

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO *marriage?*

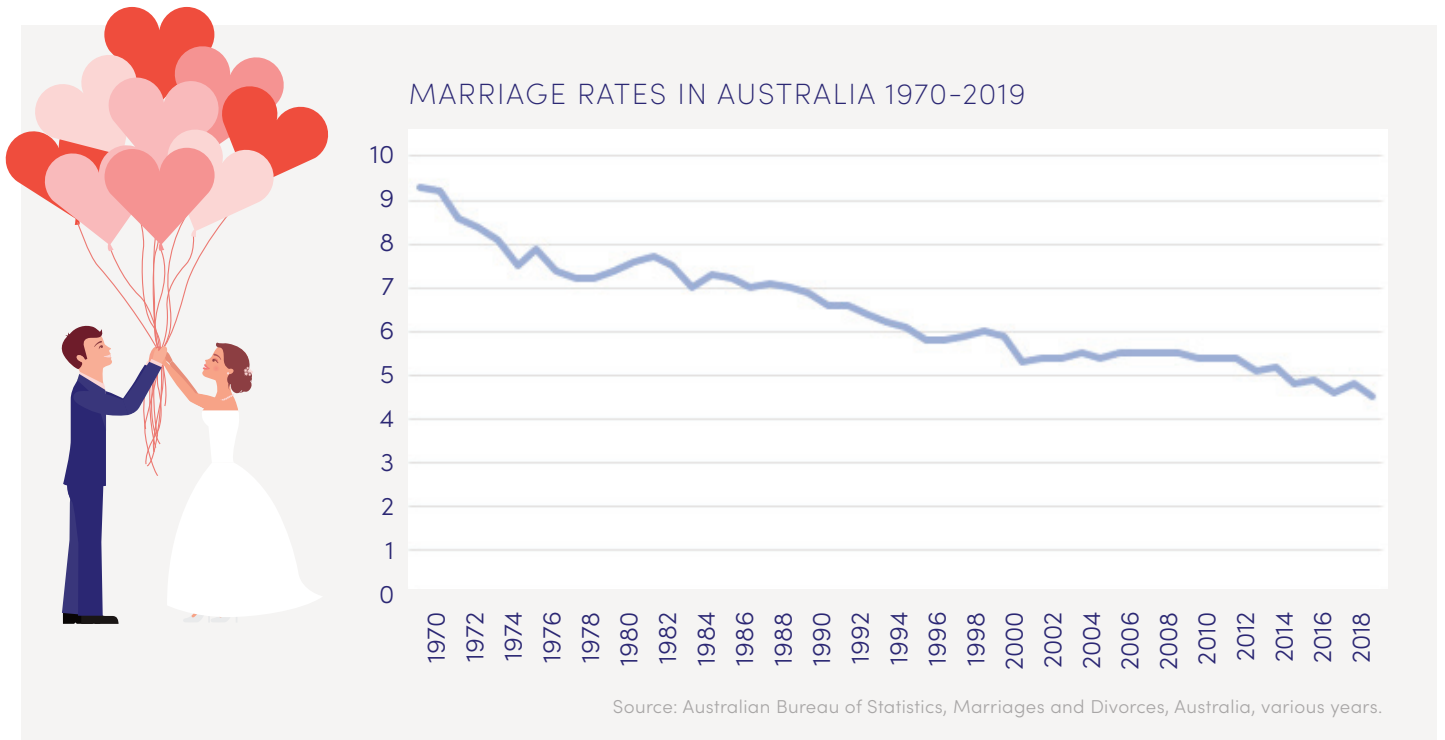


Fifty years ago, back in 1971, nearly 95% of young adults were likely to get married at some time in their lives. Now the marriage rate is less than half what it was then, and a lot of the marriages these days are second or even third marriages.

So whatever happened to marriage?

## MARRIAGE RATES IN AUSTRALIA

We work out marriage rates based upon how many people per thousand in the population marry in any given year. **These are the trends:**

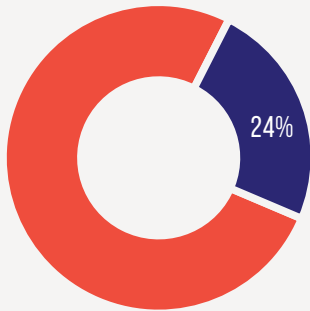


# 2019

In 2019, Australia had the lowest rate of marriages on record – **4.5 per thousand people compared with 9.3 per thousand in 1970**. So that means that fewer than half as many people per 1000 are getting married as did so 50 years ago. There is a similar number of weddings each year though, because the population has increased so much since 1970.



**FEWER THAN HALF AS MANY PEOPLE PER 1000 ARE GETTING MARRIED AS DID SO 50 YEARS AGO**



MORE THAN **3/4**

OF ALL WEDDINGS ARE TAKEN BY CIVIL CELEBRANTS

Only 24% in 2018 were celebrated by ministers of religion.

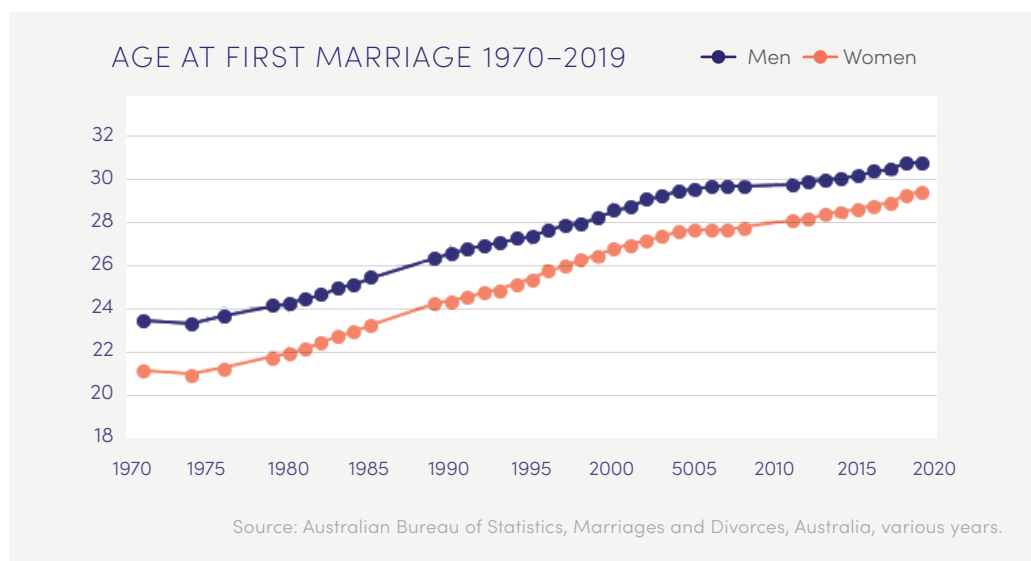
## WHAT PROPORTION ARE SECOND OR SUBSEQUENT MARRIAGES?

A lot of those who marry these days have been married before. In 2019, **27%** of marriages involved at least one person who had been married before.



## AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

People are delaying marriage more and more. In 2019, the median age when a man first married was nearly 31 years old, and for women, over 29.



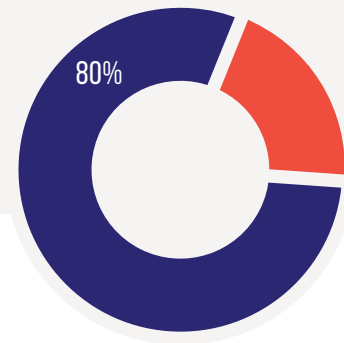
## LIVING TOGETHER BEFORE MARRIAGE

It has become increasingly common over the last few decades to live together before marriage. In 2017, **81.3%** of couples had lived together before the wedding, up from only **16%** in 1975. That represents a significant change in how people think about marriage. In traditional Christian teaching (and that of other major world religions as well), marriage provided the foundation stone of a new intimate partnership. That is, the wedding marked the beginning of the

couple's life of living together. Now, for many couples, if not most, marriage is the capstone of their relationship. People will often have a wedding some years after cohabitation began, at a point when they are well-enough established financially, and choose to celebrate their continuing partnership with family and friends. This helps explain the continually increasing age that people marry for the first time.

## LIVING TOGETHER OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

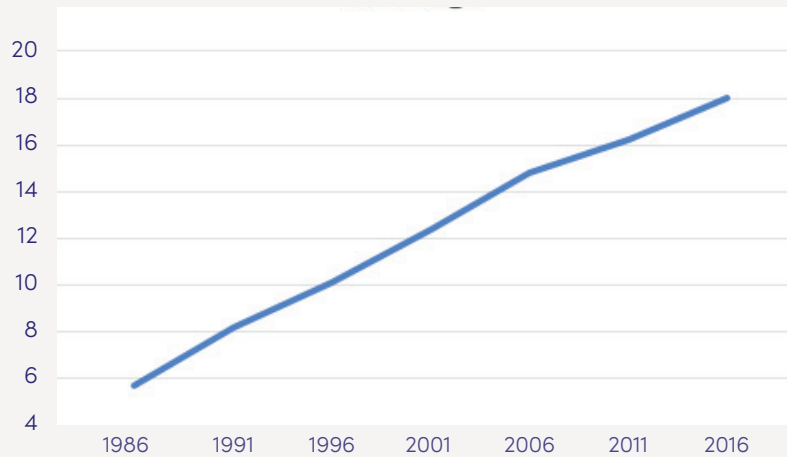
WHILE SOME COUPLES LIVE TOGETHER FOR A WHILE AND EVENTUALLY MARRY, OTHERS CHOOSE NOT TO MARRY AT ALL



At any one period of time, more than **80% of couples** are married; but there has been a sharp increase over the last 35 years in people living together. This is data from the Census, held every five years in Australia.

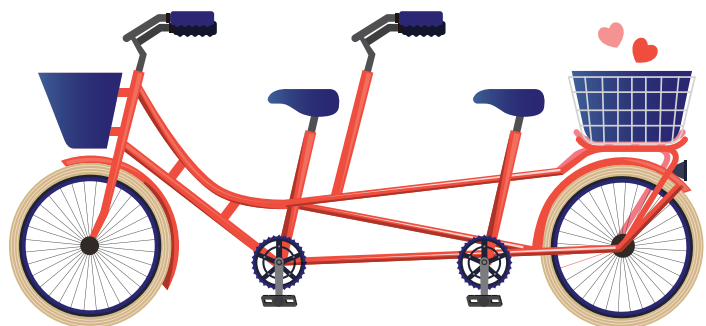


PERCENTAGE OF COUPLES LIVING TOGETHER OUTSIDE MARRIAGE



## SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Although a great deal of attention has been given in recent years to same-sex relationships, they still represent less than **1%** of all couples in Australia. In the 2016 Census, there were just under 46,800 same-sex couples – a big increase from 2011, particularly for those under 30, but still only **0.9%** of all couples living together.



2016 | 46,800  
SAME-SEX COUPLES

## FEWER PEOPLE ARE MARRIED OR LIVING TOGETHER

Is it just that people are living together outside of marriage and don't see the need to marry?

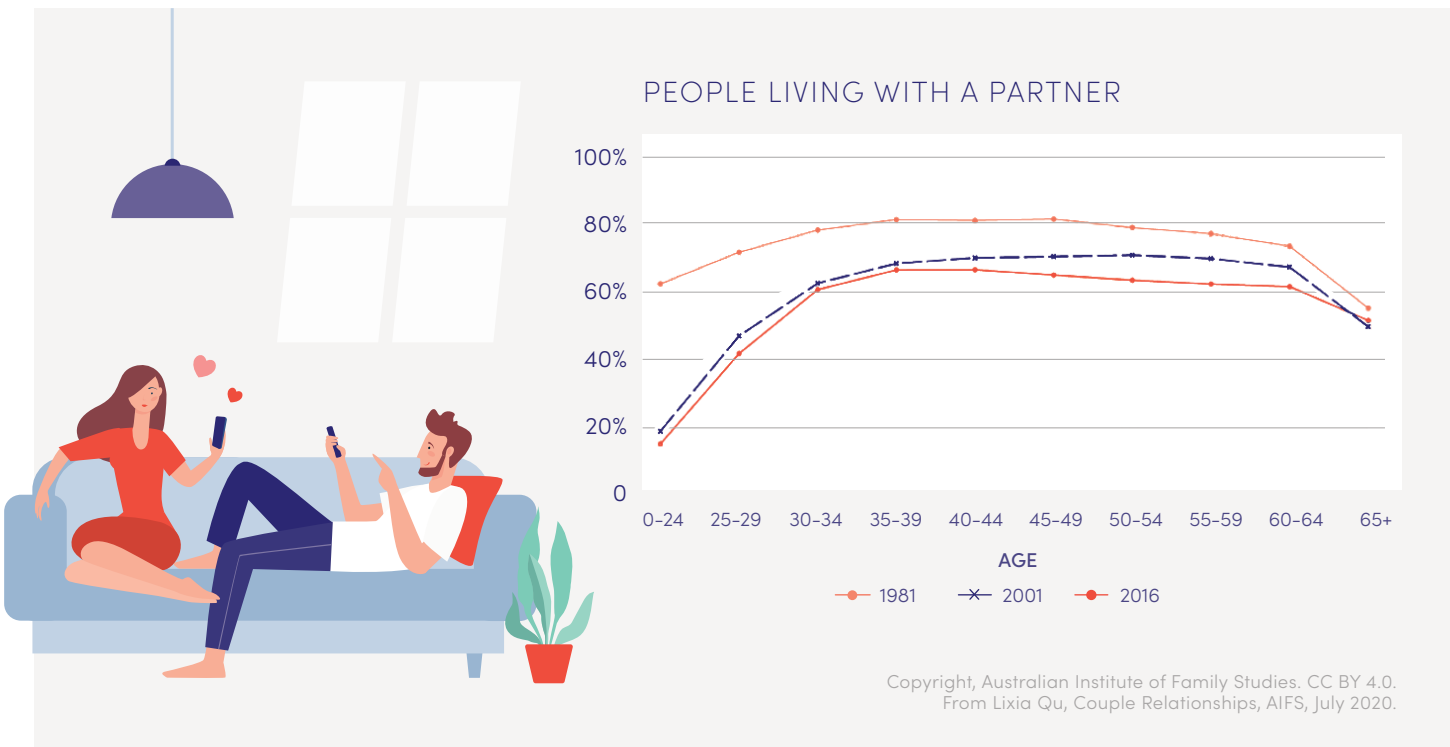
To some extent, yes, but a lot of cohabiting relationships break up after a few years – much more frequently than marriages. For a great many cohabiting couples, particularly those without children, the pattern is either to marry eventually, or to break up within about ten years.

Even cohabiting couples who have children have much higher rates of break-up than married couples. So the decline in marriage is not offset by an increase in long-term cohabitation outside marriage. What has

happened in the last few decades is that less people are either married or living together outside marriage. In 1981, over 80% of people aged 35–49 were either married or living with someone.

**By 2016, this had dropped to less than 70%.** The greatest fall in the proportion of people who are married or living with a partner was in the under 30 age group.

WHY HAS THE MARRIAGE RATE DECLINED SO MUCH?



## THE RISE IN LIVING ALONE

More people are now living alone. In 1981, 18% of households were one person only. By 2016, this had risen to over 24%. The proportion of people living in group households has stayed around the same over the last few decades.

2016 | 24% OF PEOPLE LIVE ALONE

## SO WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO MARRIAGE?

Marriage remains widely accepted and supported in Australian society; but patterns are changing. Many people are delaying marriage, typically until they are around 30. They are most likely to have lived with their partner beforehand, and may have had one or more other cohabiting relationships before that. A wedding is, for many, a stage of affirming commitment to a cohabiting partner, rather than marking the beginning of life living together as a couple.

While some people choose to live together with another person for the long-term without marrying, and have children together, this does not, in itself explain the substantial fall in marriage rates over the last 50 years. Nor does the greater acceptance of same-sex relationships. While the number of same-sex relationships has increased considerably over the last two decades, particularly among the under 30s, these couples were less than 1% of all couples at the last census in Australia.



A major reason why marriage has declined is that fewer people are finding partners. More people are staying single or experiencing a period of cohabitation which does not last. As a consequence of lower numbers of people forming and sustaining partnerships, whether married or cohabiting outside of marriage, there has been a substantial increase in the number of single people in the population, particularly in the under 30 age group.

## SOURCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2019* (2020).
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Same-Sex Couples In Australia, 2016* (2017).
- Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Marriage Rates in Australia* (2021).
- Nicole Hiekel et al, 'Love. Break up. Repeat: The prevalence and stability of serial cohabitation among West German women and men born in the early 1970s' (2018) 39 *Demographic Research* 855-69.
- Sowrirajulu Krishnamoorthy, 'Changing marriage and divorce patterns in Australia, 1921-81: an application of multi-state life table analysis' (1987) 43 *Genus* 69-84.
- Marika Jalovaara & Anette Fasang, 'From never partnered to serial cohabitators: Union trajectories to childlessness' (2017) 36 *Demographic Research* 1703-1720.
- Brienna Perelli-Harris et al, 'Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia' (2014) 31 *Demographic Research* 1043-1078.
- Lixia Qu, *Couple Relationships*, AIFS, July 2020.
- Lixia Qu, *Families Then & Now: Households and families* AIFS, July 2020.