

# Family size in 2012

## Key points

- There were 7.7 million families with dependent children in the UK in 2012, 1 in 7 of which had three or more dependent children
- Married couples had a higher average number of dependent children in their family than other family types, at 1.8 children per family compared with 1.7 on average
- The UK has a higher percentage of households with three or more children than three-quarters of European Union countries
- Nearly 9 in 10 couple families with three or more dependent children had either one or both parents working

## Introduction

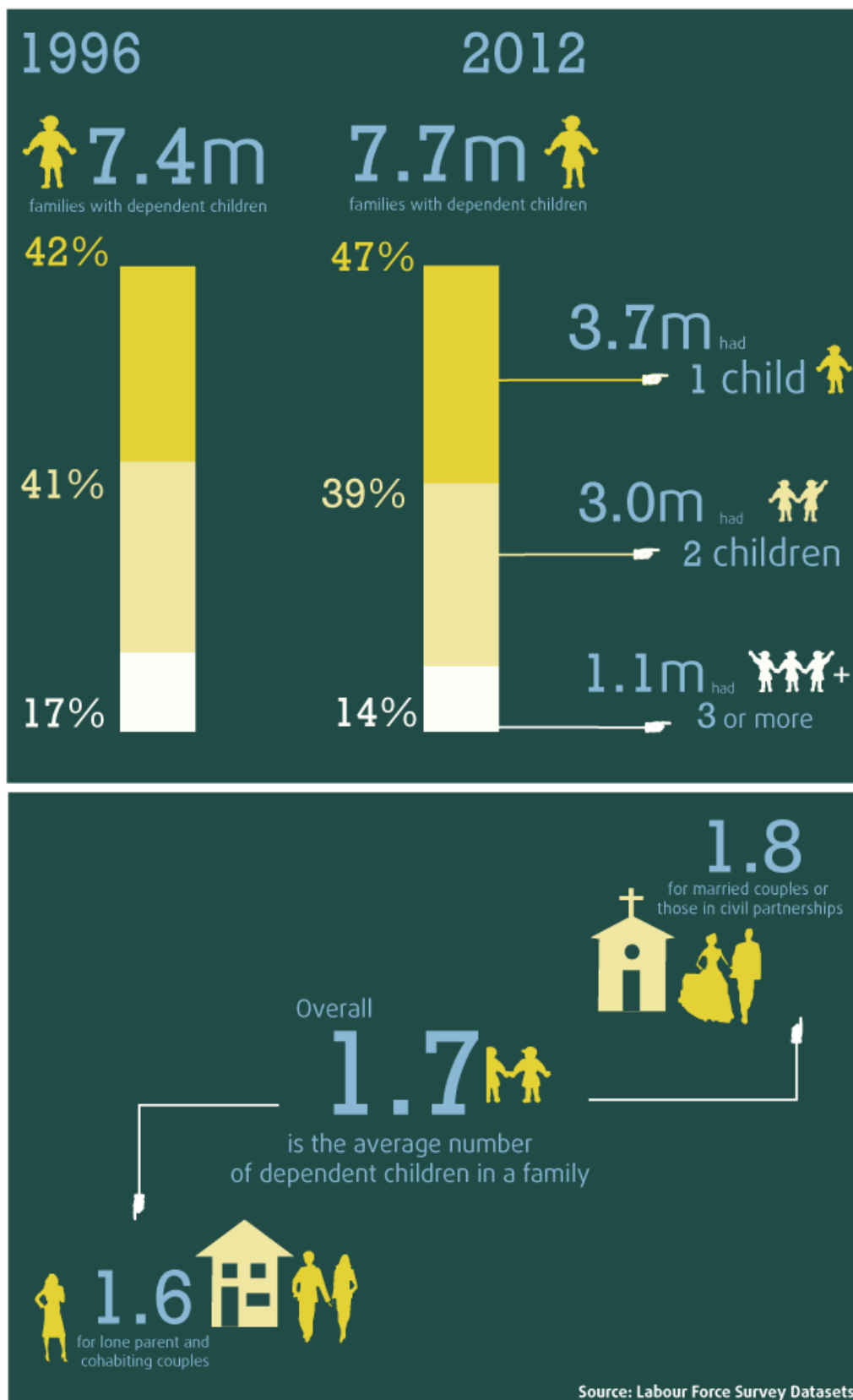
This report analyses families in the UK by the number of dependent<sup>1</sup> children they have, with a particular focus on those with three or more dependent children. It examines trends over time, where such families live and their economic activity. The statistics for 2012 were first published in November 2012, but this analysis is new.

The statistics are used to help the public, government and researchers understand how many children families have living with them and the possible reasons behind the current trends.

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<sup>1</sup> Dependent children are those living with their parent(s) and either (a) aged under 16, or (b) aged 16 to 18 in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household

## One in seven families with children had three or more children



1. Dependent children as those living with their parent(s) and either (a) aged under 16, or (b) aged 16 to 18 in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household.

The graphic shows the percentage of families in the UK with one, two or 'three or more' dependent children in 1996 and 2012. These are the earliest and latest years for which comparable figures are available. In 2012 there were 7.7 million families with dependent children. The most common number of children was one (3.7 million families), while 3.0 million had two dependent children and 1.1 million had three or more.

It appears that families are getting smaller as the percentage of families who have one dependent child has increased by five percentage points, from 42% in 1996 to 47% in 2012. Meanwhile the percentage of families with three or more has decreased by three percentage points to 14%.

It is important to note that these figures represent the current situation of families at a snapshot in time. Families may go on to have more children later, may have non-dependent (adult) children living in the household, or may have children living elsewhere. For example, a family may have one dependent child aged 15, and a non-dependent (adult) child aged 19 living with them, so they would be counted as a family with one dependent child here.

## **Married couples have more children than other families**

The graphic also shows the average number of dependent children different types of families had. Married or civil partnered couples had a higher average number of dependent children in their families than other family types, at 1.79<sup>2</sup> dependent children per family compared with 1.71 for all families. Meanwhile lone parent families had 1.59 dependent children on average, lower than other family types, and cohabiting couples had an average of 1.62. These patterns are likely to reflect whether there is a partner living in the household and the stability of parental partnerships. Previous research has indicated that marital partnerships are more stable than cohabiting partnerships<sup>3</sup>.

The age of parents is also a factor as previous analysis<sup>4</sup> has shown that married couples tend to be older on average than cohabiting couples so are more likely to have finished having children. This is partly because some couples cohabit, have children and then marry when children are older. Similarly, lone parents may move into a cohabiting relationship, and then marry, having more children at either of these latter stages.

A different source of data, the General Lifestyle Survey, which provides a longer time series, shows that families with dependent children in Great Britain had 2.0 children on average in 1971. Although not directly comparable with the UK figure of 1.7 for 2012 and 1.8 for 1996, this suggests the average number of dependent children per family has fallen by around 0.3 since 1971.

