

# Couples in Australia

Couple relationships provide people with love, companionship, support, and opportunities for having children and raising families. As such, couples are a fundamental building block of society. Changing social attitudes during the late 20th century have led to an increase in de facto and same-sex relationships as well as giving people more freedom to end relationships, start new relationships or remain single.

## Partnering

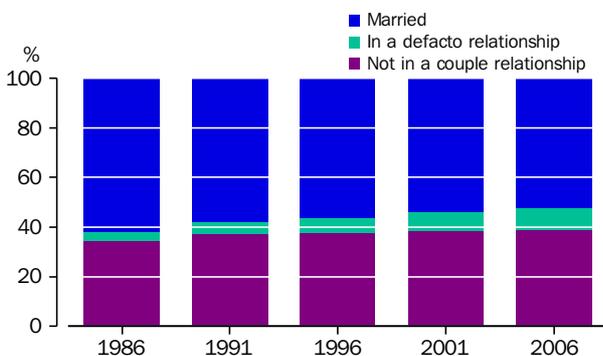
The proportion of adults living with a partner has declined during the last two decades, from 65% in 1986, to 61% in 2006. Factors such as the trend towards partnering at a later age, and the increased financial and social independence of women, may be associated with this decline, as well as legal changes in recent decades which have improved access to divorce.

Consistent with the declining proportion of people in couple relationships has been the fall in the proportion who were in a registered marriage, from 62% in 1986 to 52% in 2006. On the other hand, there has been an increase in the proportion of adults in de facto relationships, which more than doubled from 4% to 9% over the period.

**In the 2006 Census, 61% of people aged 18 and over were in a couple relationship, down from 65% in 1986.**

The number of people living in a same-sex couple relationship has also increased over the past decade. In 1996, 0.2% of all adults said they were living with a same-sex partner. By 2006, this had increased to 0.4% (to around 50,000 people). However, these figures may be an

### People aged 18 years and over: whether in a couple relationship



Source: 1986–2006 Censuses of Population and Housing

## Data sources and definitions

This article uses data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing, the ABS Family Transitions and Characteristics Survey and the ABS Marriages Collection.

In this article, *couple relationship* includes only people who usually live with their partner in the same dwelling, including those in registered marriages and de facto relationships.

*De facto relationship* refers to people living together as a couple who are not registered as married to each other. A de facto relationship may exist between a couple of the opposite sex or of the same-sex.

*Registered marriage* refers to people in a couple relationship who usually live together and have had their marriage formally registered. In this article, *marriage* is used to refer to a registered marriage only.

Unless otherwise stated, the information in this article relates to people aged 18 years and over.

undercount of the true number of people living in same-sex relationships. Some people may be reluctant to identify as being in a same-sex relationship, while others may not have identified because they didn't know that same-sex relationships would be counted in the census.

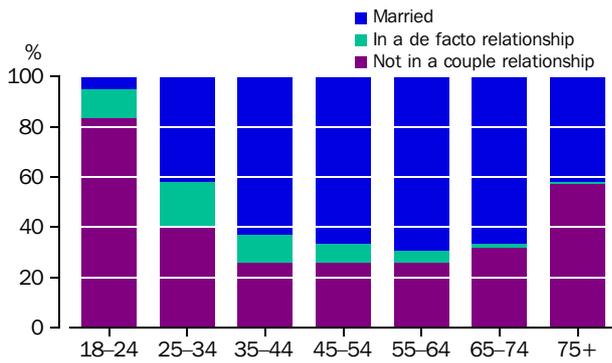
## ...by age

The proportion of people living in a couple relationship tends to increase with age from young adulthood, reaching a broad plateau around middle age, and declining in older age.

