This article presents developments that have taken place in relation to family formation and dissolution through an analysis of marriage and divorce indicators. Marriage, as recognised by the law of each country, has long been considered to mark the formation of a family unit. However, the analysis of trends in family formation and dissolution based on just marriage and divorce data might not offer a full picture. Legal alternatives to marriage, like registered partnership, have become more widespread and national legislation has changed to confer more rights on unmarried couples. Recent demographic data show that the number of marriages per 1 000 persons decreased within the EU-28 in recent decades, while the number of divorces increased. An increase in the proportion of children who are born to unmarried couples was also observed.

Fewer marriages, more divorces

Some 2.2 million marriages and almost 1 million divorces took place in the EU in 2016, according to the most recent data available for all EU Member States. These figures may be expressed as 4.4 marriages for every 1 000 persons (in other words the crude marriage rate) and 1.9 divorces for every 1 000 persons (in other words the crude divorce rate). The value for divorces in 2016 is an estimate based on 27 countries, since the figure for Ireland is not available.

Since 1965, the crude marriage rate in the EU-28 has declined by close to 50 % in relative terms (from 7.8 per 1 000 persons in 1965 to 4.4 in 2016). At the same time, the crude divorce rate has more than doubled, increasing from 0.8 per 1 000 persons in 1965 to 1.9 in 2016. Part of this increase may be due to the fact that in several EU Member States divorce was legalised during the period (for example, in Italy, Spain, Ireland and Malta).
Table 1 shows that in 2017 among the EU member States, the highest crude marriage rates were in Lithuania (7.5 marriages per 1 000 persons) and in Romania (7.3). The lowest crude marriage rates were reported in Slovenia (3.1 marriages per 1 000 persons) and Italy and Luxembourg (both 3.2). In the candidate countries, the crude marriage rate was generally higher than in the EU. It ranged between 5.1 marriages per 1 000 persons in Serbia and 7.9 in Albania. Among the EFTA countries, the crude marriage rate was available for Norway (4.4 marriages per 1 000 persons) and Switzerland (4.8).
As regards divorce (see Table 2), in 2017 the lowest crude rates in the EU were registered in Malta (0.7 divorces per 1 000 persons) and Slovenia (1.2); in general eastern or southern Member States — Bulgaria, Croatia and Italy (all three 1.5) and Romania (1.6) — had low crude rates. By contrast, divorce rates were higher in several northern Member States, notably Latvia (3.1 divorces per 1 000 persons), Lithuania (3.0), Denmark (2.6) and Estonia (2.5). In 2017 the candidate countries had generally low crude divorce rates, with the lowest rate in North Macedonia (1.0 per 1 000 persons) and the highest in both Albania and Turkey (1.6). Among the EFTA countries for which data are available, the crude divorce rate was around 2.0 divorces per 1 000 persons.

Table 1: Crude marriage rate, selected years, 1960–2017 (per 1 000 persons) Source: Eurostat (demo_nind)
Table 2: Crude divorce rate, selected years, 1960–2017(per 1 000 persons)Source: Eurostat (demo_ndivind)

### A rise in births outside marriage

The proportion of live births outside marriage in the EU in 2016 was 42.6% (see Table 3). This is an estimate based on 27 countries, since the figures for Malta were not available. This share has continued to increase, signalling new patterns of family formation alongside the more traditional pattern where children were born within marriage. Extramarital births occur in non-marital relationships, among cohabiting couples and to lone parents.

In 2017, extramarital births outnumbered births inside marriage in several EU Member States: France (59.9%), Bulgaria (58.9%), Estonia (58.6%), Slovenia (57.5%), Portugal (54.9%), Sweden (54.5%), Denmark (54.2%), and the Netherlands (51.0%), as well as in Iceland (71.2%) and Norway (55.7%) among the EFTA countries. Mediterranean countries like Greece, Croatia and Cyprus along with Poland and Lithuania, were generally at the other end of the scale as more than 70% of births in each of these Member States occurred within marriage; in Turkey this share was as high as 97%.
The share of children that were born outside of marriage increased in the EU-28 from 27.3% in 2000 to 42.6% in 2016. Looking at the latest available data, extramarital births increased in fifteen EU Member State in 2017 compared with 2016. The most relevant exception to this trend was Hungary, where a decrease in the share of children born outside of marriage by 2 percentage points (from 46.7% to 44.7%) was observed. In 2017 compared with 2016, extramarital births increased also in the candidate countries and in the EFTA countries, with the exceptions of North Macedonia and Norway, while in Lichtenstein they remained stable.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_find)

Marriage and divorce statistics: tables and figures

Data sources

Eurostat compiles information on a wide range of demographic data, including data on the number of marriages by sex and previous marital status and statistics relating to the number of divorces. Data on the number of live births according to the mother’s marital status may be used to produce an indicator that shows the proportion of births outside marriage.

Context

The family unit is a changing concept: what it means to be a member of a family and the expectations people have of family relationships vary with time and space, making it difficult to find a universally agreed and applied definition. Legal alternatives to marriage, like registered partnerships, have become more widespread and national legislation has changed to confer more rights on unmarried and same sex couples. Alongside these new legal forms, other forms of non-marital relationships have appeared, making it more difficult for statisticians to...
collect data within this domain that can be compared across countries.

Due to differences in the timing and formal recognition of changing patterns of family formation and dissolution, these concepts have become more difficult to measure in practice. Analysts of demographic statistics therefore have access to relatively few complete and reliable data sets with which to make comparisons over time and between or within countries.

See also
- Fertility statistics
- Mortality and life expectancy statistics
- Population and population change statistics

Publications
- Short analytical web note — Demography report — 2015 edition

Main tables
- Marriage and divorce (t_demo_nup), see:

  Crude marriage rate (tps00012)
  Crude divorce rate (tps00013)

Database
- Marriages and divorces (demo_nup)

Dedicated section
- Marriages and divorces

Methodology
- Marriages and divorces (ESMS metadata file — demo_nup_esms)

View this article online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics