

SF3.1: Marriage and divorce rates

Definitions and methodology

This indicator presents information on marriages through three measures:

- The *crude marriage rate* (CMR), defined as the number of marriages during the year per 1000 people.
- The *mean age at first marriage*, defined as the mean age in years of marrying persons at the time of marriage. This measure is disaggregated by sex with separate averages for men and women.
- The *distribution of marrying persons by previous marital status*, or the proportion of all marrying people with known previous marital status who were previously ‘single never married’, ‘divorced’, or ‘widowed’.

Divorce is captured by one measure:

- The *crude divorce rate* (CDR), defined as the number of divorces during the year per 1000 people.

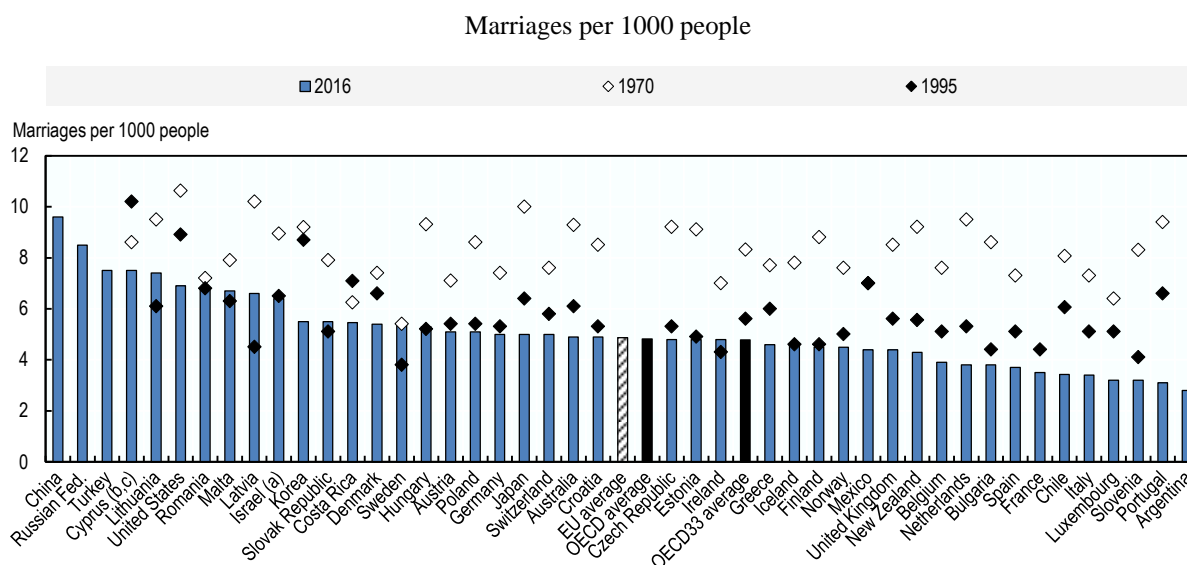
Key findings

Marriage rates differ considerably across OECD countries (Chart SF3.1.A). In some countries (including Chile, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Slovenia) crude marriage rates (CMRs) are very low at fewer than 3.5 marriages per 1000 people. In others (such as Lithuania, Turkey, and the United States) rates are twice as high at around 7 per 1000 or above. In most OECD countries, the CMR is somewhere between 4 and 5.5 marriages per 1000, with the OECD average standing at 4.8.

In almost all OECD countries, marriage rates have declined over the past few decades (Chart SF3.1.A). In 1970, most OECD countries had CMRs of somewhere between 7 and 10 marriages per 1000 people. By 1995, in most OECD countries, CMRs had fallen to around 5 to 7 marriages per 1000 people, and in many countries they have continued to fall since. In Portugal, for example, the CMR more than halved between 1995 and 2016 – from 6.6 marriages per 1000 in the former to 3.1 in the latter – while in four others (Chile, Korea, Mexico and the United States) CMRs fell by at least 2 marriages per 1000. Only Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic and Sweden have seen CMRs increase since 1995.

Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Mean age of mother at first childbirth (SF2.3) and Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4); and Cohabitation rates and prevalence of other forms of partnership (SF3.3).
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Chart SF3.1.A. Crude marriage rate, 1970, 1995 and 2016 or latest available year



Notes: Instead of 2016, data for Iceland refer to 2011, for China and the Russian Federation to 2012, and for Chile, Israel, the United Kingdom and Argentina to 2015. Data for New Zealand include civil unions. Data for New Zealand include civil unions. The OECD33 average is the unweighted average across the 33 OECD countries with data available for all 3 time points.

a) The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

b) Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to « Cyprus » relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue";

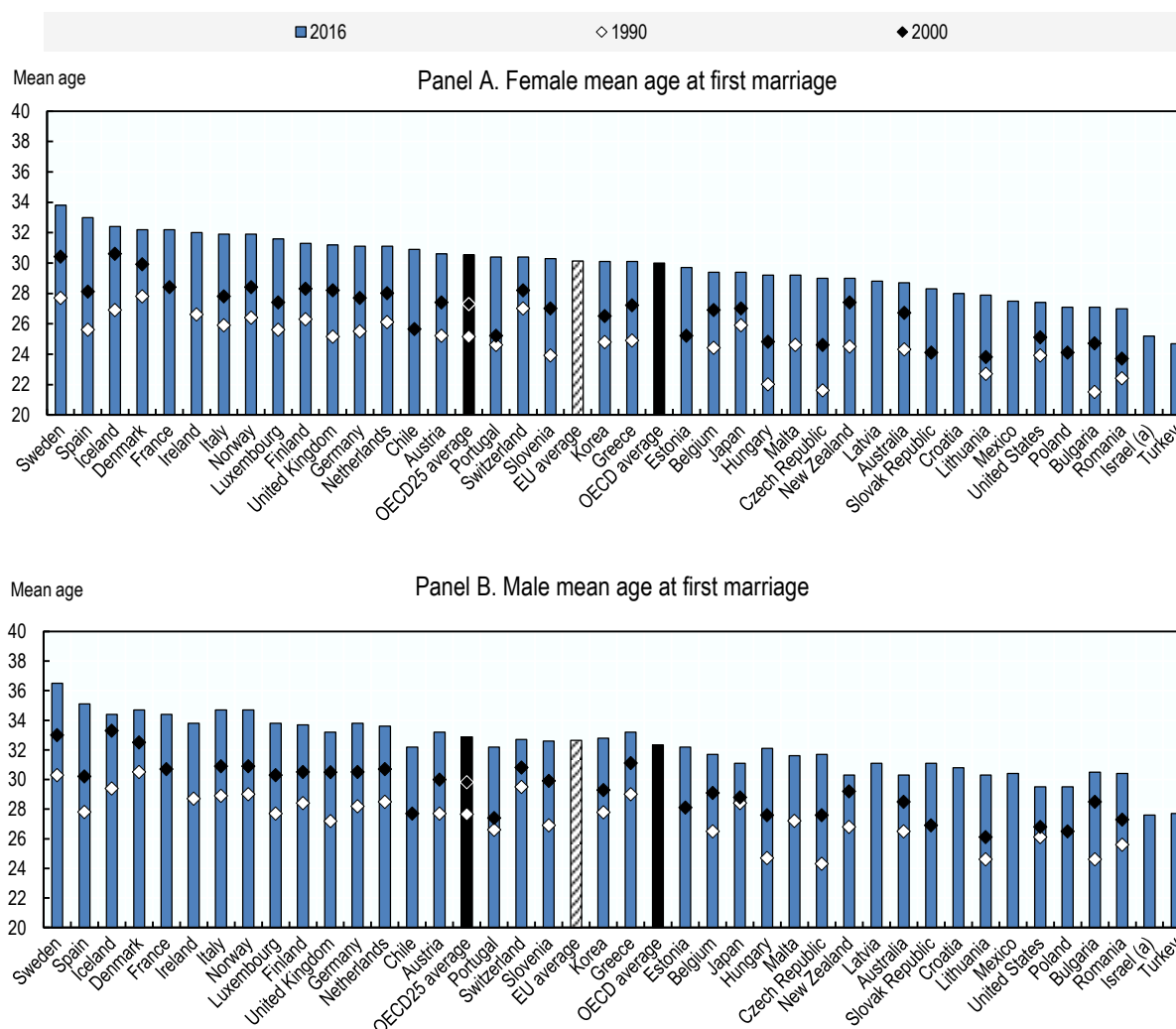
c) Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Sources: [For European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics](#); for Australia, [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#); for Costa Rica, [INEC](#); for Chile, [INE](#); for Israel, [CBS](#); for Japan, [Statistics Japan](#); for Korea, [Korean Statistical Information Service](#); for Mexico, [INEGI](#); for New Zealand, [Statistics New Zealand](#); for the United States, [Centers for Disease Prevention and Control](#); for all countries, [United Nations World Marriage Data 2008](#); for all countries, [United Nations Demographic Yearbook](#)

Across the OECD, declining marriage rates have been accompanied by increases in the average age of those getting married (Chart SF3.1.B). At the start of the 1990s, in most OECD countries, the mean age of women at first marriage stood at somewhere between 22 and 27 (Chart SF3.1.B, Panel A), and the mean age of men at first marriage between 24 and 30 (Chart SF3.1.B, Panel B). By 2016, these numbers had increased for almost all OECD countries to somewhere between 27 and 33 for women and 29 and 35 for men. On average across OECD countries, the men age at which women first get married is now 30.0, and the mean age for men 32.3.

Despite common historical trends, there remain notable differences across countries in the ages of individuals at first marriage (Chart SF3.1.B). The mean age of both women and men at first marriage is very high in the Nordic countries, for example, especially in Sweden, where the mean age for women is 33.8 and for men as high as 36.5. In Israel and in Turkey, by contrast, the average age at first marriage for women is about 25 and for men less than 28. Differences between countries points to a variety of transition paths towards the formation of long-term partnerships: cohabitation has become an important form of long-term partnership in, for example, the Nordic countries, postponing and frequently replacing marriage as the partnership standard (see Family Database indicator SF3.3).

Chart SF3.1.B. Mean age at first marriage by sex, 1990, 2000, and 2016 or latest available year



Notes: For 2016, data for Belgium refer to 2010, for Iceland and Malta to 2011, for Austria to 2012, for Mexico to 2014, and for Chile, France, Ireland, Israel, and the United Kingdom to 2015. Data for Mexico refer to all marriages rather than first marriages, and for Australia, New Zealand and the United States to median age at first marriage, rather than mean age at first marriage. Data for New Zealand include civil unions, and from 2007 onwards also those who transferred their civil union to a marriage. For the United Kingdom, data from 2014 onwards include marriages between same-sex partners. The OECD25 average is the unweighted average across the 25 OECD countries with data available for all 3 time points.

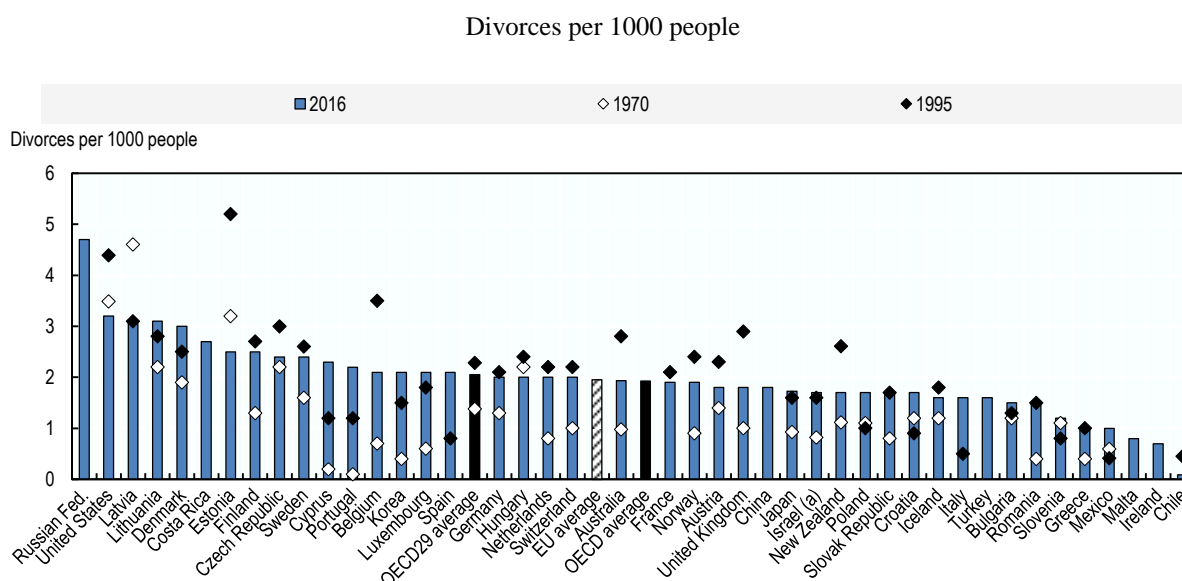
a) See note a) in Chart SF3.1.A

Sources: For European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics; for Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics; for Chile, INE; for Israel, CBS; for Japan, Statistics Japan; for Korea, Korean Statistical Information Service; for Mexico, INEGI; for New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand; for the UK, Office for National Statistics; for the United States, US Census Bureau

Declining rates of marriage have also been accompanied by increases in rates of divorce (Chart SF3.1.C). Crude divorce rates (CDRs) vary considerably across countries – from as low as 0.1 divorces per 1000 people in Chile to as high as 3.2 divorces per 1000 in the United States – but, in comparison to 1970 for example, current CDRs in most OECD countries are generally high. All except four OECD countries with available data (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia and the United States) have CDRs that are higher now than they were in 1970, with many OECD countries (Belgium, Greece, Israel, Korea, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal and the Slovak Republic,) having seen their CDRs more than double over the period.

However, in more recent decades trends in divorce rates have become mixed (Chart SF3.1.C). In some OECD countries CDRs have continued to increase. For example, between 1995 and 2016 (or nearest available), CDRs increased in 12 of the 33 OECD countries with available data, but fell at least slightly in another 18. In Australia, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States, CDRs have fallen by at least 0.5 divorces per 1000 people since 1995. Indeed, in Belgium the CDR has fallen by 1.4 divorces per 1000 since 1995, while in Estonia it has declined by almost 3 divorces per 1000, although in the latter case at least part of the decline can be explained by an unusually high number of divorces in 1995, caused most likely by the introduction of a new family law that eased and simplified divorce procedures (Philipov and Dorbritz, 2003: 88).

Chart SF3.1.C. Crude divorce rate, 1970, 1995, and 2016 or latest available year



Notes: Data for Chile refer to 2010, for Iceland to 2011, for China to 2012, for the Russian Federation to 2013, and for Ireland, Israel, and Mexico to 2015. The OECD29 average is the unweighted average across the 29 OECD countries with data available for all 3 time points.

- a) See note a) in Chart SF3.1.A
- b) See note b) in Chart SF3.1.A
- c) See note c) in Chart SF3.1.A

Sources: [for European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics](#); [for Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics](#); [for Israel, CBS](#); [for Japan, Statistics Japan](#); [for Korea, Korean Statistical Information Service](#); [for the United States, Centers for Disease Prevention and Control](#); [for all countries, United Nations Demographic Yearbook](#)

Despite long-run increases in rates of divorce, most of those people getting married are still getting married for the first time. Chart SF1.3.D shows that for 2016 and on average across OECD countries, more than four in every five people getting married had not been married before, and less than one in five had previously been divorced. However, there are considerable cross-country differences. In Ireland, for example, over 92% of marrying people in 2016 were ‘single never married’ and less than 7% were previously divorced, while in countries like Latvia and Belgium less than 75% were ‘single never married’ and over 25% previously divorced.

