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, Portugal and Slovenia) crude marriage rates (CMRs) are very low at fewer than 3.5 marriages per 1000 people. In others (such as Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Turkey), rates are twice as high at close to 7 per 1000. In most OECD countries, the CMR is somewhere between 4 and 5.5 marriages per 1000, with the OECD average standing at 4.6.

2020 marriage rates being available only for a few countries, it is still too early to measure the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marriage rates. However, marriage rates are likely to have declined significantly in 2020 in many countries.

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 halved between 1995 and 2019 – from 6.6 marriages per 1000 in the former to 3.2 in the latter – while in five others (Chile, Costa Rica, Korea, Mexico and the United States) CMRs fell by at least 2 marriages per 1000. Only Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic and Sweden have seen CMRs increase since 1995.
Chart SF3.1.A. Crude marriage rate, 1970, 1995 and 2019 or latest available year

Marriages per 1000 people

Note: Instead of 2019, data for Iceland refer to 2011, for China to 2012, for the Russian Federation to 2013, for the United Kingdom to 2016, for Argentina, Chile and France to 2018. Data for New Zealand include civil unions. The OECD-34 average is the unweighted average across the 34 OECD countries with data available for all 3 time points.

Sources. for European countries and Turkey, 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 other 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 2019, these averages 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 mean age at which women first get married is now 30.7, and the mean age for men 32.8.

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 34.1 and for men as high as 36.7. In Israel and in Turkey, by contrast, the average age at first marriage for women is about 25 and for men 28 or less. Differences between countries point 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 2019 or latest available year

Note: For 2019, data for Iceland and Malta to 2011, for Mexico to 2014, and for Chile and Ireland to 2016, for Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom to 2017, and for Estonia to 2018. 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 OECD-26 average is the unweighted average across the 26 OECD countries with data available for all 3 time points.

Sources. for European countries and Turkey, 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). In 2019, crude divorce rates (CDRs) varied considerably across countries – from as low as 0.7 divorces per 1000 people in Ireland to as high as over 3 per 1000 in Chile, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg – 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, Mexico, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal and the Slovak Republic) having seen their CDRs more than double over the period.
2020 divorce rates being available only for a few countries, it is still too early to assess the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on divorce rates.

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 2017 (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, Denmark, Hungary, Estonia, the Netherlands, 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 1.5 divorces per 1000 since 1995, while in Estonia it has declined by over 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).

Despite long-run increases in rates of divorce, most of the people getting married are still getting married for the first time. Chart SF1.3.D shows that for 2019 and on average across OECD countries, 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 were ‘single never married’ and less than 7% were previously divorced, while in countries like Latvia and Finland less than 75% were ‘single never married’ and over 25% previously divorced.
Chart SF3.1.D. Distribution of marrying persons by previous marital status

Proportion (%) of all marrying persons with known previous marital status, 2019 or latest available year

Note: Data for Iceland to 2011, for Malta to 2014, for Ireland to 2015, for Chile and Germany to 2016, 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.

Sources: for European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics; for Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics; for New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand.

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.

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: