



Australian Social Trends 2007

Article: Lifetime marriage and divorce trends

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Susan Linacre
Acting Australian Statistician

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SYMBOLS AND USAGES

| | |
|---------|---|
| billion | 1,000 million |
| kg | kilogram |
| m | metre |
| n.a. | not available |
| n.e.c | not elsewhere classified |
| n.p. | not published |
| n.y.a. | not yet available |
| no. | number |
| '000 | thousand |
| '000m | thousand million |
| \$ | dollar |
| \$m | million dollars |
| \$b | billion dollars |
| \$US | American dollar |
| % | per cent |
| * | estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution |
| ** | estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use |
| . . | not applicable |
| — | nil or rounded to zero (including null cells) |

Where figures have been rounded, discrepancies may occur between the sums of the component items and totals.

Lifetime marriage and divorce trends

Contributed by Dr Shail Jain, Australian National University.

Between 1985–1987 and 2000–2002, the likelihood of a marriage ending in divorce increased from 28% to 33%.

Decreases in marriage rates and increases in divorce rates over the past twenty years have resulted in changing family structures within Australia. Increases in the proportions of babies being born outside registered marriages and increases in cohabitation provide evidence that registered marriage as the traditional social institution for family formation is declining.¹ Family formation has important implications for individuals and society in areas such as health and wellbeing, financial security, outcomes for children, and population growth through changing trends in fertility.²

This article examines the trends in registered marriages and divorces, and proportions of the population in different marital states in 1986 and 2001. It also provides a comparison of the length of time men and women could expect to spend in different marital states throughout their lifetime and the probabilities of particular transitions between marital states.

Trends in marriage and divorce

In 2005, 109,000 new marriages were registered in Australia. This was equivalent to 5.4 marriages for every 1,000 people in the population. This rate has been in overall decline since 1986 when there were 7.2 marriages per 1,000 people.

Over the same period, the crude divorce rate has remained relatively unchanged with 2.6 divorces for every 1,000 people in 2005 and 2.5 divorces per 1,000 people in 1986. The greatest annual number of divorces occurred in 2001 when there were

Data sources and definitions

Marriage statistics presented in this article are compiled by the ABS from information provided by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages in each state and territory.

In this article, *marital status* refers to registered marital status only. Marital states are: Never married, Married, Divorced and Widowed. People separated from their registered marital partner are classified to the married state. People's de facto marital status does not affect their classification to a registered marital state. As same-sex unions may not be registered under the *Marriages Act 1961*, these relationships are excluded.

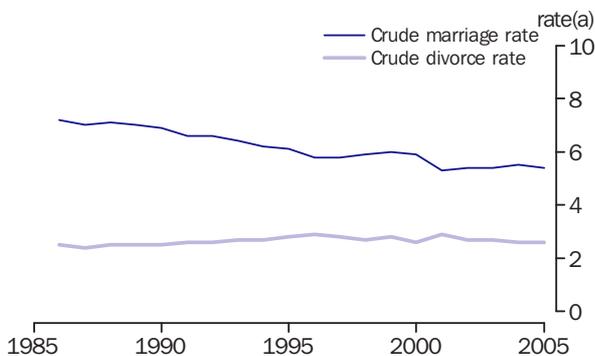
Divorce statistics presented are compiled from information supplied by the Family Court of Australia (FCA). The FCA provide combined data from Federal Magistrates Court registries and FCA registries.

The ABS does not collect annual data on the number of people forming de facto relationships or becoming separated. However, data from the 2006 Census indicates there were 1.2 million people aged 15 years or over living in de facto relationships, including 49,400 people in same-sex couples. De facto relationships accounted for 15% of the population who were living in partnered relationships in 2006 (i.e. either in a registered or de facto marriage).

55,300 divorces recorded. This peak has been followed by recent declines, with 52,400 divorces in 2005.

As well as marrying less, Australians are tending to marry later than in the past. In 1986, the median age at first marriage for men was 25.6 years, increasing to 30.0 years in 2005.

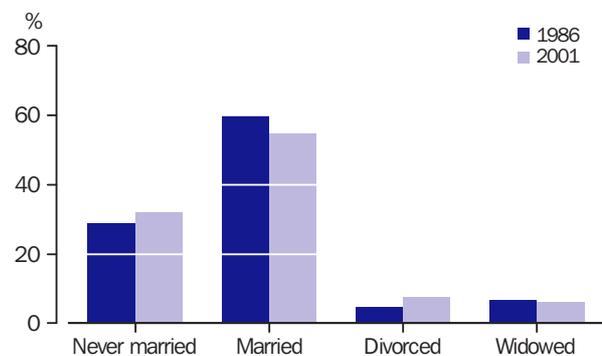
Marriage and divorce rates — 1986 to 2005



(a) Rate per 1,000 estimated resident population.

Source: ABS Marriages and Divorces collections.

Estimated resident population(a), marital status



(a) Population aged 15 years and over.

Source: *Marriages and Divorces, Australia* (ABS cat. no. 3310.0).

For women, the median age at first marriage increased from 23.5 years in 1986 to 28.0 years in 2005.

People are also divorcing at older ages. In 2005, the median age of divorcing men was 43.5 years, compared with 37.5 years in 1986, while for women the median age in 2005 was 40.8 compared with 34.7 years in 1986.

Marital status of the population

The decline in the marriage rate and the steady rate of divorce has led to a decrease in the proportion of the population that is formally married. In 1986, 60% of the population aged 15 years and over were married; by 2001 this proportion had decreased to 55%. Conversely, the proportion of the population aged 15 years and over who were never married increased from 29% in 1986 to 32% in 2001. At the same time, the proportion of the population who were divorced increased, from 5% in 1986 to 7% in 2001, while the proportion of the population who were widowed remained at around 6%.

In 2001 the number of never married males exceeded that of never married females with 121 never married males per 100 never married females. In contrast, females were more numerous than males among both the divorced and widowed populations with 78 divorced males per 100 divorced females and 24 widowed males per 100 widowed females in 2001.

Expected years of life in different marital states

Between 1985–1987 and 2000–2002, life expectancy at birth improved by nearly five years for males (to 77.5 years) and three and a half years for females (to 82.7 years).

Based on the nuptiality tables for each period, the length of time people could expect to spend on average in their lifetime in the never married state has increased – from

Lifetime marital status transitions and nuptiality tables

Throughout a lifetime, a person can experience different marital states. While some people marry, others remain unmarried (i.e. stay in the never married state throughout their lives). Some people who marry stay married until they die, while others become divorced or widowed and some remarry.

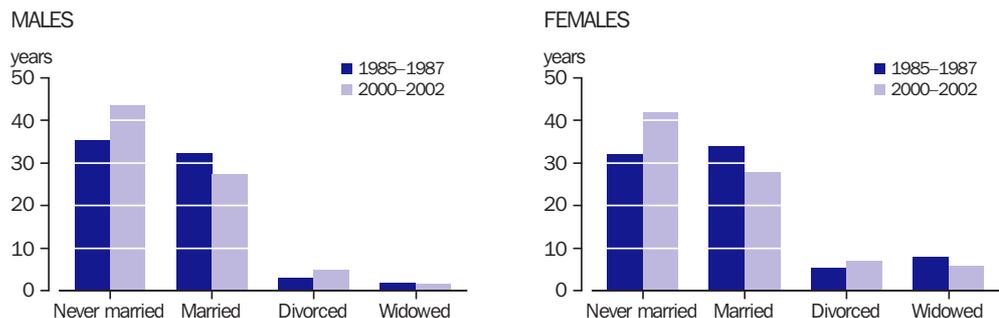
Analysis of the probabilities of, and expected years of life in, the various registered marital states in this article is based on nuptiality tables constructed using the methodology described by Krishnamoorthy.³ The nuptiality table is a type of statistical model produced from administrative data on marriage, divorce and death registrations and is restricted to transitions to and from formal (registered) marriages. It is based on the principles of the life table (used in life expectancy analysis) and assumes that the prevailing age-patterns of mortality, marriage, divorce, widowhood, and remarriage remain constant throughout a person's lifetime.

The nuptiality tables used in this analysis are based on the demographic events of two periods: 1985–87 and 2000–02. Because the nuptiality tables are based on the assumption that prevailing rates in each period will continue, caution should be used in interpreting the results due to distortions that may arise from tempo (timing) effects. For example, when marriages are delayed, the nuptiality table's lifetime measure may overstate the proportion who will never marry.

35 to 43 years for males, and from 32 to 42 years for females. The increase in the expected years of life spent in the never married state is a reflection of the decline in the proportion of people marrying, the increase in the median age at first marriage and longer life expectancy.

The years of life that people could expect to spend married has reduced from an average of 32 years for a boy born in 1985–87 to 27 years for a boy born in 2000–02. For girls the decline was from 34 to 28 years over the same period.

Expected years of life spent in different marital states



Source: ABS data available on request.

While the number of years that males could expect to spend in a widowed state remained around 2 years for those born in 1985–1987 and in 2000–2002, the number of years females could be expected to be widowed declined over the period from 8 to 6 years. In contrast, years of life that could be expected to be spent in the divorced state has increased – from an average of 3 to 5 years for males and 5 to 7 years for females between 1985–1987 and 2000–2002.

Probability of first marriage

The probability of people ever marrying has declined as the rates of marriage have declined. Based on the nuptiality tables, 79% of boys born in 1985–1987 would get married; by 2000–2002, this proportion had fallen to 69%. For girls, the decline was from 86% to 74%. In other words, if 2000–2002 nuptiality rates were to prevail into the future, 31% of males and 26% of females would never marry in their lifetimes.

The decline in the proportion of married people would most likely have been less pronounced had there been no emergence of couples living in de facto marriages. De facto marriages have risen steadily in the Australian population over the past 15 years. According to the 1991 Census 4.3% of the total population aged 15 years and over were in a de facto marriage. The proportion increased to 5.3% in 1996, 6.4% in 2001, and in 2006, 7.7% of the population aged 15 years and over were in a de facto marriage.

Expected probabilities of marriages ending in divorce and widowhood

| | Period marriage began in | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | 1985–1987 | 2000–2002 |
| | % | % |
| Males | | |
| Divorce | 27.9 | 33.4 |
| Death of spouse | 21.0 | 19.7 |
| Own death | 51.0 | 47.0 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Females | | |
| Divorce | 27.7 | 33.2 |
| Death of spouse | 47.8 | 44.5 |
| Own death | 24.5 | 22.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: ABS data available on request.

...duration of marriage

For those people who got married in 1985–1987 and 2000–2002, the expected average duration of their total married life remained unchanged at around 32 years.

The expected duration of first marriages that end in divorce has increased between 1985–1987 and 2000–2002. Men who first married in 1985–1987 and who would later divorce, could expect their marriage to last an average of 11 years, increasing to 14 years for those men marrying in 2000–2002. The average duration of women's first marriages ending in divorce increased from 14 to 16 years over the same period.

For marriages ending in widowhood, men and women who got married in 1985–1987 could each expect an average of 43 years in marriage. With improved life expectancy, men and women married in 2000–2002 whose marriage ended with the death of the other partner could expect an average of 46 and 45 years in marriage respectively.

Divorce

The probability that a marriage will end in divorce has been increasing over time. Based on the nuptiality tables, around 28% of marriages entered into in 1985–1987 could be expected to end in divorce. This proportion increased to 33% for all marriages entered into in 2000–2002.

For divorced men, the average time that could be expected to be spent divorced increased from 11 years for those divorcing in 1985–1987 to 17 years for those divorcing in 2000–2002, while for women divorcing in each period, the average time spent divorced increased from 18 years to 24 years. Several factors are expected to have contributed to this increase including increasing life expectancy, not entering into a formal remarriage and/or the tendency to live alone following divorce.

Widowhood

Widowhood currently occurs at an older age than in the past. According to the nuptiality tables, the median age of men entering widowhood was 78 years in 2000–2002, compared with 74 in 1985–1987. For women in 2000–2002, the median age of widowhood was 75 years, six years older than in 1985–1987 (69 years).

For couples marrying in 1985–1987, the probability of a marriage ending due to the death of the husband was 48%; by 2000–2002 this had decreased to 45%. Over the same

period the probability of a marriage ending due to the death of the wife also decreased, although to a lesser extent – from 21% to 20%.

The higher probability that a marriage would end due to the death of the husband relative to the death of the wife can partly be attributed to the age difference between husband and wife at marriage,⁴ and the longer life expectancy of women.⁵

There is an increasing tendency among widowed persons not to remarry after the end of marriage. This could be related to the relatively older age of widowhood, preference to enter into a de facto marriage living arrangement or simply deciding to live alone. The average duration that men could expect to spend in widowhood was 9 years for men becoming widowed in both 1985–1987 and 2000–2002. Over the same period there was a slight decrease in the expected years of life spent in widowhood for women, from 16 years to 15 years. The increasing age at widowhood may have contributed to this decrease.

Remarriage

Overall, people whose marriage ended due to divorce or the death of their spouse did not remarry at the same rate as they did in the past. In 2000–2002, men who got married could expect an average of 1.25 marriages in their lifetime, compared with 1.29 in 1985–1987. Women who married in 2000–2002 could on average expect to marry 1.20 times, down from 1.24 in 1985–1987.

Divorced people tended to have a far greater likelihood of remarriage than those who are widowed. Over half (56%) of men who divorced in 2000–2002 could expect to remarry, compared with 8% remarriage among men who were widowed. For divorced women in 2002–2002, 46% could expect to remarry. In contrast just 3% of widowed women could expect to remarry.

Endnotes

- 1 Parker, R 2005, 'Perspectives on the future of marriage', *Family Matters*, no. 72, pp.78–82.
- 2 Qu, L, and Soriano, G 2004, 'Forming couple relationships', *Family Matters*, no. 68, pp.43–49.
- 3 Krishnamoorthy, S 1982, 'Marital status life table for Australian women, 1971', *Genus*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 1–2, pp. 99–117.
- 4 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Marriages, Australia, 2005*, cat. no. 3306.0.55.001, ABS, Canberra.
- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Deaths, Australia, 2005*, cat. no. 3302.0, ABS, Canberra.

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