



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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Divorce rate drops back to levels not seen since 1970, finds new study

- Overall lifetime risk of divorce drops to 35 per cent
- Study shows big drop in divorces filed by women
- Report says annual ONS divorce stats fail to give the full picture
- Official stats “overstate” divorce rate and “underestimate” the number of weddings

The divorce rate has dropped back to levels not seen since 1970, according to a major new report, published today.

The study, *What is the Divorce Rate?* from the Marriage Foundation finds that the predicted lifetime risk of divorce for couples marrying today is now 35 per cent, the same as for couples marrying in 1970, down from 44 per cent for couples who tied the knot in 1986.

It argues that the normal ONS method of reporting divorces annually fails to paint the full picture of what is happening between couples as it merely provides a snapshot of how many divorces take place in any given year, and not what is happening to marriages over time.

“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, it's mostly old marriages ending and in the second year, it's mostly younger marriages ending. The headline 'divorce rate' would show no change. Yet a great deal is happening behind the scenes,” it says.

“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."

The report shows that over their first five years of marriage the actual divorce rate so far among couples who married in 2015 was 5 percent, down by half compared to the 10 percent actual divorce rate among couples who married during the peak years for divorce in the 1980s or 1990s. Over their first ten years of marriage, the actual divorce rate so far among couples who married in 2010 was 18 percent, down by one quarter compared to the 23 percent actual divorce rate among couples who married during the 1980s or 1990s.

By extrapolating the latest trends to predict future divorce rates, the report concludes: "Overall lifetime divorce rates have risen from 28 per cent among couples marrying in 1963 to peak at 44 per cent among couples marrying in 1986 – the cohort with the highest ever rates of subsequent divorce – before falling to the current best estimate of 35 per cent. 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 per cent among 1963 couples to 46 per cent among 1986 couples and falling to the current estimate of 38 per cent.

Interestingly the report finds that the drop in the divorce rate has overwhelmingly been driven by divorces granted to wives. "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 rates 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."

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation's Research Director commented: "The good news for marriage is far from the usual and inaccurate narrative that the institution is in crisis and the divorce rate is out of control. What we actually see is couples who married in the 2000s and 2010s seem to be more stable and less likely to divorce, with a divorce rate not seen since 1970.

“This is not to say that there aren’t problems. While the aspiration to marry remains almost universal among young people, the likelihood of the least well-off couples tying the knot has collapsed, creating a deeply troubling marriage gap between rich and poor. This gap denies the benefits of marriage to couples on very low or modest incomes, a problem that successive governments have failed to address as they maintain a punitive welfare system that disincentivises marriage and commitment.”

The study also dismisses the recent post-pandemic blip in the divorce rate in 2021 as the clearing of backlogs by the Courts, rather than more people giving up on marriage.

“...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. Second, our own analysis of survey data showed a reduction, not an increase, in 'thoughts about divorce' during lockdown itself. Thirdly, the 'blip' in divorce is evenly spread across all durations of marriage. The number of divorces by duration of marriage shows 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.”

The report attempts to address the problem that the current method of counting marriages in England & Wales does not take overseas marriages into account for official statistics.

“The Annual Passenger Survey produces an estimate of the number of people returning to the UK after getting married. Between 2002 and 2015, some 30-70,000 British nationals married abroad in each year. 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.

“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.”

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

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of Marriage Foundation added: “INSERT QUOTE”

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Notes to editors

About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

For all media enquiries, please contact Alistair Thompson on 07970 162225