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Love Me Do

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Love Me Do

Families are the building blocks of society, facilitating generational renewal, human interaction, and linking individuals to wider society as a whole. Relationships are closely linked with wellbeing, with families playing a key role in socialising children and shaping the future of society.

Changing patterns in divorce and cohabitation over recent decades have resulted in differences in family structure; however families still remain a basic unit in society. While the rate of marriages registered in Australia each year has remained relatively stable in recent years, Australians have been marrying at an older age, and delaying having their first child until later in life. More Australians are in de facto relationships, and more are choosing non-religious ceremonies if they do decide to marry.

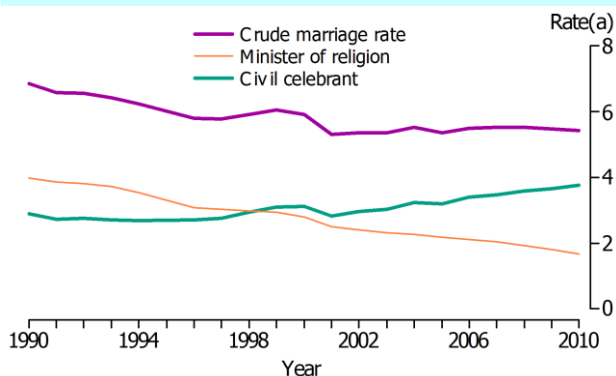
This article looks at trends in marriage, de facto relationships and divorce between 1990 and 2010, as well as the effect of these trends on the family.

How many marriages?

Over the last two decades, the crude marriage rate fell from 6.9 registered marriages per 1,000 estimated resident population in 1990 to 5.4 marriages per 1,000 estimated resident population in 2010. This decline in part reflects a changing population structure.

There were 121,000 marriages registered in 2010, the most recorded in a single year in Australia, and slightly more than the 120,000 marriages registered in 2009. Of the registered marriages in 2010, 31% were religious ceremonies, down from 58% in 1990. In contrast, in 2010, 69% of marriage ceremonies were conducted by civil celebrants, up from 42% in 1990.

Crude marriage rate – 1990 – 2010



(a) Marriages registered during a calendar year per 1,000 estimated resident population.

Source: ABS [2010 Marriages and Divorces, Australia](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), ABS [2008 Australian Historical Population Statistics](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001) and ABS [Australian Demographics Statistics Quarterly](#) (cat. no. 3101.0)

Data sources and definitions

The main data sources for this article are the ABS publications:

[Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2010](#) (cat. no. 3310.0)

[Family Characteristics and Transitions, Australia, 2006–07](#) (cat. no. 4442.0)

[Family Characteristics, Australia, 2009–10](#) (cat. no. 4442.0)

[Births, Australia](#), 1993 and 2010 (cat. no. 3301.0)

The *crude marriage rate* represents the number of marriages registered during a calendar year per 1,000 estimated resident population at 30 June of the same year.

Age-specific marriage rates per 1,000 population give the proportion of total estimated resident population aged 16 years and over for a given age-group who are married in a specific year.

The *crude divorce rate* represents the number of divorces granted during a calendar year per 1,000 estimated resident population at 30 June of the same year. *Age-specific divorce rates* provide a more accurate representation of divorce rates by taking account of both changes in the population structure and changing rates of marriage, but are not available for the most recent years examined in this article.

Median is the value which divides the relevant population into two equal parts, half falling below the value and half exceeding it.

Step families are those formed when parents re-partner following separation or death of their partner and there is at least one step child aged 0–17 years of either member of the couple, but no natural or adopted child aged 0–17 years from the couple.

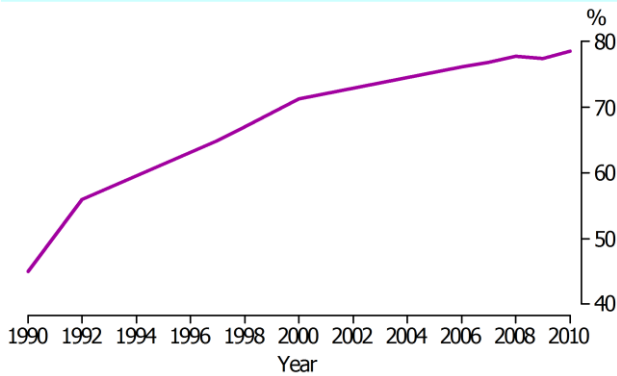
A *blended family* contains at least one step child aged 0–17 years but also at least one natural or adopted child aged 0–17 years of both parents.

...living together

In 2009–10, 11% (1.9 million) of Australians aged 18 years and over were living in a de facto relationship, while 53% were in a registered marriage.

De facto relationships were most common amongst younger people, with one fifth (22%) of people aged 20–29 years living in these relationships, compared with nearly one tenth (9.4%) of people aged 40–49 years. The proportion of people aged 20–29 years living in a de facto relationship has doubled since 1992, where one tenth (10%) were living in one of these relationships. The rate for people aged 40–49 years has also nearly doubled (up from 4.7%) during this time.

Cohabitation prior to registered marriage - 1990 – 2010



Source: ABS [Marriages and Divorces 2010, 2001, 2000, 1997, 1994](#) (cat. no. 3310.0)

De facto relationships include those living in a same-sex relationship and in 2009–10 there were around 46,300 people living in a same sex couple. The majority of these couples had no children.

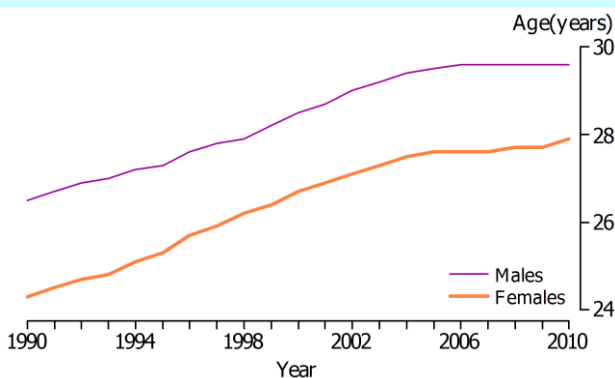
Cohabitation prior to registered marriage has increased over the last twenty years. In the early 1990s, just over half of all registered marriages were preceded by a period of cohabitation (56% in 1992).¹ By 2010 it was almost eight in ten (79%).

Many people in de facto couples expect their relationship to lead to marriage. In 2006–07, of the 1.6 million people aged 18 years and over who were in a de facto relationship, just over two fifths (42%) of them expected to enter into a registered marriage with their current partner.

...age at first marriage

Over the last twenty years, the average age at which Australians first marry has increased. In 2010, the median age at first marriage for men was 29.6 years and 27.9 years for women, an increase of more than three years since 1990 (26.5 years and 24.3 years respectively). Since 2002, the median age at first marriage for both men and women has remained relatively unchanged.

Median age at first marriage – 1990 – 2010



Source: ABS [2010 Marriages and Divorces, Australia](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), [ABS 2008 Australian Historical Population Statistics](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

Save the date... month and day of marriage in Australia

Between 1990 and 2010, spring and autumn were the most popular seasons in which to marry. The winter months tend to be the least popular time for weddings, although in the Northern Territory couples prefer to marry in June, July or August to avoid unpredictable summer tropical weather.

In 1990, September recorded the most marriages nationally, but in 2010, October was the most popular month in which to wed. Generally in 2010, Saturday was the most popular day to get married. However, possibly due to the memorable date 10-10-10, Sunday 10 October saw the most weddings in one day for 2010 with 2,454 couples tying the knot that day.

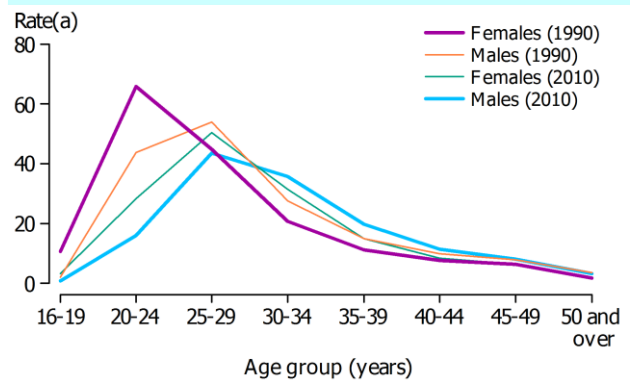
There are many factors that may affect the age at which Australians first marry. These include the pursuit of higher education, the associated delay in labour force participation, the increasing social acceptance of cohabitation before marriage, and children moving out of the family home later in adulthood due to these factors. In 2006–07, 49% of men and 45% of women aged 18–24 years had never left the parental home, mainly for financial reasons (41%) or the convenience and/or enjoyment of living at home (36%).

Since 1990, the median age at first marriage has increased by three years for men and three and a half years for women.

...marrying older

The trend of marrying later in life has also been seen in the median age for all marriages (that is, when second and subsequent marriages are included). For men the median age for all marriages rose from 28.2 years in 1990 to 31.4 years in 2010, while for women, it increased from 25.9 years in 1990 to 29.2 years in 2010.

Age-specific marriage rate(a) – 1990 & 2010



(a) Marriages registered per calendar year per 1,000 estimated resident population by 5-year age groups.

Source: ABS [2010 Marriages and Divorces, Australia](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), [ABS 2008 Australian Historical Population Statistics](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

In the twenty years to 2010, the age-specific marriage rate more than halved in the 20–24 years age group, dropping to 16.1 per 1,000 men (down from 44.0 in 1990), and 28.4 per 1,000 women (down from 66.0 in 1990).

Conversely, in middle age groups, the rate increased. In 1990, the marriage rate for men aged 30–34 years was 27.7 per 1,000 men, rising to 35.7 in 2010. During this time the rate for women in this age group also increased from 20.8 to 31.4 per 1,000 women.

Later childbearing

A range of factors has influenced changes in Australia's birth rates. While the age at marriage is increasing, more time spent on educational pursuits, and concerns regarding financial stability,² have also contributed to these changes.

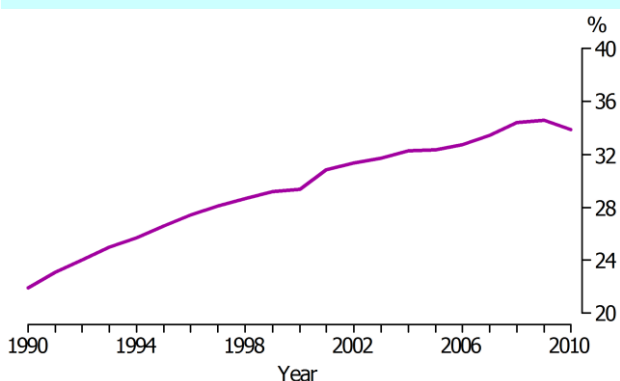
While Australia's total fertility rate has not changed significantly between 1990 and 2010 (1.90 babies per woman in 1990, compared with 1.89 babies per woman in 2010), the age at which women have their first baby has changed. In 1990, the median age of first-time mothers was 27.5 years. By 2010, this had increased to 28.9 years.

Since 2000, women aged 30–34 years have continued to record the highest fertility rate of all age groups. In 1990, the fertility rate for this age group was 102 babies per 1,000 women, rising to 123 babies per 1,000 women in 2010. Further, since 2005 the fertility rate for women aged 35–39 years has exceeded that of women aged 20–24 years.

...births outside of marriage

The proportion of births occurring outside registered marriage has increased over the last two decades. Overall, unmarried women bear children at younger ages than women in registered marriages.

Births outside of registered marriage – 1990 – 2010



Source: ABS [Births, Australia, 2010](#); [2000](#); [1995](#); [1993](#) (cat. no. 3301.0)

Marriage and divorce across the states and territories

The registration of marriages, and the granting of divorces, differs across states and territories. In 2010, the states recording the highest and lowest crude marriage rates also recorded the highest and lowest crude divorce rates. The highest rates were found in Queensland, with 5.9 marriages per 1,000 population and 2.5 divorces per 1,000 population. The Northern Territory had the lowest crude marriage rate at 4.2, as well as the lowest crude divorce rate at 1.9. The rates reflect the state in which the marriages are registered rather than the state of usual residence of the applicants.

Men and women appeared to marry younger for marriages registered in the ACT, Queensland and South Australia. The lowest median age at first marriage for males was for those registered in the ACT (29.4 years), while Queensland and South Australia had the lowest median age for females (both 27.7 years). The Northern Territory had the highest median age at marriage registered for both males (30.7 years) and females (28.7 years).

The Northern Territory also had the highest percentage of civil ceremonies, with civil celebrants conducting nearly 8 out of 10 (78%) marriage ceremonies in 2010. The ACT recorded the highest percentage of religious marriage ceremonies, with ministers of religion conducting more than a third (35%) of all marriage ceremonies.

The Northern Territory also had the highest proportion of babies born outside of marriage with three-fifths (60%). The ACT recorded the lowest proportion of births outside of marriage with 27%.

Queensland and Tasmania recorded the highest proportion of couples living together prior to marriage registered in the state in 2010 (both 86%). New South Wales recorded the lowest proportion (72%).

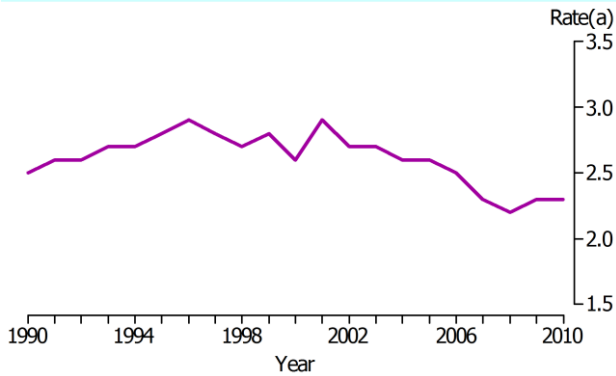
In 2010, the median age of unmarried mothers was 27.3 years, just over three years older than in 1990 (24.0 years), and nearly four and a half years younger than the median age of married women giving birth in 2010 (31.7 years). The proportion of babies born outside registered marriage also rose during this time, from just over one fifth (22%) to just over one third (34%) of all births.

Unmarried fathers also have children at younger ages. In 2010 the median age of unmarried fathers was 29.9 years compared with 34.0 years for married fathers. The median age of fathers has increased over the last twenty years, by 2.6 years for both married and unmarried fathers.

How many divorces?

Although more divorces were granted in 2010 (50,200) than in 1990 (42,600), the crude divorce rate was comparatively lower (2.3 divorces per 1,000 estimated resident population, down from 2.5).

Crude divorce rate – 1990 – 2010



(a) Divorces granted during a calendar year per 1,000 estimated resident population.

Source: ABS [2010 Marriages and Divorces, Australia](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), ABS [2008 Australian Historical Population Statistics](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

However, over the last two decades the crude divorce rate has varied. Rates during this period peaked in 1996 and 2001, at 2.9 divorces per 1,000 estimated resident population, while the lowest rate of 2.2 occurred in 2008. In part, the fluctuations in the crude divorce rate reflect both a changing population age structure, and a changing proportion of the population that is married.

...years to separation and divorce

The number of years to separation and divorce has remained stable since 2006, and recent divorce statistics show couples are married for longer before ending their marriage.

In 2010, the median length of marriage before separation was 8.8 years, just over one year longer than in 1990 (7.5 years). The median length of time before divorcing increased by two years, from 10.2 years in 1990 to 12.3 years in 2010.

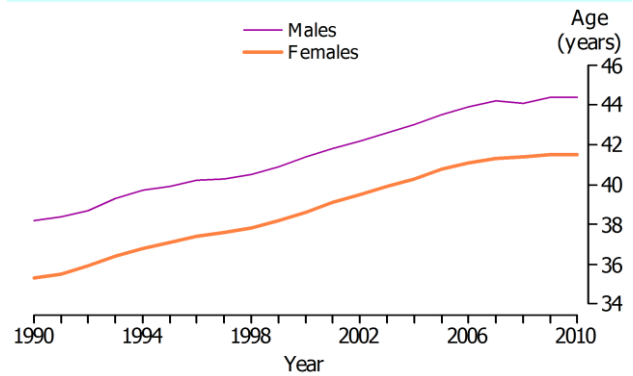
Couples are also now separated for longer prior to divorce. In 1990, the average length of time between separation and divorce was 2.7 years. In 2010 this gap had increased to 3.5 years.

...age at separation and divorce

As couples are choosing to marry later in life, and marriages are lasting longer, couples also tend to divorce at older ages. In the last two decades, the median age at separation has increased by approximately six years for both men and women.

In 2010, the median age for males at separation was 40.8 years, and 44.4 years at divorce, up from 35.3 years and 38.2 years respectively in 1990. Reflecting the age gap between men and women at marriage, the female median age at separation was 38.1 years, and 41.5 years at divorce, up from 32.4 years and 35.3 years in 1990.

Median age at divorce – 1990 – 2010



Source: ABS [Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2010, 2002, 2001, 1998, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1994](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), ABS [Divorces, Australia, 2004, 2003, 2002](#) (cat. no. 3307.0.55.001)

Divorce and children

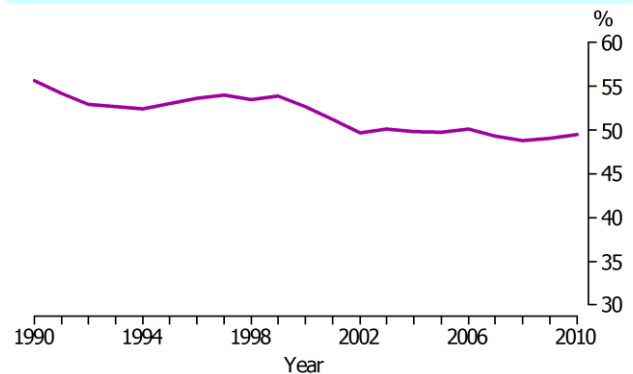
Between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of divorces involving children decreased from 56% to 49%. Divorces between couples with children aged less than 18 years made up around half of all divorces in Australia in recent years. The proportion has remained relatively stable since declining to 50% in 2002.

The reality of divorce means that many children live without regular contact with one of their parents (usually the father) after separation. In 2009–10, of the 5 million children aged 0–17 years, just over 1 million, or one in five (21%), had a natural parent living elsewhere. For four fifths (81%) of these children, the parent living elsewhere was their father.

Of all children who had a natural parent living elsewhere, nearly half (48%) saw this parent at least once per fortnight, while one quarter (24%) saw them less than once per year or never.

Nearly three quarters (73%) of children with a parent living elsewhere were in one parent families, 14% lived in step families, and 11% lived in blended families.

Divorces involving children(a)(b)– 1990 – 2010



(a) As a proportion of all divorces.

(b) Children aged under 18 years.

Source: ABS [2010 Marriages and Divorces, Australia](#) (cat. no. 3310.0), ABS [2008 Australian Historical Population Statistics](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

International Comparisons

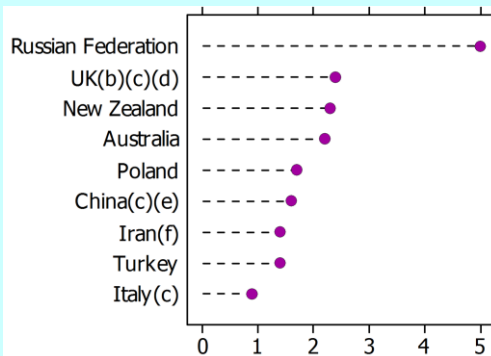


English-speaking countries generally have the highest crude divorce rates and countries which are the least secularised generally have the lowest. Differences between countries will also be affected by their respective population age structures and marriage rates.

Countries with high Catholic populations, such as Poland and Italy had lower rates (1.7 and 0.9 respectively), as well as countries with largely Islamic populations like Turkey (1.4) and Iran (1.4). The Vatican and the Philippines are the only countries where divorce is illegal.

A 'no-fault' divorce principle was introduced in Australia by the *Family Law Act 1975*. Australia is one of the few nations that operate by this principle; others include the United States of America, Canada and Malta.

Crude divorce rate(a), selected countries – 2008



(a) Per 1,000 population.

(b) Excludes Channel Islands and Isle of Man.

(c) Data for 2007.

(d) Provisional data.

(e) Excludes Special Administrative Regions and Taiwan Province.

(f) Data for 21 March 2007 to 20 March 2008.

Source: United Nations, 2009, *Divorces and crude divorce rates, by urban/rural residence: 2004-2008*, <<http://unstats.un.org>>

Looking ahead

The last two decades have seen changes in Australians' relationship behaviour, the composition of families and the decision on when to have children. These changes will affect the ways couples and families form, interact and live together into the future.

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994, *Focus on Families: Demographics and Family Formation*, cat. no. 4420.0, Canberra, <www.abs.gov.au>.
- 2 Gray, M., Qu, L. & Weston, R., 2008, *Fertility and family policy in Australia: Research paper no. 41*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, <www.aifs.gov.au>.

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