

Technical notes¹

Table 12 (Population by marital status, age, sex, and urban/rural residence, each census: 1948–1997) presents population by marital status, age and sex for each census between 1948 and 1996.

Description of variables: Marital status is defined as the personal status of each individual in relation to the marriage laws or customs of the country.²

The marital status classification used in this table is the following: single (never married), married, widowed (but not remarried) and divorced (but not remarried). Additional classifications appear for certain countries or areas when data are available. These include: consensually married, separated and marital status unknown. Unless otherwise specified, when the categories of "consensually married" and "separated" are not shown separately, it can be assumed that persons in these categories are shown as "married".

Age is defined as age at last birthday, that is the difference between the date of birth and the reference date of the age distribution expressed in completed solar years. The age classification used in this table is the following: under 15 years, 5-year age groups through 70–74 years, 75 years and over and age unknown. In addition a category for 15 years and over is presented; in this category persons of unknown age are excluded. The same classification is used for both males and females.

Statistics presented in this table are from population censuses. Data from demographic sample surveys are shown for countries or areas where no census of the total population was held during this period. This table also provides information on national practices regarding a lower age limit for the enumeration or the tabulation of population by marital status. In a number of countries or areas, population by marital status is tabulated only for persons above a minimum age, which may be 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and even 18 years. When it is known that this minimum age is other than 15 years, specific information is given in footnotes about the age categories under 15 or 15–19 years, as appropriate.

Reliability of data: No special reliability codes have been used in connection with this table.

Limitations: Statistics on population by marital status, age and sex are subject to the same qualifications which have been set forth for Population statistics in general as discussed in [section 3 of the Technical Notes](#).

Comparability is also affected by the accuracy of the response to the questions on marital status. Divorced or separated persons may erroneously be reported as single, while those in consensual unions may be reported as married. Also, persons that are divorced may report themselves as single, married or widowed.

¹ Demographic Yearbook Historical Supplement 1948–1997, United Nations DYB–CD, Sales No.: E/F.99.XIII.12, United Nations Publications New York, Geneva

² Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses

The number of divorced persons reported at the census is usually too small in relation to the number of divorces granted and the frequency of remarriage in the intercensal period. Similarly, married males who are separated from their spouses seem to report themselves as single, while their wives appear to report themselves correctly as married. Another type of response error is the possibility that a single woman with an illegitimate child will report herself married, while the father of the child is reported correctly.

Unless persons in consensual unions are tabulated separately in countries or areas where these unions are relatively numerous, comparability of data on marital status is limited. Evidence seems to indicate that parties in consensual unions are more likely to report themselves as married rather than single.

Similarly, the category "separated" may be of uncertain composition. It may contain persons whose marriage has been suspended by legal process, or it may include as well married persons who are simply living apart and who may or not intend to remain apart. Since laws and practices with regard to legal separation differ within and among countries or areas, genuine comparability for this group is probably impossible.

When consensual unions are shown in a separate category, persons classed as "separated" generally include those separated from consensual unions as well as those separated from legal unions. If the "separated" category is not shown, persons separated from consensual unions are typically included in the "single" category.

Because these statistics are classified according to age, they are subject to the limitations with respect to accuracy of age reporting similar to those already discussed in connection with [Section 3.1.3](#) of the Technical Notes.

In addition, in this particular table comparability for the age groups 15 years of age and over, under 15 years and 15–19 years may be limited because data on marital status may be collected at the time of a census only for persons above a certain minimum age. As noted above, when this age is other than 15 years, these minimums have been indicated in the footnotes for the appropriate age groups. The assumption (which may be reflected in the tabulations) that no individual below this minimum age in a given country or area is married may be incorrect because of the census includes not only persons whose marriage took place in the country or area concerned but also those who were married in other countries or areas, where legal age limits might be lower. When no data have been provided for the age category of under 15 years, only the total population for this age group, irrespective of marital status, has been shown.

The absence of frequencies in the category of either marital status unknown or age unknown does not necessarily indicate completely accurate reporting and tabulation of these items. It is often an indication that unknowns have been eliminated by ascribing to them either a marital status or an age before tabulation, or by proportionate distribution after tabulation.

Coverage: Population by marital status by age and sex is shown for 200 countries or areas.