

# Married or not in Britain today

## key facts, key trends

- **First partnerships:**

70% of first partnerships are cohabitations and last on average two years<sup>1</sup>.

- **Pre-marital cohabitation:**

About 60% of first cohabitations turn into marriage and about 30% end within ten years<sup>1</sup>.

- **Cohabitations among young people:**

Cohabitation is most common among men aged 30 to 34 and women aged 25 to 29<sup>2</sup>.

Overall among non-married people aged 16 to 59, 25% of both men and women were cohabiting<sup>2</sup>.

- **Young partnerships are more likely to be cohabitations:**

By the time women born in 1946 were age 20, 40% were married.

For women born in 1970 just over a quarter had lived with a partner by the time they were 20<sup>5</sup>.

- **More women remain single for longer:**

Single women cohabiting increased from 8% in 1979 to 23% in 1991 and 31% in 2002<sup>2</sup>.

The proportion of single women has more than doubled from 18% in 1979 to 38% in 2002<sup>2</sup>.

- **Cohabitation after divorce:**

Higher proportions of divorced people cohabit compared with other marital statuses: 34 % of divorced men and 30% of divorced women lived in a cohabiting relationship in 2001/02<sup>2</sup>.

- **Expectations of marriage:**

73% of cohabiting people aged under 35 expect to marry each other—about one in eight never expect to marry<sup>3</sup>.

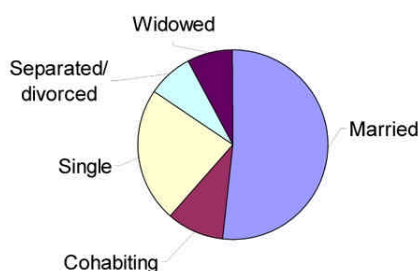
- **Pre-marital cohabitation:**

In 2001, 76% of couples lived together before they married<sup>4</sup> and 73% chose a civil wedding ceremony<sup>4</sup>.

### Figure 1:

Marital status in England and Wales in 2001.

(Source: Census 2001<sup>7</sup>.)



- **Decline in first marriages:**

The number of first marriages in England and Wales peaked in 1970 at almost 340,000, and has since fallen to less than half this number—150,200 in 2002<sup>6</sup>.

The 2001 figure was the lowest annual number of marriages since 1897<sup>6</sup>.

- **Marrying later:**

In 2001 the average age at first marriage was 30.6 years for men and 28.4 years for women, compared with 24.6 years for men and 22.6 years for in 1971<sup>2</sup>.

- **Fewer married women:**

Since 1979 the proportion of married women has continuously declined: from 74% in 1979 to 61% in 1991 and to 49% in 2002<sup>2</sup>.

- **Cohabiting couples with children:**

In 2001, 14% of families were headed by a cohabiting couple and 70% by a married couple<sup>7</sup>. 26% of all babies were born to cohabiting couples in 2001<sup>8</sup>.

- **Cohabiting families are more fragile:**

70% of children born within marriage are expected to live with both natural parents up to their sixteenth birthday, but only 36% of children born in a cohabiting union<sup>1</sup>.

- **Rise in non-marital births:**

Just over 40% of births were outside of marriage in 2002, more than four times the proportion seen 25 years earlier<sup>8</sup>. 18% of babies whose parents are not married parents are registered solely by their mothers<sup>8</sup>.

## Attitudes to marriage and cohabitation

- 59% of the British population agree that "even though it might not work out for some people, marriage is still the best kind of relationship"<sup>10</sup>.

- 69% agree that "too many people just drift into marriage without really thinking about it."<sup>10</sup>.

- 9% agree that "there is no point getting married—it's only a piece of paper"<sup>10</sup>.

- When asked whether they thought it was a good idea for couples who intend to get married to live together first, 56% thought that it was "a good idea"<sup>10</sup>.

- 67% thought it acceptable for a couple to cohabit, even if they don't intend to marry<sup>10</sup>.

- 54% agreed that "people who want children ought to get married"<sup>10</sup>.

- 97% believe that a cohabiting father should have the right to consent to his child's medical treatment<sup>10</sup>.

- 93% believe that a cohabitant should have the right to the family home after the death of their partner<sup>10</sup>.

- 56% of people incorrectly believe that unmarried couples living together 'definitely' or 'probably' have the same rights as married people<sup>10</sup>.

## Partnership and parenthood in the 21st Century

A large-scale survey of babies born in the UK—The Millenium Cohort Study—provides information on 18,819 babies born between September 2000 and August 2001. The sample design allowed for over-representation of families living in areas with high rates of child poverty, and in areas with high proportions of ethnic minorities, and the three smaller countries of the UK:

- 60% of parents were married and 25% were cohabiting<sup>9</sup>.
- 15% of the babies had mothers who were not living with a partner when they were born. 4% had mothers who were not in any relationship. For 7% of babies their parents were "closely involved", 2% were "just friends" and 1% were separated or divorced<sup>9</sup>.
- Over 90% of both married and cohabiting fathers were present at the birth of their child<sup>9</sup>.
- 97% of babies born to cohabiting parents had their father's name on their birth certificate<sup>9</sup>.
- 73% of babies whose mothers were not in a relationship did not have their father's name included on their birth certificate<sup>9</sup>.
- Among mothers who were not living with a partner at the time of the birth, just under a quarter (23%) were living with the father just over nine months later<sup>9</sup>.
- 39% of babies of married couples were born into a household with low or very low income compared with 62% of babies of cohabiting couples<sup>9</sup>.
- 3% of married parents were receiving income support compared with 13% of cohabiting parents<sup>9</sup>.
- 81% of married parents owned their homes compared with 54% of cohabiting parents<sup>9</sup>.

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