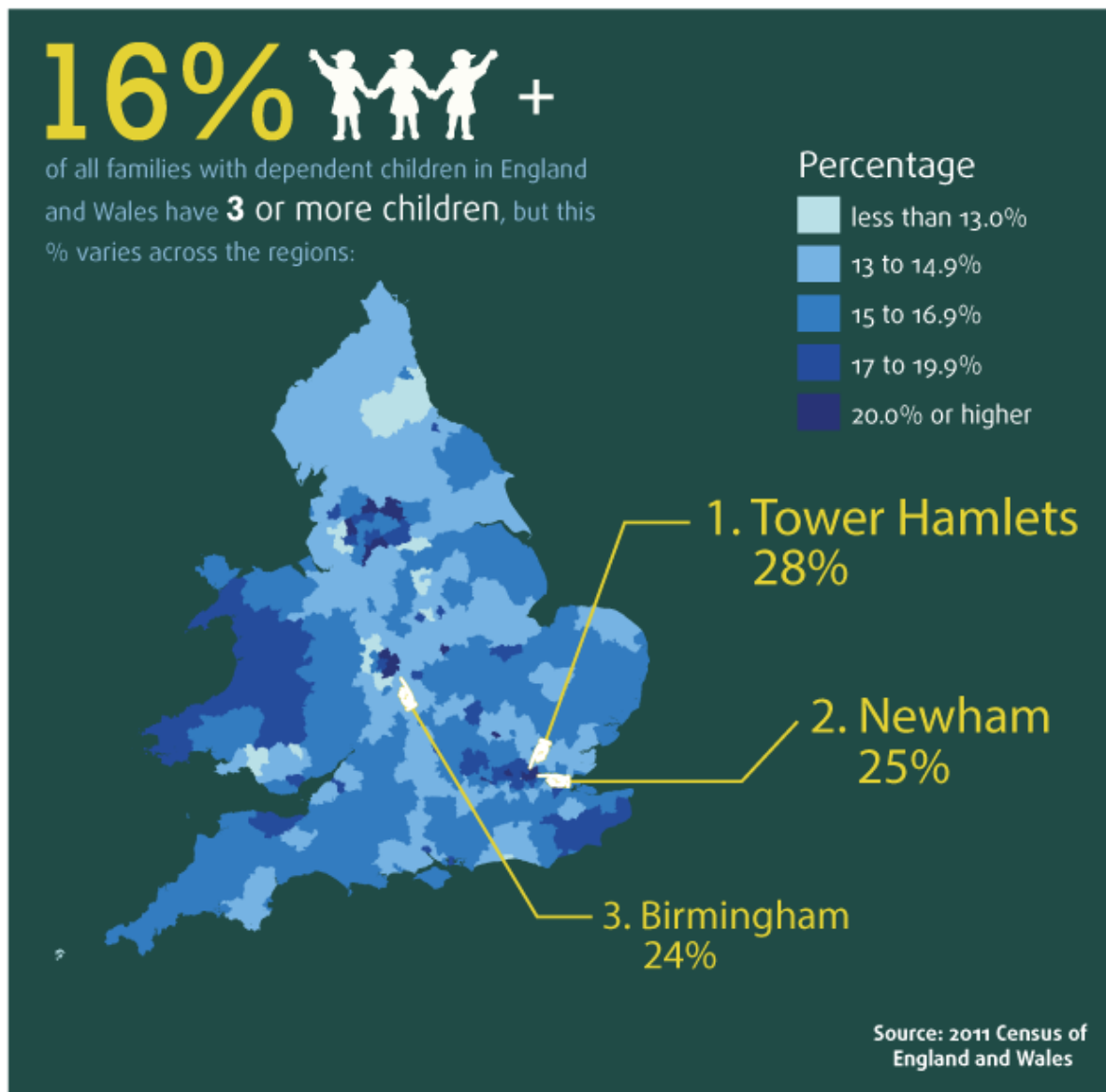
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2 This is the average number of dependent children for married and civil partnered couples combined, although over 99% of the couples are married.

3 Population Trends article ["Do partnerships last? Comparing marriage and cohabitation using longitudinal census data"](#)

4 [Cohabitation in the UK](#)

## Where are families with three or more children living?



The map shows the percentage of families with dependent children who have three or more dependent children in local authorities in England and Wales according to the 2011 Census. Across England and Wales as a whole, 16% of families with dependent children had three or more. Higher proportions of families with three or more children can be found in London, parts of the West Midlands, including Birmingham, and parts of the North West, including Bradford.

