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trade](#)

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Milestones: journeying into adulthood

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We used to think of getting married and having children as some of life's most important milestones. How are some of the modern markers of adulthood – from working life to living arrangements – changing?

18 February 2019

For many young adults in the UK, their social media pages are full of baby pictures and wedding-day snaps from friends and acquaintances they've grown up with. Such events have traditionally been celebrated as the key milestones of early adulthood. When do these life events typically happen, and what are the other modern markers of adulthood, in work and family life?

Age 18: Legally an adult



The law gives children more rights and responsibilities as they grow up. From as young as 8 in Scotland, or 10 in the rest of the UK, they can be held responsible for criminal behaviour – although the Scottish Parliament is currently considering [raising the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years old](#).

Teenagers get more rights as they get older – for example, they can begin

doing “light work” part-time from the age of 13 or 14 (depending on which part of the UK they live in). From the age of 16 they are legally able to consent to sexual activity, and from 17 they can start driving.

But it’s not until their 18th birthday (or, in some circumstances, earlier in Scotland) that children become adults in the eyes of the law. Adults can enter into legal contracts, leave home, and take on debt. They’re also able to buy alcohol, smoke, get married without their parents’ permission, and vote in UK Parliamentary elections.

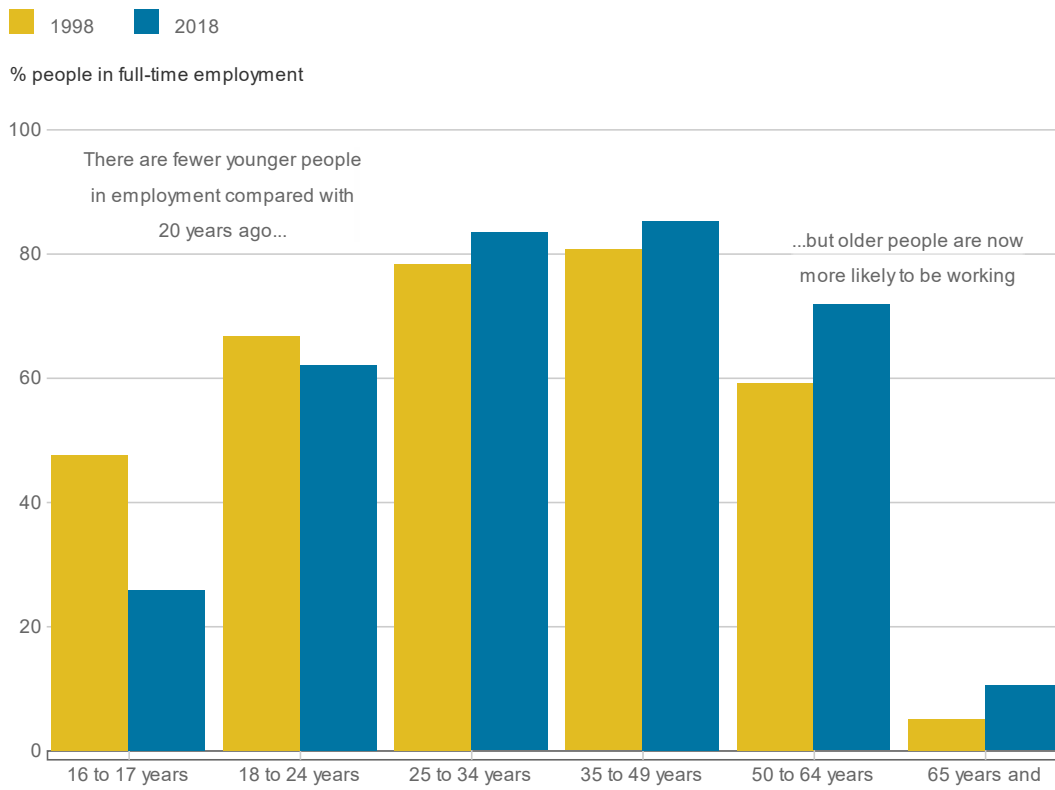
Age 19: Starting full-time work



It’s not until the age of 19 that more than 50% of people are in full-time employment. Over the past 20 years, only two age groups have seen their employment rate decline: those aged 16 to 17 and 18 to 24.

The youngest age groups work less than they did 20 years ago

Employment rate by age group, UK, 1998 and 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

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[Download the data](#)

This is largely because more people are staying on at schools and colleges, and progressing to university. Between 1998 and 2018, the average age people left full-time education increased from 17.8 years to 19.3 years.

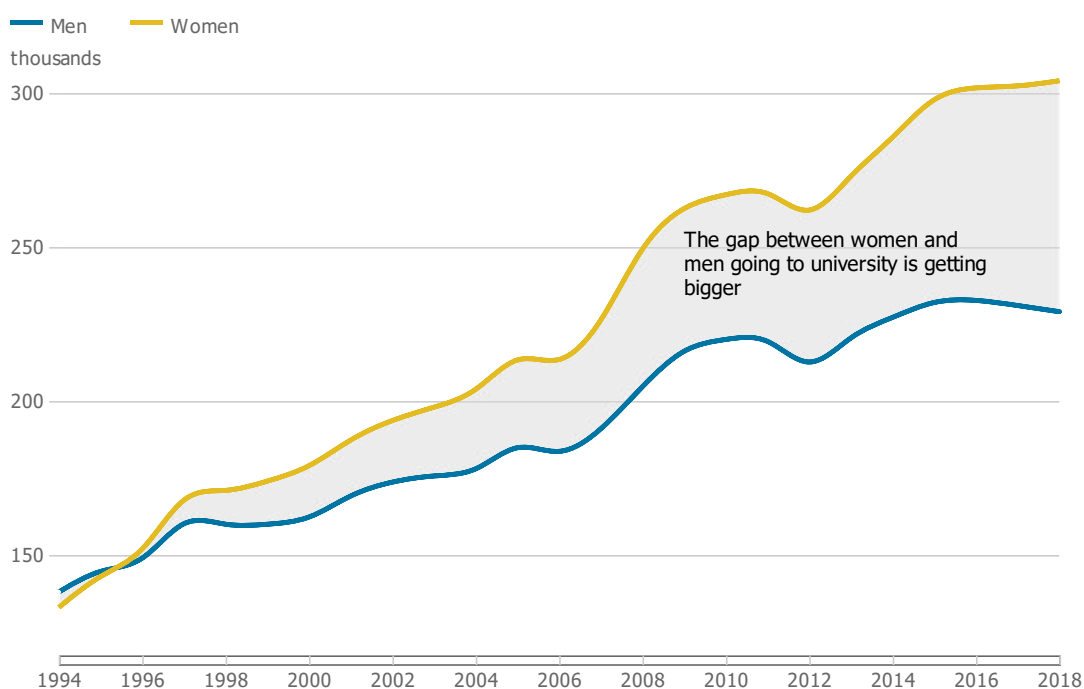
In part, this can be explained by official changes to [the age at which you are expected to stay on in education](#) – in 2015, this changed to 18 for students in England. However, the main explanation is the big increase in the number of people choosing to remain in education beyond age 18. [Around a third of 18-year-olds now go to university \(PDF, 1.4MB\)](#), compared with a quarter in 2006.

On average, women stay in full-time education around half a year longer than men, mainly due to the larger number of women going to university. Since the mid-1990s, women have outnumbered men on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and this gap between the sexes is widening.

While the number of men applying to higher education increased by two-thirds between 1994 and 2018 (up 66%), the number of women applying more than doubled (up 129%). One possible explanation is the [growing gap in educational achievement between girls and boys](#).

Women have outnumbered men at university since the mid-1990s

Accepted applicants to higher education via UCAS, UK, 1994 to 2018



Source: [UCAS end of cycle report 2018](#)

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Note: These figures include both overseas and home applicants. Home applicants account for most applicants (86% in 2018).

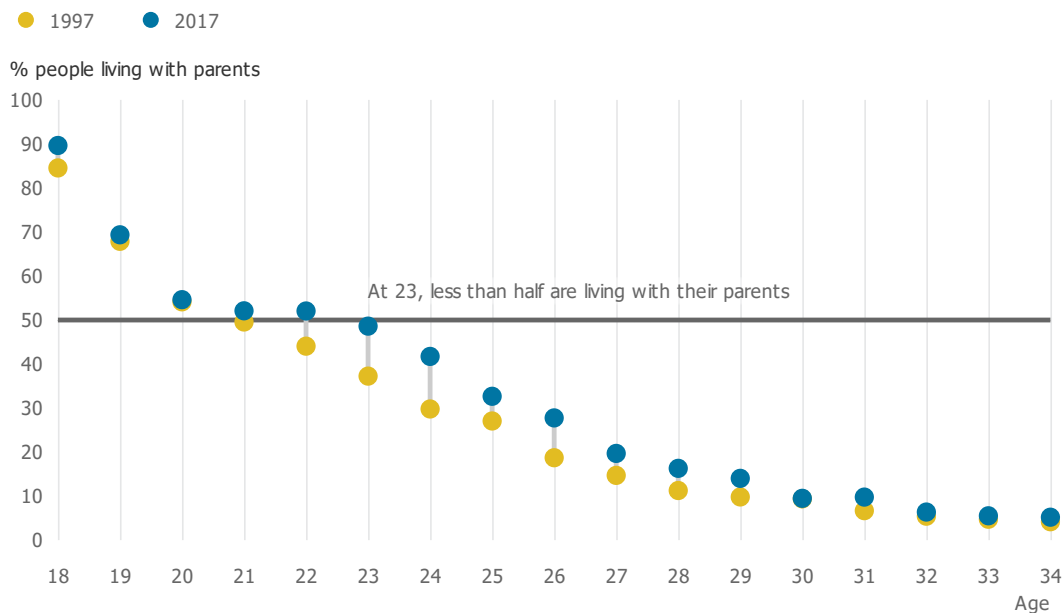
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Age 23: Moving out of your parents' home

In 2017, the first age at which more than 50% of young people had left the parental home was 23. Two decades earlier, more than 50% of 21-year-olds had already left home.

People are living with their parents for longer than they used to

Percentage of people living with parents by age, UK, 1997 and 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics – Young adults living with their parents

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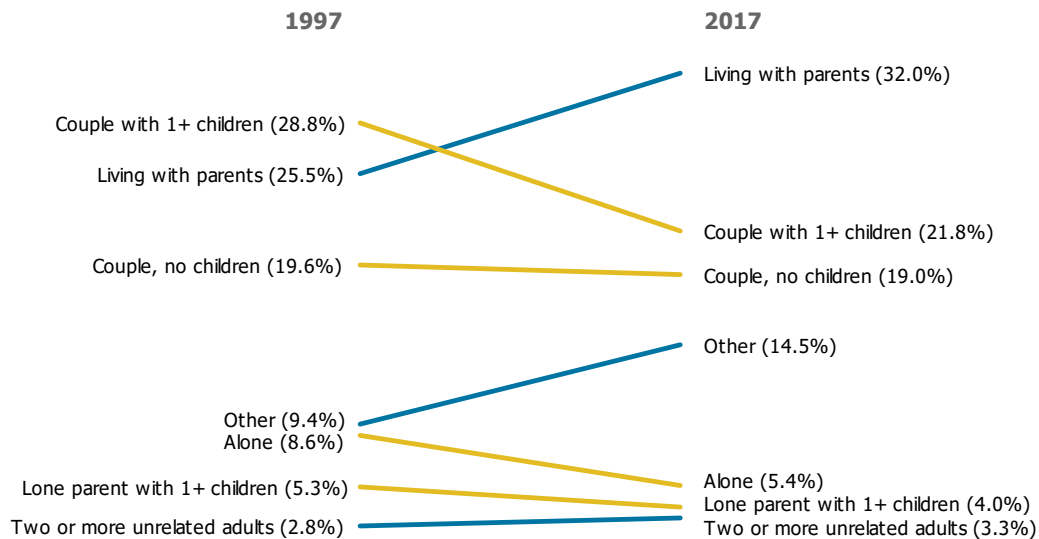
Both men and women are living with their parents for longer than they did 20 years earlier, but it's young men who are more likely to stay with their parents than young women. In 2017, of men aged 18 to 34 years old, 37% lived with their parents, compared with 26% of women in the same age group.

There are a few possible reasons for this: women have traditionally moved in with a partner at younger ages than men; women are also more likely to go to university; and there is some evidence that, early in their careers at

least, [women have been known to earn more than men](#) .

Living with parents is now the most common living arrangement for young adults

Living arrangements of 18- to 34-year-olds, UK, 1997 and 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

► [Embed code](#)

Note: "Other" includes people in multi-family households (these contain at least two families). The families may be related. "Other" may also contain those who are the head of the family unit or the partner of the head of the family unit, but not the head of the household, or the partner or cohabitee of the head of the household. It may also include those in a one-person family but who live with others in their household. Data do not include students living in halls of residence.

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In 1997, the most common living arrangement for young adults was as a couple with one or more children (29% of 18- to 34-year-olds). By 2017, there were more young adults living with their parents (32% of 18- to 34-year-olds). During this period, the costs of both renting and buying homes have increased, and the average ages of getting married and having

children have risen. These factors, combined with the rise in the number of people staying in education and not in full-time work, may be factors in encouraging young adults to remain living with their parents.

Age 27: Moving in with a partner

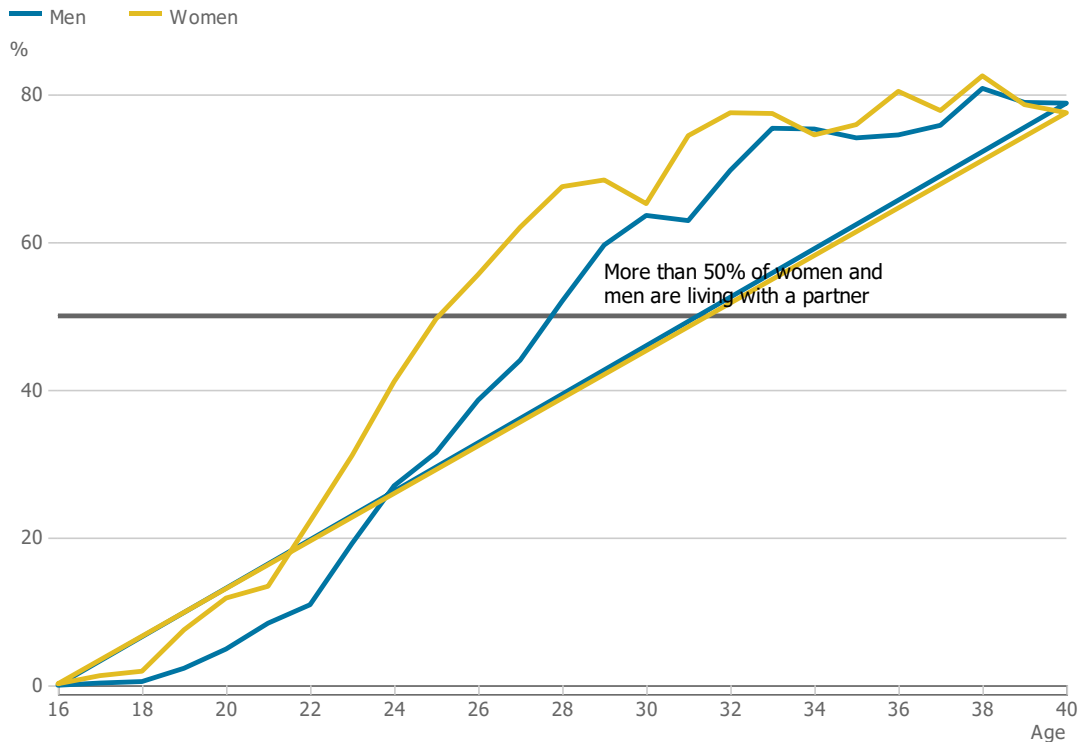


The age at which people move in with a partner has not changed much over the last couple of decades and has fluctuated between 26 and 27.

More than 50% of 27-year-olds were living with a partner in 2017. Women are more likely to move in with their partner earlier than men, with more than 50% of 26-year-old women living with a partner. The first age at which more than half of men are living with a partner is 28.

Women move in with their partners at a younger age than men

Percentage of population living with a partner by age, UK, 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

► [Embed code](#)

Note: "Living with a partner" includes the categories "living in a couple – married", "living in a couple – cohabiting, previously married", and "living in a couple – cohabiting, never married". Same-sex and opposite-sex partners are included.

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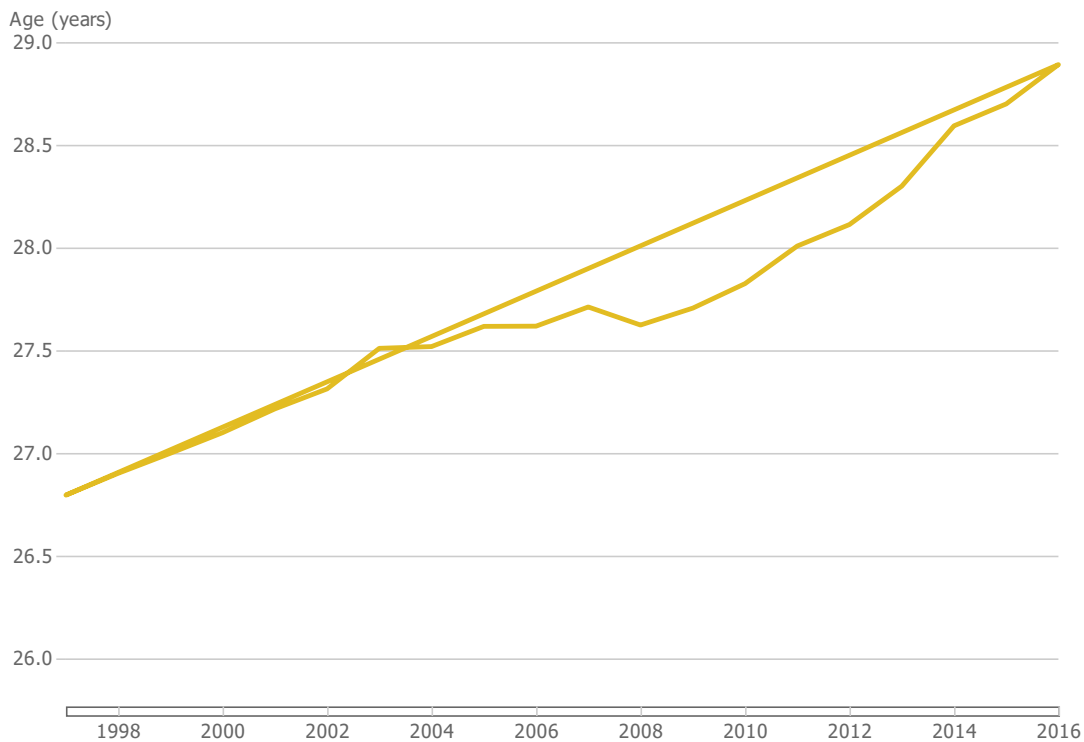
Age 29: Having a baby



The age at which women have their first child has been increasing for more than 40 years. In 2016, the average age of a first-time mother was 29 – two years later than it was in 1997.

Age of first-time mums continues to rise

Average age of first-time mothers, UK, 1997 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

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It's not possible to produce a figure for the average age of first-time fathers, as when births are registered, fathers aren't asked whether they have any children already. We do know the average age of all fathers in England and Wales is around three years higher than for all mothers. In 2017, the average age of all fathers (not just first-time fathers) in England and Wales was 33.4 years, compared with 31.5 years in 1997.

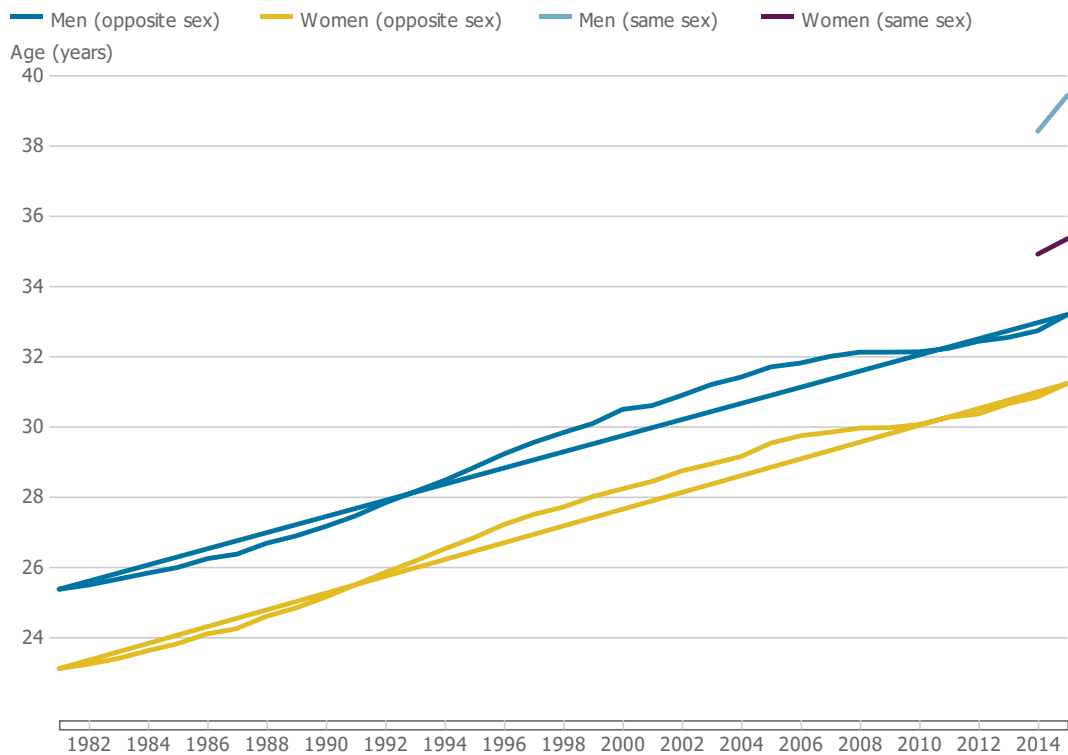
Age 32: Getting married



Many people used to see marriage as a precursor to having children. In the UK today, people in their 20s are more likely to have children than be married, with the average age of first-time marriage increasing in 2015 to 33 for men and 31 for women (up from ages 30 and 27 respectively in 1997).

Age of marriage continues to rise

Average age of first marriage, UK, 1981 to 2015



Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

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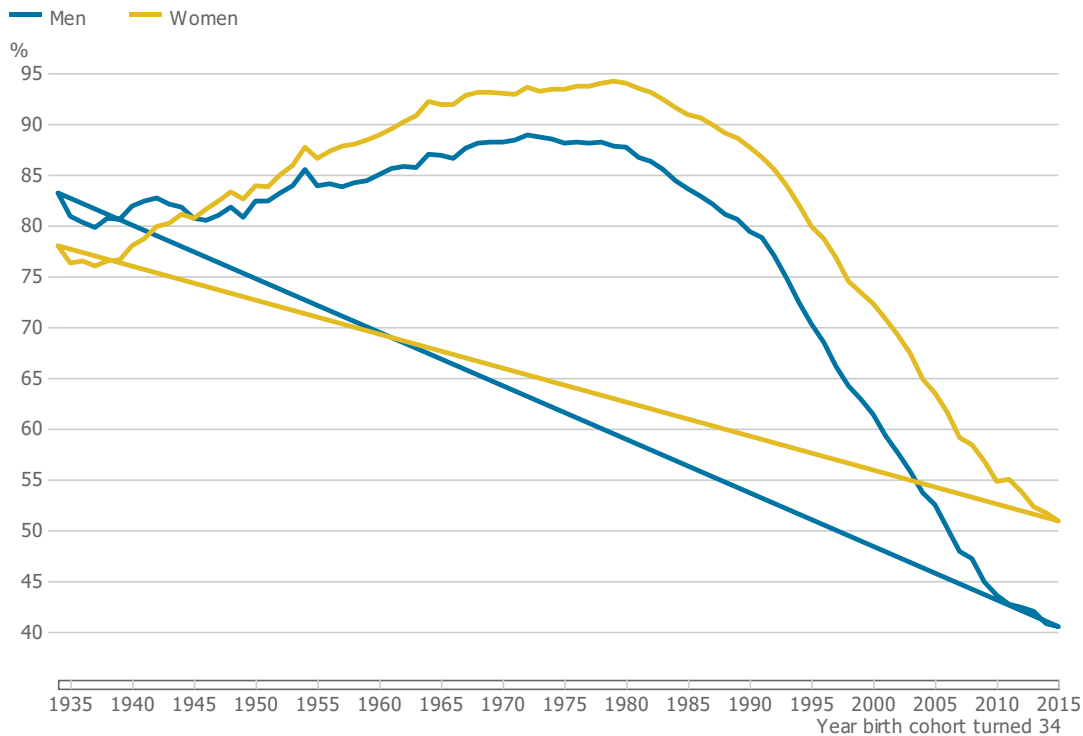
Note: Same sex marriages include data for only England, Wales and Scotland.

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In 1979, in England and Wales, 94% of 34-year-old women, and 88% of 34-year-old men, had ever been married. By 2015, this figure had fallen to 51% of 34-year-old women and 41% of 34-year-old men.

Marriage before 34 has declined since 1979

Percentage of birth cohorts married by the year of their 34th birthday, England and Wales, 1934 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

► [Embed code](#)

[Download the data](#)

There are numerous reasons for the changes in the timing and number of marriages in the UK. With [weddings rising in price](#) and house prices increasing, the cost of setting up family life has increased considerably.

We've also seen [changing attitudes to marriage itself](#) through [changes in society, religion and cultural norms](#) including a reduced parental expectation to marry in your twenties.

Age 34: Owning your own home

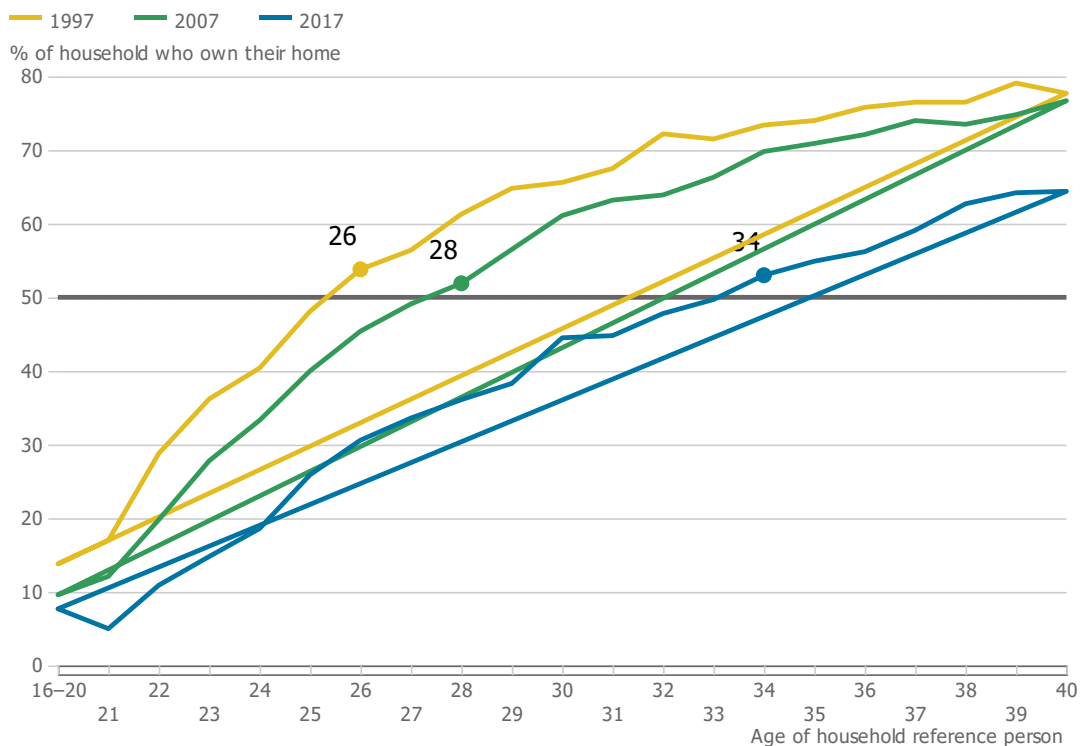


The age at which people own their own home is continuing to rise: it is not until the age of 34 that more than 50% of people live in a home they own (based on the age of household reference persons, individuals within a household who act as a reference person for all individuals in the household). In 1997, the youngest age at which more than 50% of people

were homeowners was 26.

Home ownership is starting later in life

Percentage of households who own their home, by age of household reference person, UK, 1997 to 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

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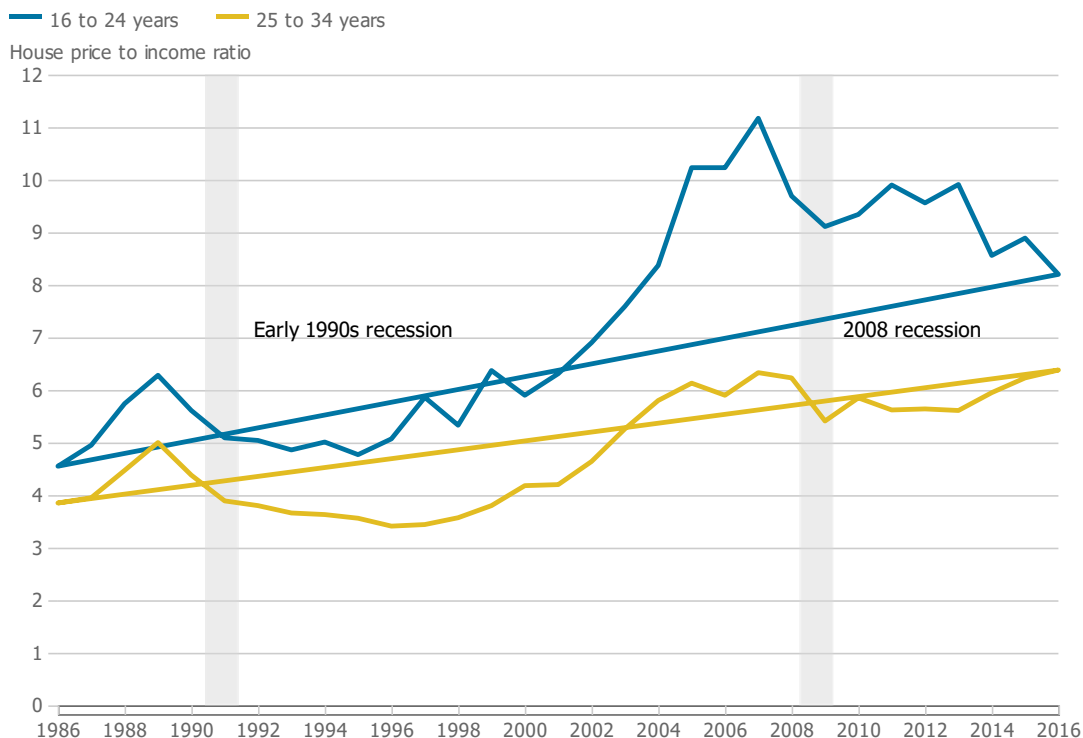
Over the last 20 years, renting (from both the private and social sector) has become more common across all but the oldest age groups. The most substantial change has been for those aged 25 to 34 – in 2018, among this age group 55% were renting, up from 35% in 1998.

Over this period, there are many factors that could be contributing towards falling rates of home ownership, including the introduction of stricter mortgage lending rules introduced after the 2008 recession and the [rising cost of an entry-level property](#).

In 1993, the average house price was 4.9 times the average household salary of a household headed by a 16- to 24-year-old. In 2016, it was 8.2 times (a decline from its peak of 11.2 times in 2007).

Housing costs still high compared with incomes

House price to income ratio by age groups, UK, 1986 to 2016



Source: ONS calculations from HM land registry and ONS household income figures

► [Embed code](#)

Note: House price figures are average for all property transactions, and so they don't refer to the average house price actually paid by those two age groups; average income regardless of tenure. Income-house price ratios are calculated as an average of all property transactions in the UK in a given year divided by the average income in a given year (both adjusted for inflation)

[Download the data](#)

Further milestones: the journey continues

This article has examined some of life's milestones on the journey into

adulthood, but there are more milestones people may experience, which can occur later in adulthood.

For example, when do we become financially independent? At what age do we pay off our mortgage? And when do we start thinking about saving for retirement? Later this year, we'll publish a follow-up piece considering what the available data can tell us about more of life's milestones.

[View all data used in this article](#)

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