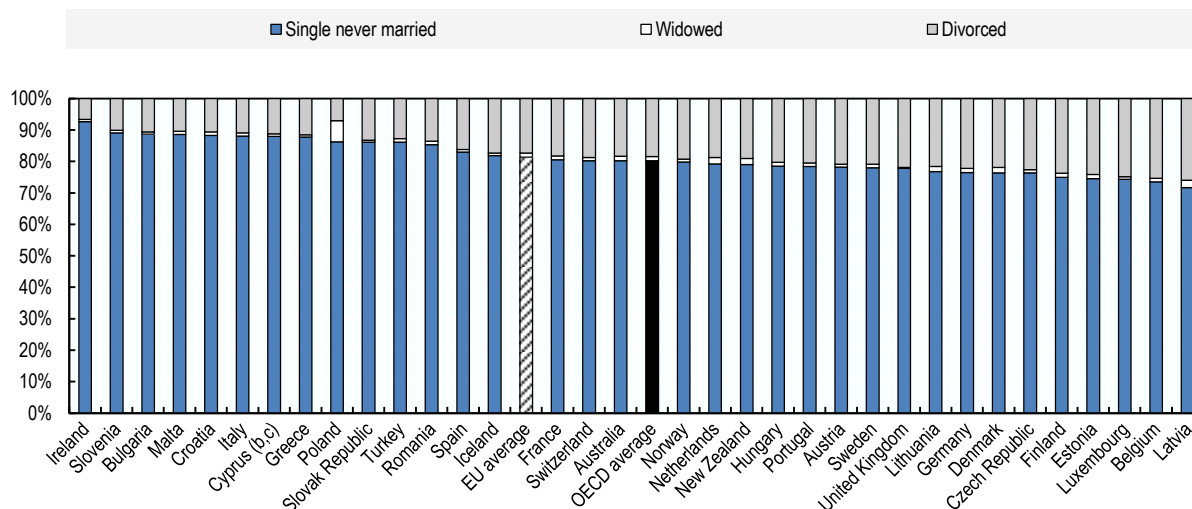
Comparability and data issues

For all countries, statistics on marriage and divorce are based on civil registration. There are cross-national differences in the status of religious ceremonies – in some countries a religious marriage is

recognised by the state as equivalent to a civil marriage, but not in others, such as France – and in the recognition of same-sex marriages. In some countries (e.g. Australia and New Zealand, see SF3.3), partners who live together for a specified period of time have a similar legal status as a married couple. These couples are not taken into account in the marriage statistics.

Chart SF3.1.D. Distribution of marrying persons by previous marital status, 2016 or latest available year

Proportion (%) of all marrying persons with known previous marital status



Notes: Data for Belgium refer to 2010, for Iceland to 2011, and for France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Malta to 2015. For some European countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland) the data allow for the separate identification of people who were previously in a registered partnership. These people are included here under 'single never married'. For New Zealand, 'single never married' means never married and never in a civil union.

- a) See note b) in Chart SF3.1.A
- b) See note c) in Chart SF3.1.A

Sources: [for European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics](#); [for Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics](#); [for New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand](#)

In all OECD countries it is possible to divorce, but there is considerable cross-country variation in the length and nature of the divorce process and these differences should be borne in mind when comparing divorce rates and mean durations of marriage across countries. For example, in some European countries there are regulations regarding the minimum period that spouses must have lived apart in order for a divorce to be granted. In addition, cross-national differences in trends in divorce rates may be influenced by developments in divorce regulation and legislation. This is particularly the case in Ireland, where the prohibition of divorce was repealed in 1997.

Sources and further reading:

Calot G., J.P. Sardon (2003), *Methodology for the calculation of Eurostat's demographic indicators*, Population and social conditions 3/2003/F/no 26, Eurostat, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-CC-04-004/EN/KS-CC-04-004-EN.PDF;

OECD (2016), *Society at a Glance 2016*, OECD Publishing, Paris;

Philipov, D, and J. Dorbritz. (2003) *Demographic consequences of economic transition in countries of Central and Eastern Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing