really want to know is what has already happened to couples who married in the same year, whether 1970 or 1980 or 1990. That tells us the real trend. We also want to know what will happen to couples who get married this year, on present trends. This is called the 'year of marriage' method.

The big advantage of the 'year of marriage' method is that it should give a really clear indication of trends in divorce. How are today's couples likely to fare, compared to couples who married in the 1980s or 1990s. The big disadvantage of this is that it's much harder to calculate.

I use much the same method used by the Office for National Statistics on the rare occasion when they report 'year of marriage' divorce rates. Their most recent paper on this is from 2012 when they calculated the lifetime risk of divorce at 42%. This is the figure most often cited in the media (ONS 2012a).

Because ONS do not routinely publish the data in sufficient detail, Marriage Foundation has specially commissioned data on four separate occasions, including this year (ONS 2012b, 2015, 2019, 2023)

The method used is straightforward enough. I take the number of divorces involving marriages under one year and divide by the total number of marriages that took place last year. I then do the same for divorces that took place after one to two years of marriage and divide by the total number of marriages two years ago.

The method isn't perfect because of overlap – for example not all divorces within a year were marriages that took place last year. But so long as the changes aren't too dramatic, the method is accurate and gives an excellent guide to trends.

Calculating divorce rates, by year of marriage and duration of marriage								
Year of marriage	No. of opposite sex marriages	Adjust for +50% overseas weddings	Adjusted number of marriages					
2016	242,774	19,422	262,196	0-1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4-5 years
2017	235,910	18,873	254,783					
2018	227,870	18,230	246,100					
2019	213,122	17,050	230,172					
2020	82,959	0	82,959					
Divorces during 2021				10	1,283	3,162	4,538	5,253

Adjusting for overseas weddings

I also make one very important adjustment to the number of new marriages recorded in any given year, as the table above shows. The Annual Passenger Survey produces an estimate of the number of people returning to the UK after getting married. Because many or most of these people will in fact be one half of a returning couple, I make a conservative adjustment to my wedding numbers by adding 50% of this estimate to the figure for England & Wales weddings.

Between 2002 and 2015, some 30-70,000 British nationals married abroad in each year (adjusted for England & Wales population). Reducing these numbers by half adds an average of 12%, ranging between 6% and 17%, to the total number of weddings in any of these years (ONS 2008, 2017).

Because these figures are based on relatively small survey samples, ONS do not adjust their divorce rate estimates for overseas weddings. ONS divorce rates will therefore always overstate the true divorce rate because they underestimate the number of weddings. I on the other hand don't have to be quite so precise. I am therefore confident that the addition of a conservative estimate for overseas weddings significantly improves the quality of all divorce rate estimates.

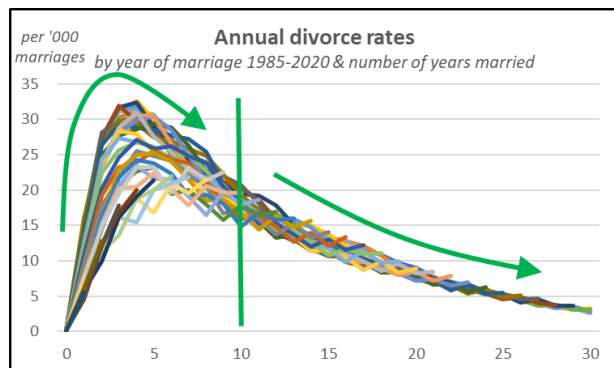
The consistent pattern of divorce

Using this 'year of marriage' method, it is possible to construct an entire spreadsheet showing the trends in divorce rates for couples who marries in any particular year.

The rather messy chart below shows the trend in annual divorce rates for every cohort of couples marrying in the years 1985 and 2020.

The purpose of showing this is to illustrate that there is a very clear trend in divorces as marriages progress over time. What is striking is

the consistency of pattern. No matter which year we are looking at, divorce risk tends to rise in the first few years of married life, peak after between 3 and 7 years of marriage, before declining in a highly predictable trend from about 10 years onwards. After about 30 years, annual divorce risk is very low.



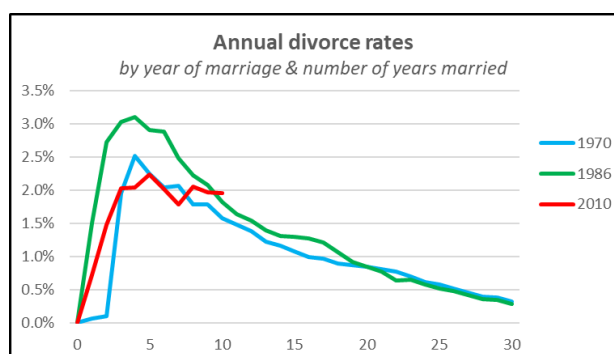
Trends in divorce – back to 1970

Most people know that divorce rates have risen since the 1960s. Few people also know that divorce rates are now back at 1970 levels.

The chart below illustrates this with a comparison of what happened to couples who married in 1970, 1986, and 2010.

The blue line shows the actual annual divorce rate of couples who married in 1970. The green line shows the actual annual divorce rate of couples who married in 1986 – the year when more couples than in any other year went on to divorce. Finally, the red line shows divorce rates for couples who married in 2010 – and have therefore had ten years of divorce data.

Although we can't be completely sure what will happen to the remaining 2010 couples, the pattern of previous years means we can be confident that their annual divorce rate will trend slowly down in the same way as for every previous year group. Their final divorce rate will therefore be similar to the 1970 couples and well below that of the 1986 couples.

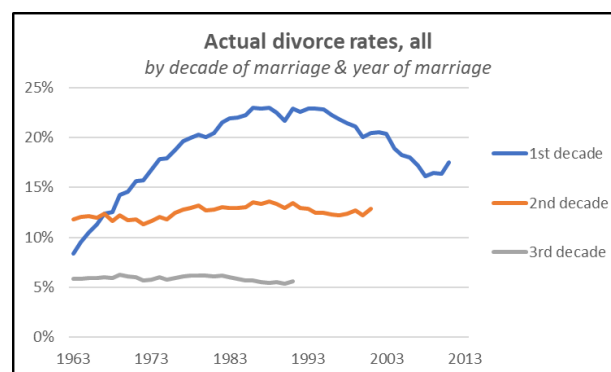


The first decade of marriage

The two previous charts strongly suggest that the big changes in divorce rates take place in the first few years of marriage. So let's have a look at what happened to couples in their first, second and third decades of marriage.

Because the latest divorce figures were reported in 2021, we have data on the first decade of marriage for couples who married any time before 2011. We have data on the second decade for couples who married any time before 2001 and third decade for couples who married any time before 1991.

The chart below shows these trends. What is very clear from the trends shown in the chart below is how the overall divorce rate for any given year of marriage depends almost entirely on what happens to couples in their first decade of marriage.



The chart shows how the blue line, the divorce rate during the first decade of marriage, rose steadily from 8% among couples who married in the mid-1960s to 23% among couples who married any time between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. Thereafter divorce rates have fallen back to 1970s levels and currently stand at 17%.

In sharp contrast, divorce rates among couples in their second or third decade of married life have remained remarkably consistent and predictable at 13% during the second decade and 6% during the third decade.

Of note is the recent upwards blip in early divorce, about which more later.

The gender gap in divorce rates

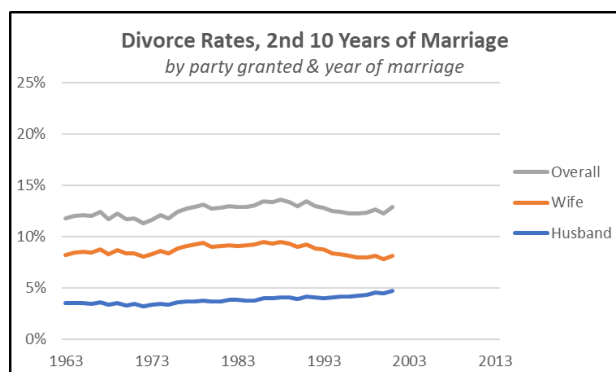
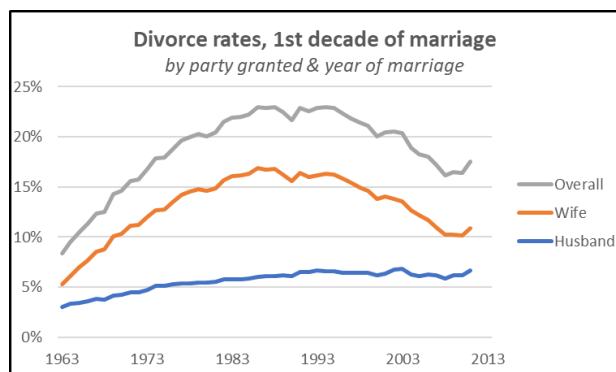
Even less known is that up until April 2022 when the law changed, almost all divorces were initially petitioned by and finally granted to either husband or wife.

We have produced several papers over the past decade highlighting the gender gap in divorces rates accruing to either husband or wife.

The two charts below show the trends in this gap over time during the first and second decades of marriage. The first chart shows the rise and fall of divorce but also highlights that these changes are driven almost entirely by changes in divorces granted to wives during that first decade.

Whereas the divorce rate accruing to wives marrying at any time after 1975 fluctuated within a 6.7% range from 10.2% to 16.9%, the divorce rate accruing to husbands fluctuated in a much lower and narrower 1.7% range between 5.1% and 6.9%.

During the second decade, fluctuations remained within a narrow 1.7% range for divorces granted to wives and 1.3% range for divorces granted to husbands.



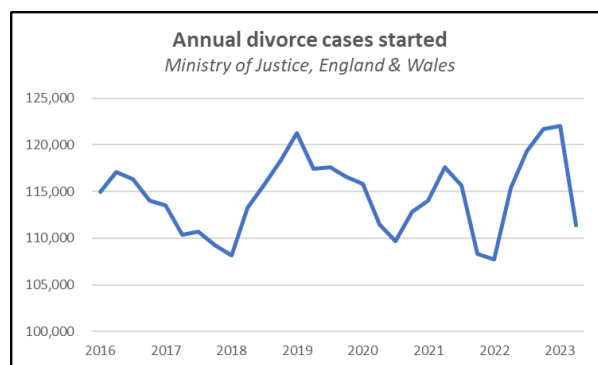
What about the 'blip in divorce rates?

The most recent 'year of divorce' data show a 9.3% increase in divorces from 102,438 to 111,934 in 2021. It is tempting to assume this is a post-lockdown phenomenon, where couples who grimly survived the domestic pressures of 2020 lockdown finally gave up on their marriages.

However, the evidence strongly suggests this is a system issue rather than a divorce rate issue. The increase is not due to more marriages giving up

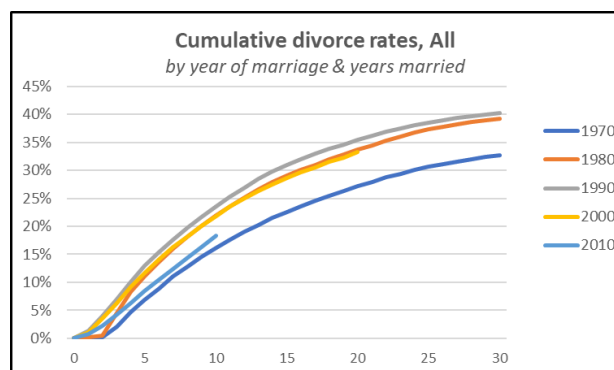
but more likely to a clearing of previous backlogs and/or faster processing of previous delays.

First, Ministry of Justice figures for 'divorce cases started' were falling during 2020 and showed no indication that there would be a 9% increase in divorces completed during 2021 (Ministry of Justice 2023) – see chart below. Second, our own analysis of survey data showed a reduction, not increase, in 'thoughts about divorce' during lockdown itself (Benson & McKay 2021). Thirdly, the 'blip' in divorce is evenly spread across all durations of marriage. The number of divorces by duration of marriage show a consistent increase of between 200 and 600 extra divorces during 2021 for every duration of marriage between 2 and 25 years. Had there been a genuine increase in divorce rates, we should have seen this concentrated among those vulnerable years 3-7.



Cumulative changes in divorce rates

The next chart shows the cumulative progression of actual divorce rates over time among different cohorts. After 30 years of marriage, 35% of couples who married in 1970 had divorced. Among the 1980 cohort, 41% had divorced. Among the 1990 cohort 42% had divorced.

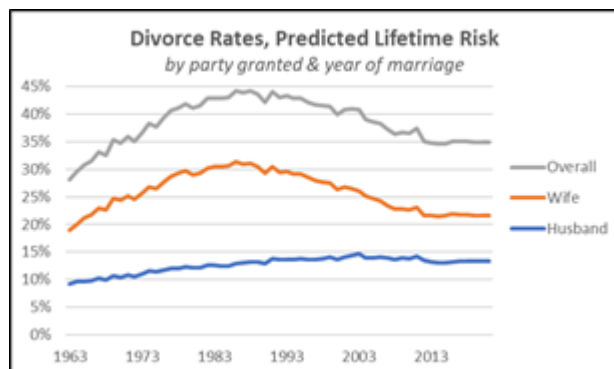


Although the 2000 cohort have only been married for 20 years, the addition of the highly predictable divorce rates in years 20-30 mean that 40% of this cohort are likely to have divorced within 30 years.

Using the same technique, the 2010 cohort already have lower divorce rates in their first ten years that makes them look more like the 1970 cohort. A long-range projection for them, albeit with a slightly higher margin of error, is that 35% will have divorced within 30 years of marriage, i.e. by 2040.

Lifetime divorce rates

Continuing this projection over 50 years for all cohorts who have married since 1963 produces the following chart.



Overall lifetime divorce rates have risen from 28% among couples marrying in 1963 to peak at 44% among couples marrying in 1986 – the cohort with the highest ever rates of subsequent divorce – before falling to the current best estimate of 35%. The chart also shows the relative contributions made by divorce granted either to wives or husbands.

Note that these predictions included a conservative adjustment estimate for overseas weddings that are not included in official figures for weddings but nonetheless contribute to the real annual number of weddings.

Leaving out this important adjustment, divorce rates would be proportionately higher, rising from 28% among 1963 couples to 46% among 1986 couples and falling to the current estimate of 38%.

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Tables

Cumulative divorce rates, Overall							
by year of marriage & duration of marriage							
	Actual		Actual			Predicted	
	1st 5	2nd 5	1st 10	2nd 10	3rd 10	Lifetime	
1965	2%	8%	10%	12%	6%	31%	
1970	5%	10%	15%	12%	6%	35%	
1975	7%	11%	18%	12%	6%	38%	
1980	8%	12%	20%	13%	6%	41%	
1985	10%	12%	22%	13%	6%	43%	
1990	10%	12%	22%	13%	5%	42%	
1995	10%	13%	23%	12%		43%	
2000	9%	11%	20%	12%		40%	
2005	7%	11%	18%			39%	
2010	6%	10%	16%			36%	
2015	5%					35%	
Latest	5%	11%	18%	13%	6%	35%	
1986	10%	13%	23%	13%	6%	44%	
vs 1986	-48%	-12%	-24%	-5%	-1%	-21%	

Cumulative divorce rates, by party granted									
by year of marriage & duration of marriage									
	Wife-granted			Husband-granted			Predicted lifetime		
	1st 10	2nd 10	3rd 10	1st 10	2nd 10	3rd 10	Wife	Husband	
1965	7%	9%	4%	3%	4%	2%	21%	10%	
1970	10%	8%	4%	4%	3%	2%	24%	10%	
1975	13%	8%	4%	5%	3%	2%	26%	11%	
1980	15%	9%	4%	5%	4%	2%	29%	12%	
1985	16%	9%	4%	6%	4%	2%	31%	12%	
1990	16%	9%	3%	6%	4%	2%	29%	13%	
1995	16%	8%		7%	4%		29%	14%	
2000	14%	8%		6%	4%		26%	14%	
2005	12%			6%			25%	14%	
2010	10%			6%			23%	14%	
Latest	11%	8%	3%	7%	5%	2%	22%	13%	
1986	17%	9%	4%	6%	4%	2%	31%	13%	
vs 1986	-36%	-14%	-5%	+12%	+18%	+7%	-31%	+3%	