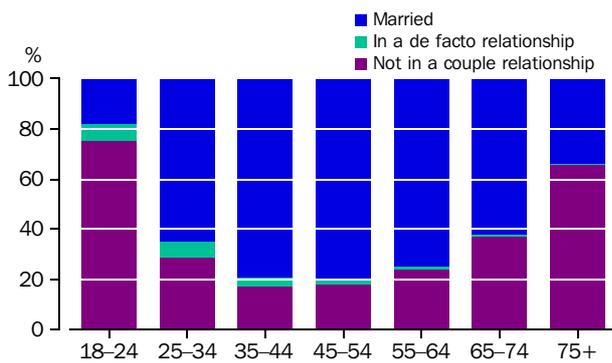
In 2006, younger people (aged 18–24 years) were less likely to be in a couple relationship than in 1986 (16% and 25% respectively). De facto relationships (11%) were more common than marriage (5%) for this age group in 2006 whereas in 1986 marriage (18%) was more common than de facto relationships (7%). Consistent with the trend towards increasing rates of de facto partnering in younger people, those aged 25–34 years had the highest rate of de facto relationships overall (18%) in 2006.

In 2006, people aged 55–64 years were the most likely to be married (69%). There were similar proportions of married people among those aged 45–54 years and 65–74 years (both 66%). However, the proportion of people who are married has declined since 1986 across all age groups, with the exception of those aged 65 and over. The decline in the proportion of married people in age groups under 65 years is partly explained by the increasing proportion of people living in de facto relationships, but more so by the increasing tendency for people to live without a partner.

## Relationship status by age group – 2006



## Relationship status by age group – 1986



Source: 2006 and 1986 Censuses of Population and Housing

In contrast to younger age groups, in 2006 a higher proportion of people aged 75 and over were married (42%) than in 1986 (34%). This partly reflects longer life expectancy, with an increasing likelihood of living into old age, meaning that spouses are widowed at an older age. However, there is still a big difference in the proportion of men (63%) and women (27%) living in couple relationships in this age group, reflecting the longer life expectancy of women.

## Age at marriage, 1985–86 and 2005–06

Previous marital status	Average age difference(a)		Proportion of all marriages registered(b)	
	1985–86	2005–06	1985–86	2005–06
	Years	Years	%	%
Groom never married, bride never married	2.3	2.0	66.9	68.2
Groom divorced, bride never married	7.6	7.3	9.5	9.4
Bride divorced, groom never married	-1.1	-0.7	8.1	7.7
Both divorced	3.8	3.7	11.1	11.6
Total	2.8	2.6	100.0	100.0

(a) Grooms older than brides

(b) Components do not add to 100% as combinations involving widows or widowers are not presented

Source: ABS Marriages collection

## Measuring relationship status

While the five-yearly Census can provide a snapshot of the relationship status of the population at a point in time, it can't tell us about the number or timing of transitions between relationship states. The Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey (FCTS) provides detailed information on these topics. The 2006–07 FCTS estimated that 65% of adults were in a couple relationship, compared with the 2006 Census which found 61% in couples.

The discrepancy is largely due to the different scope used in each collection. The census includes the population living in all dwellings (including non-private dwellings such as nursing homes and prisons) whereas the scope of the FCTS includes private dwellings only.

## Partners' characteristics

### ...age

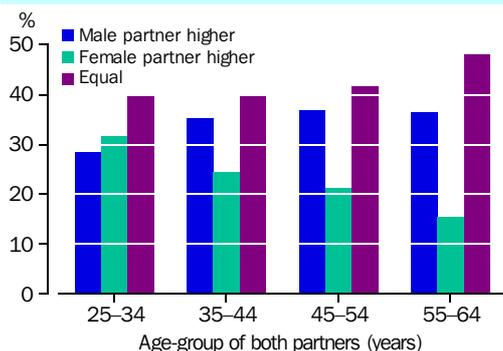
In 2006, around three-quarters (76%) of all couples involved partners aged within five years of each other. In same-sex relationships, the average age difference was 1.5 years, while in opposite-sex relationships, men were on average 2.6 years older than their partners. Among marriages that were registered in 2005–06 the gap was 2.6 years, compared with 2.8 years for marriages registered in 1985–86.

Men who had been married before tended to be much older than their brides. In 2005–06, for marriages occurring between a male divorcee and a never married bride, the groom was, on average, older by 7.3 years. Where the bride was remarrying after a divorce, she was around a year older than her never-married groom.

### ...education

In 42% of opposite-sex couples, the male partner had the same level of non-school qualification as the female partner. Males had a higher level of qualification in one-third (34%) of couples, with women having a higher qualification in almost one-quarter of cases (24%). This overall picture is, however, strongly influenced by the historical propensity for men to have greater opportunities for non-school education than women. This norm has changed over recent decades as young women have been attaining bachelor degree or higher qualifications at a significantly faster rate than men (although men are still far more likely to gain certificate-level vocational qualifications than women). For more information see *Australian Social Trends 2007*, 'Qualification profile of Australians'. The change is most evident in younger partnerships. For example, among couples where both people were aged 25–34 years, women were slightly more likely to be more qualified than their partner (32% compared with 28%), although having similar levels was still more common (40%).

### Couples, partners with highest non-school qualification<sup>(a)</sup> — 2006



(a) Couples where both partners have no non-school qualifications were categorised as 'equal'

Source: 2006 Census of Population and Housing

### ...religion

In 2006 most couples (87%) were made up of people who shared the same faith (including no religion) of their partner. This suggests the importance of religious affiliation to partnering, given that by chance alone, the probability of someone partnering someone of the same faith would be much lower.

One factor affecting the high rate of same-faith partnering is the significant proportion of migrants to Australia who arrived as a couple (partners in these couples would be likely to have the same faith). However, even for people who partnered in Australia the tendency to partner someone of the same faith persists, although among some religions more than others. Excluding migrants who arrived in the same year as their overseas-born partner, Christians in a couple were very likely to be partnered to other Christians (85%), a pattern strongly influenced by the population aged 60 years and over where 94% of couples involving a Christian were same-faith relationships. Muslims in couple relationships were also very likely to

### Couples, partnered with someone of same faith — 2006<sup>(a)</sup>

	All couples (%)	People who partnered in Australia <sup>(b)</sup> (%)	In registered marriage <sup>(b)</sup> (%)
Christian	85.5	84.6	88.1
Buddhist	60.5	34.2	83.7
Hindu	81.6	48.7	95.0
Islam	86.7	77.5	95.5
Judaism	67.0	58.0	94.0
No religion	53.8	51.9	69.8

(a) Proportion based on the number of same religion couples, compared with all couples with a person having that religion

(b) Excludes couples where both members were overseas born and had the same year of arrival

Source: 2006 Census of Population and Housing

### Couple relationships in law and society

As social attitudes in regard to relationships change, amendments to laws have followed. Changes to family law since the mid 1970s have provided legal recognition of de facto partnerships, reducing the legal and financial need to marry.

Recent developments in this area include the *Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Act 2008*, a Commonwealth Act which allows separating de facto couples to access the Family Law Court to obtain property settlements, therefore giving de facto couples the same access to the Family Law Court as married couples. Additionally, changes to Commonwealth laws such as the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws — General Law Reform) Act 2008* and the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws — Superannuation) Act 2008* give formal recognition to same-sex relationships in Commonwealth legislation, and will give people in same-sex relationships the same access to government entitlements and superannuation benefits as people in opposite-sex couple relationships.

be partnered to other Muslims (78%).

Buddhists who partnered in Australia were more likely than people of other faiths to have an interfaith partnership. Only 34% of couples involving a Buddhist were same-faith relationships. A higher proportion were 'Buddhist-Christian' couples (40%).

Of the 26% of couples involving at least one person with no religion, over half (52%) were matches where both partners were non-religious, while most of the remainder (46%) were a 'no-religion-Christian' couple.

Couples who shared the same faith were more likely to be in a registered marriage (88%) compared with couples where both partners had no religion (70%) or different faiths (71%).

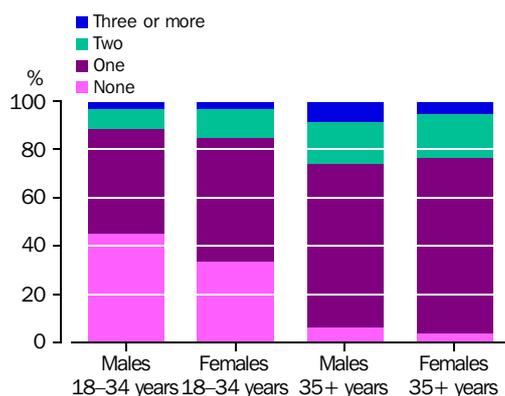
### How many relationships have people had?

According to the 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey, 84% of adults had had at least one marriage or de facto relationship. For those aged under 35 years, women were more likely to have had a partner than men (66% and 55% respectively). For people aged 35 years or over, 95% had had at least one marriage or de facto relationship. This included 18% who had two relationships and 7% who had three or more. Although men aged 35 years or over were slightly less likely than women to have ever been in a relationship (94% of men compared with 96% of women) they were more likely to have had three or more relationships (8.4% compared with 4.8% for women).

### Length of relationships

Of the people currently in a live-in relationship, the median length of the relationship was 18 years. However, the duration varied widely

### Total number of live-in relationships<sup>(a)</sup> – 2006–07

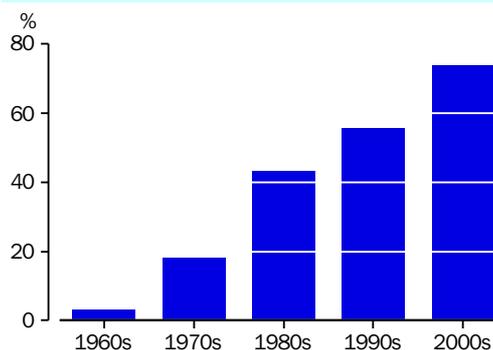


(a) De facto relationships which later became registered marriages are counted as one relationship  
Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

according to age and the number of relationships people had previously had. For example, for people aged 65–74 years who had only ever been in their current relationship, the median time together was 46 years, while for people aged 35–44 years who had had three or more relationships, the median duration of the current relationship was six years.

In 2006–07, around one-third (34%) of people aged 18 years and over said they'd had a live-in relationship that had subsequently ended. For just over half of these people their most recent past relationship was a registered marriage. Past registered marriages tended to have a much longer median duration than past de facto relationships (14 years compared with 2 years). In considering the apparently brief duration of de facto relationships, it should be kept in mind that this median is only for those relationships that have ended – a greater number have gone on to become a registered marriage or remain as long-term partnerships. In addition, where de facto relationships are being used by couples as a step before marriage, those that end before

### People who lived together before marriage<sup>(a)</sup>, decade of marriage – 2006–07



(a) Currently married people only  
Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

marriage may reduce the number of marriages that would otherwise end in divorce within a short period.

### Living together before marriage

Overall, 39% of married people in 2006–07 had lived with their partner before marriage. The propensity to live together before marriage has increased sharply over recent decades as de facto relationships have become an increasingly common precursor to marriage. For example, almost three-quarters (74%) of people who married in the 2000s lived together before marrying. In contrast, just 3% of people who married in the 1960s (and are still married) lived together first.

### ...expecting to marry?

Almost half of those living in opposite-sex de facto relationships in 2006–07 expected to marry their partner (44%). The proportion expecting to marry noticeably declines with increasing length of relationship beyond ten years. Compared with the median time that currently

### Length of live in relationships: 2006–07

	Units	Age group (years)							Total
		18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75 and over	
Have a current relationship	%	21.4	64.7	75.4	75.5	76.4	70.5	51.8	64.5
Median length of current relationship	Years	2.3	6.2	13.6	24.2	35.6	45.2	55.0	18.3
Had a previous registered marriage(a)	%	**0.3	5.3	15.3	27.5	28.5	34.7	53.6	20.1
Median length of previous marriage(a)	Years	**1.0	4.0	6.1	10.1	15.0	23.0	39.1	14.0
Had a previous de facto marriage(a)	%	11.0	24.8	21.8	14.2	6.4	3.4	*1.3	14.1
Median length of previous de facto marriage(a)	Years	1.1	2.0	2.1	2.1	3.1	5.1	*5.1	2.0

\* 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

(a) Only includes people whose most recent previous live-in relationship was of this type

Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

## People in de facto relationships who expect to marry partner<sup>(a)</sup> — 2006–07

Length of relationship (years)	Previous marital status			Total <sup>(b)</sup> '000
	Previously married	Never married	Total	
<2	33.2	55.0	50.2	375.5
2–4	48.3	56.7	55.4	425.6
5–9	21.2	57.7	48.4	307.3
10–14	13.0	42.7	31.2	174.6
15–19	18.4	23.3	22.0	95.0
20 and over	8.6	5.7	6.7	97.3
Total (c)	25.6	50.2	43.9	1 500.7

(a) Excludes same-sex couples

(b) All people in opposite-sex de facto couples

(c) Includes not stated

Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

married people spent living together before marriage (2.0 years), people in de facto relationships expecting to marry will spend significantly longer in the de facto state given the median length of relationship for people intending to marry was 3.0 years.

People in de facto relationships who had been married before were significantly less likely to expect to marry their new partner than people who had never been married. Around one-quarter (26%) of people in a de facto relationship who were separated, divorced or widowed from a previous spouse intended to marry their current partner, compared with 50% of people in a de facto relationship who had never been previously married. Much of this difference was still apparent even after accounting for differences in the length of relationship between the two groups.

### Child bearing

As higher rates of de facto relationships emerge, so too a greater proportion of people are having children outside of marriage. In the five years to 2007, close to one-third (32%) of all births have been to unmarried mothers, twice the average rate of the 1980s (16%).

Around 78% of children aged 0–4 years in 2006–07 were the natural children of parents who were either currently married or who were previously married. This was ten percentage points more than the 68% born to married parents in 2002–07, suggesting that some parents got married after the birth of their child(ren). This is also supported by the fact that throughout the 2000s, births of a first child were twice as likely to be to unmarried parents (39%) as births of second or subsequent children (20%).

## Wedding trends

Social change over recent decades has had an effect on the age at which people marry, and the type of ceremony they choose. Higher proportions of young people spending longer in education and living in de facto relationships prior to marriage have contributed to an increase in the median age of first marriage of 4 years for both men and women between 1987 and 2007.

Less people are choosing religious ceremonies, with nearly two-thirds of all marriages in 2007 being performed by civil celebrants.

### Weddings: key characteristics, 1987 and 2007

	1987	2007
Median age at first marriage		
Men	25.9	29.6
Women	23.8	27.6
% marrying in a civil ceremony	40.3	62.9
No. marriages registered ('000)	114.1	116.3

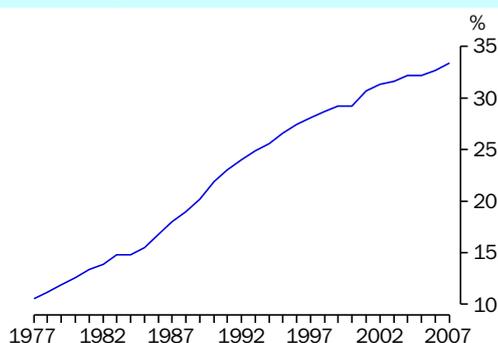
Source: *Marriages, Australia 2007* (ABS cat. no. 3306.0.55.001), *Australian Historical Population Statistics 2008* (ABS cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

In 2006–07, married people aged 25–44 years were twice as likely to have children as people of the same age in de facto relationships (77% and 37% respectively). Some of this difference is due to the fact that people in de facto relationships are more likely to have been in their relationship for a shorter period of time, and therefore have had less time in which to have children. However even after adjusting for this, people in de facto relationships were still much less likely to have dependent children (including those not living with them) than those who were married.

### ...intending to have children?

Most younger people in childless couple relationships intend to have children, and this intention is not affected by the form of relationship they are in. In 2006–07, 86% of

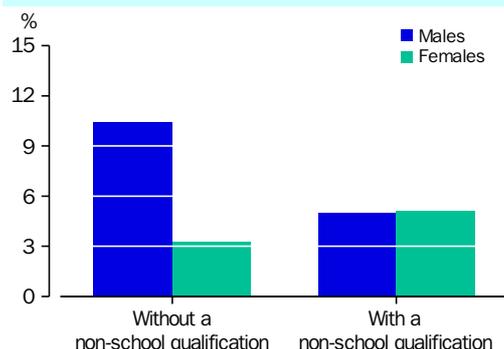
### Births registered to unmarried mothers<sup>(a)</sup>



(a) Include births to mothers aged under 18 years

Source: *Births, Australia* (ABS cat. no. 3301.0)

### Never partnered people aged 35–64 years, non-school qualification — 2006–07



Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

married people aged 18–24 years and 88% of those in a de facto relationship who did not already have children expected to do so. Childless couples aged 25–34 years were less likely to intend to have children (75%) if they were in a de facto relationship than married (85%). Some of the difference may be due to couples who intend to have children using this decision as a reason to get married. Among childless couples aged 35–44 years, the intention to have children was not significantly different between those in registered marriages (32%) and those in de facto relationships (41%).

### ...childlessness

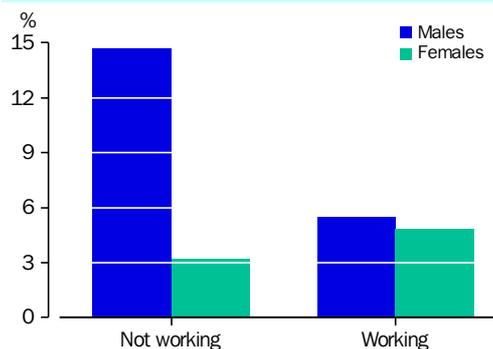
While only 7% of women aged 35–44 years were childless and had never been in a live-in relationship, they accounted for 29% of all childless women of this age. Of those women who had had at least one live-in relationship, some 17% were childless, which was consistent with the expectation of childlessness among the 18–24 year olds in de facto relationships and marriages.

### Who doesn't partner?

While the vast majority (95%) of people aged 35–64 years have been in at least one live-in relationship, the proportion of those who have not had a relationship varies by particular characteristics. Men with a lower level of education were more likely to have never partnered (10.4% of men with no non-school qualifications compared with 5.0% for those with non-school qualifications). Women, on the other hand, were more likely to never have had a relationship if they had non-school qualifications (5.1%, compared with 3.3% for those women who did not have any non-school qualifications).

As work and education are related, it is not surprising that different patterns of labour force participation can be seen for those who have and haven't partnered. Men who were not working in 2006–07 were almost three times as

### Never partnered people aged 35–64 years, whether working — 2006–07



Source: 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

likely to have never had a live-in relationship (14.7%) as those who were employed (5.5%). For women, not working is strongly associated with child-rearing so this pattern did not hold – 3.2% of women who weren't working had never been in a live-in relationship, compared with 4.8% for those who were employed.

### Conclusion

Changes in social attitudes in recent decades have led to greater acceptance of couple relationships outside of registered marriage, such as de facto and same-sex relationships. At the same time, broader social, economic and educational opportunities have become more accessible to most people (particularly women), which has made remaining single a more viable option.

For some people, couple relationships outside of marriage may provide an opportunity to test the suitability of the match before making the commitment of marriage, whereas others may see no need to formalise what is for them a long-term and committed relationship.