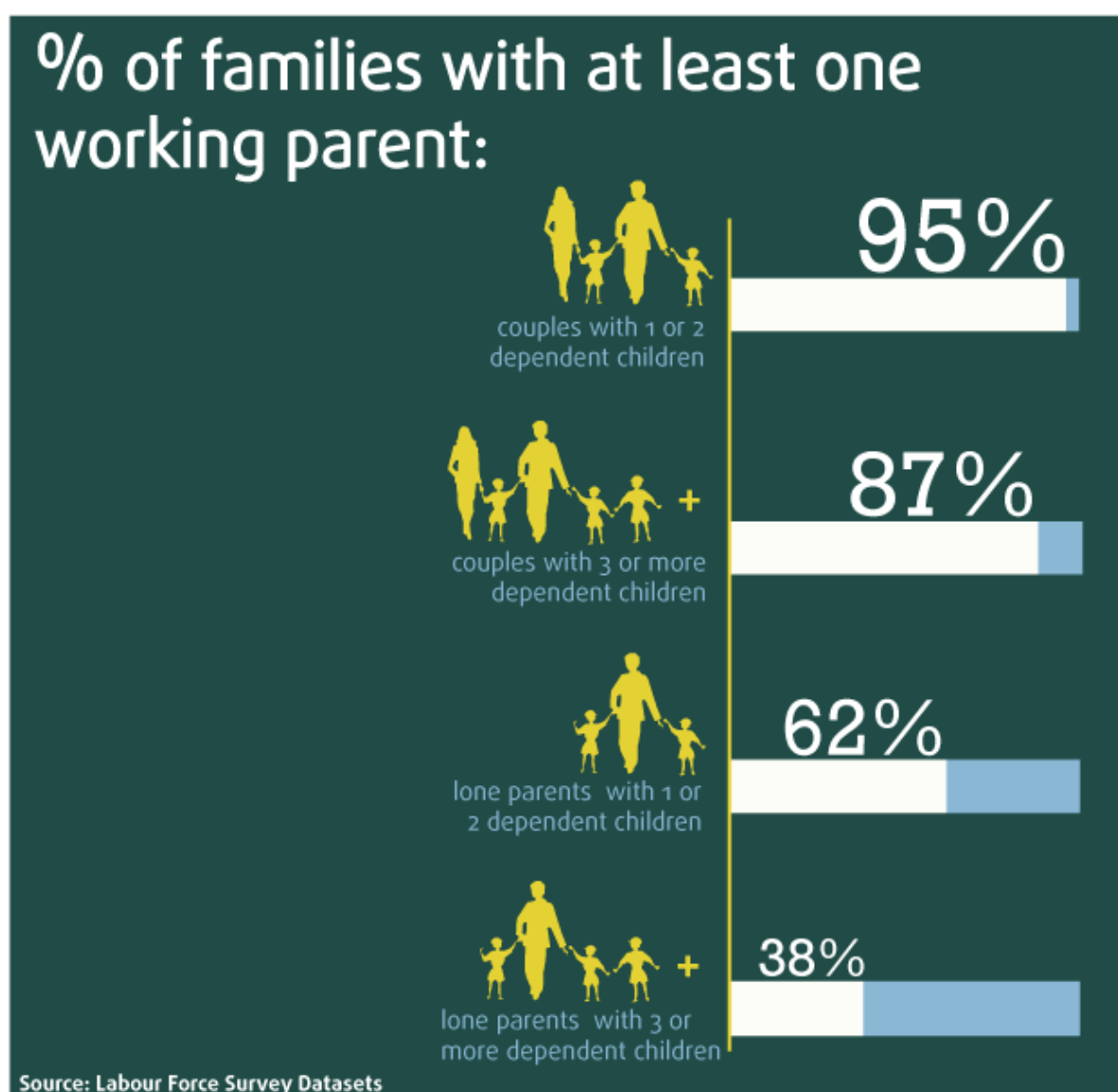
This may be related to the ethnicities of people living in these areas, as previous research<sup>5</sup> has shown that fertility rates in the UK are higher among women born in Bangladesh and Pakistan than women born in the UK.

<sup>5</sup> [Childbearing of UK and non-UK born women living in the UK, 2011](#)

The local authorities with the three highest percentages of families with three or more dependent children (Tower Hamlets, Newham and Birmingham) are also local authorities with high percentages of people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnicity<sup>6</sup>. For example in Tower Hamlets, 28% of families with dependent children had three or more, and here a third of people had Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnicity – the highest percentage of all local authorities in England and Wales. For comparison, across England and Wales, 3% of people had Bangladeshi or Pakistani ethnicity.

Aside from the City of London and Isles of Scilly, which have small numbers of families, the local authorities with the lowest percentages of families with three or more children are North Tyneside, South Tyneside and County Durham.

## Employment of parents in the UK

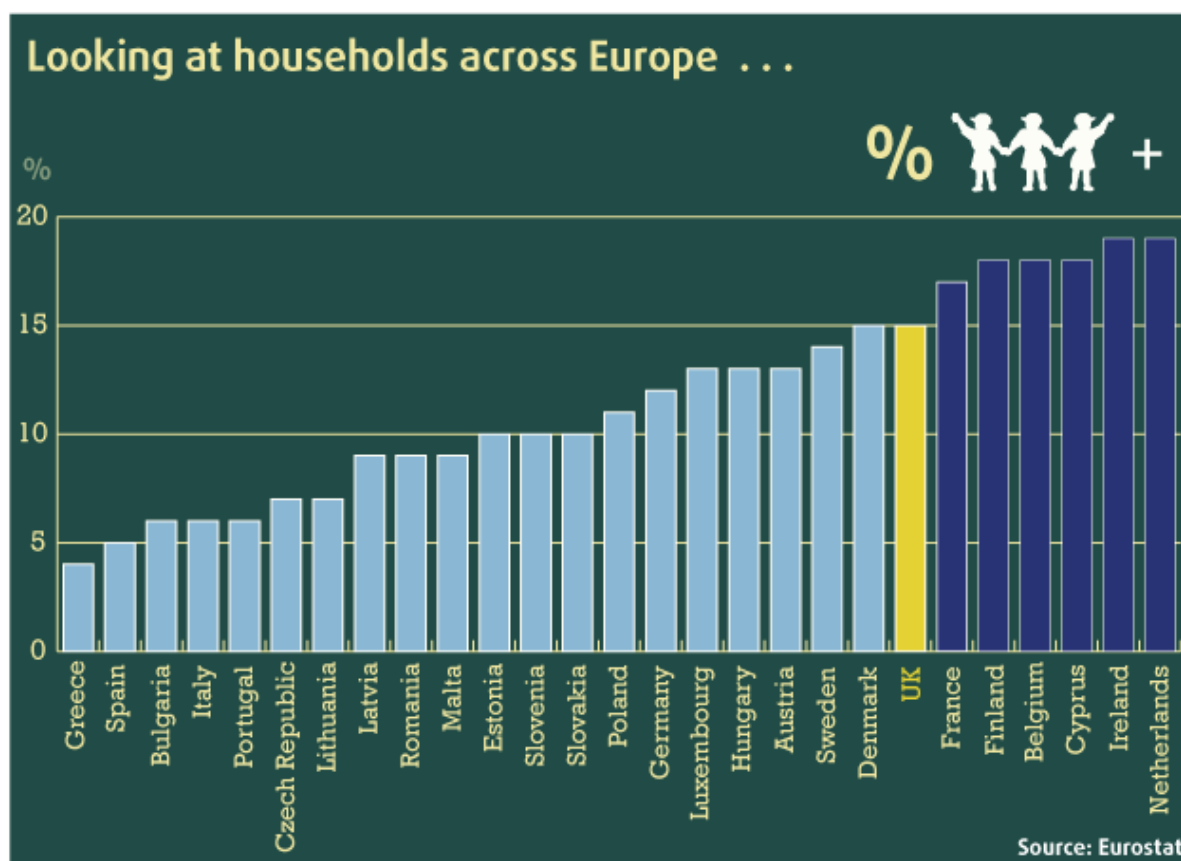


<sup>6</sup> Source: Table KS201EW from 2011 Census of England and Wales

The graphic shows that in 2012, 95% of couple families with one or two dependent children had one or both parents<sup>7</sup> working, compared with 87% of couple families with three or more dependent children. Similarly, 62% of lone parents with one or two dependent children were working compared with 38% of lone parents with three or more dependent children. So families with one or two dependent children are more likely to have at least one employed parent than those with three or more dependent children. This illustrates the greater challenge of combining work with childcare with three or more children compared with one or two.

The graphic also shows that living with a partner makes it easier to work and to share childcare responsibilities. 62% of lone parents with one or two children were employed in 2012, whereas 95% of couple families with one or two dependent children have at least one parent in employment. Previous research<sup>8</sup> has shown that as the age of the youngest child in the family increases, so does the opportunity for the mother in the family to be in work and the gap narrows between the employment rates for mothers with a partner living in the household, and those without a partner.

## European comparisons



1. Dependent children are those aged less than 18, plus economically inactive 18 - 24 year olds living with at least one parent. This definition is slightly wider than that used in the rest of this report.

<sup>7</sup> Parents include biological, cohabiting, step or adoptive parents who live with children

<sup>8</sup> [Mothers in the labour market](#)

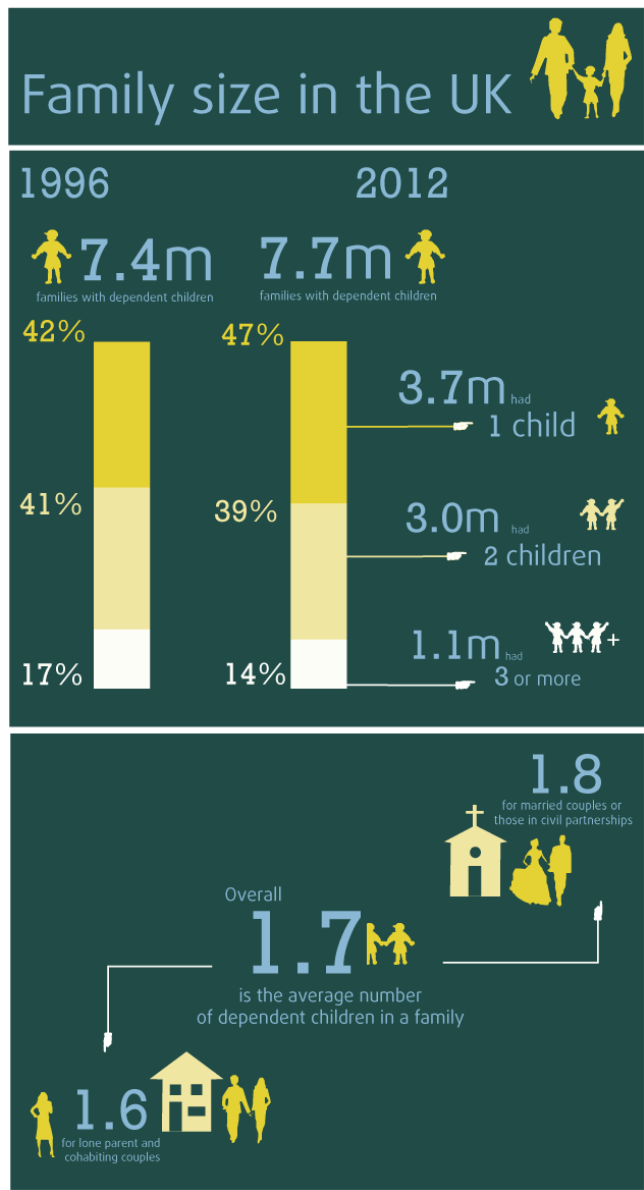
Comparisons with other countries are not straight forward due to different definitions of children but provide an indication of how the UK compares internationally. The chart shows the percentage of households which contain three or more children. Using this source of data, dependent children are those aged less than 18, plus economically inactive 18-24 year olds living with at least one parent. This definition is slightly wider than that used in the rest of this report<sup>9</sup>.

The graph indicates that around 15% of households with dependent children in the UK contain three or more children, compared with a European average of 11%. In fact around three-quarters of European Union countries have a lower proportion of three or more dependent children than the UK and those countries with higher proportions are predominantly in north western Europe. The patterns in the chart are consistent with current fertility levels which are generally lower in southern, central and eastern Europe.

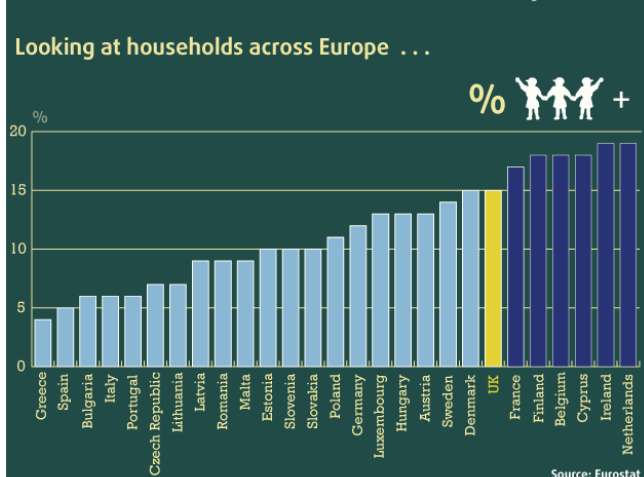
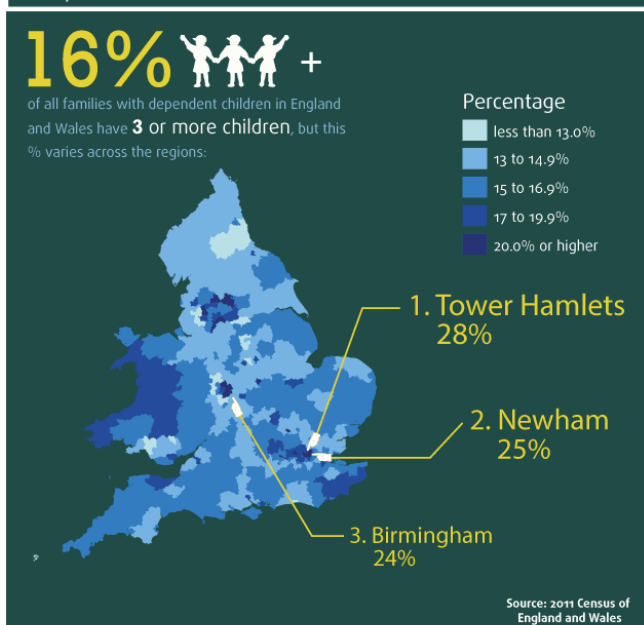
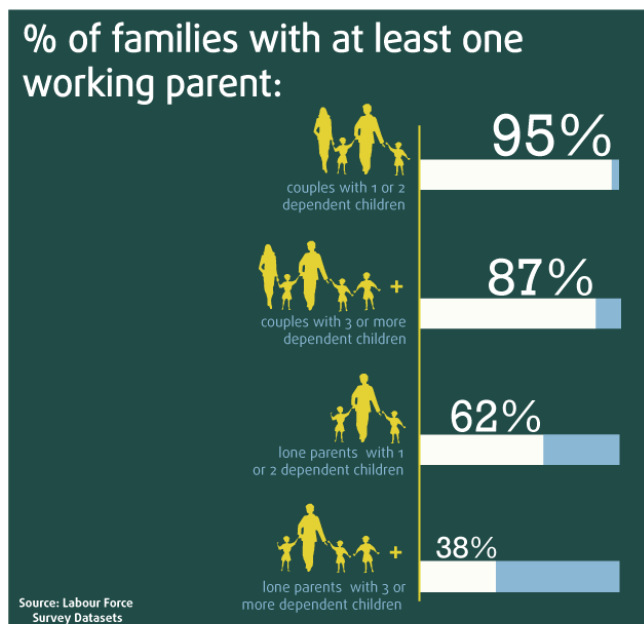
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<sup>9</sup> In the rest of this report, dependent children are those living with their parent(s) and either (a) aged under 16, or (b) aged 16 to 18 in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household

Full length infographic







1. The ONS defines dependent children as those living with their parent(s) and either (a) aged under 16, or (b) aged 16 to 18 in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. This definition is slightly different in the chart of European countries.

## Further information

### Media contact:

Tel: Media Relations Office +44 (0)845 6041858

Emergency on-call +44 (0)7867 906553

Email: [media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk)

### Statistical contact:

Tel: Karen Gask +44 (0)1329 444022

Email: [families@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:families@ons.gsi.gov.uk)

## Background notes

1. The Office for National Statistics would appreciate feedback on the uses made of the statistics and the usefulness of the information provided. Please email [families@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:families@ons.gsi.gov.uk) (preferred) or call +44 (0)1329 444022 to provide feedback.
2. A family is a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child. Children may be dependent or non-dependent.
3. Dependent children are those aged under 16 living with at least one parent, or aged 16 to 18 in full-time education, excluding all children who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household.
4. A small number of children are excluded from the analysis on families. These include (a) foster children and (b) children who live in communal establishments which are not covered by the Labour Force Survey.
5. Labour Force Survey household datasets have been used for most of this analysis. The dataset is available from 1996 onwards. Statistics from the April to June 2012 dataset were first published in August 2012. Further information about the quality of the Labour Force Survey can be found in the [Performance and Quality Monitoring Reports](#).
6. The Labour Force Survey is a household survey of people in the UK. It covers people in private households, NHS accommodation and students in halls of residence whose parents live in the UK. Such students are included through proxy interviews with their parents. However people in other communal establishments such as prisons are excluded. Results from the 2011 Census have not yet been incorporated into any weighting for the Labour Force Survey.
7. Most of the statistics in this report from the Labour Force Survey are considered to be precise but estimates of employed lone parents with three or more children are less precise because they are based on a smaller sample size of people. Further information about the data quality and methods used to create the statistics on families from the Labour Force Survey are available in the [families and households quality and methodology report](#).

8. The statistics in the map in the section “Where are families with three or more children living?” are from table QS118EW from the 2011 Census of England and Wales. The Census is considered to be the most complete and best source of data about families at the local level. Further information about quality and methods is in the [2011 Census quality and methodology report](#).
9. The statistics in the European comparisons are from Eurostat’s EU survey of income and living conditions. Further information about this survey is on the [Eurostat website](#).
10. Further information about mothers in the labour market is on the [ONS website](#).
11. The statistics published in this report show the number of dependent children in the household at the time of the survey. Another way to quantify the size of families is to consider the number of children women have had on average by the end of their childbearing years using [fertility statistics](#). For example, of women born in 1966 who reached age 45 in 2011, 20% were childless, 14% had one child, 38% had two and 28% had three or more. These different sources show different patterns and are used for different purposes: The statistics in this report are most useful for showing the current situation of families with children in households at a snapshot in time, whereas fertility statistics are most useful for tracking how many children women have, including those who remain childless, but are less timely.
12. An [overview of population statistics](#) is available on the ONS website.
13. Follow ONS on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/statisticsONS](http://www.twitter.com/statisticsONS) and Facebook: [www.facebook.com/statisticsONS](http://www.facebook.com/statisticsONS)
14. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the Media Relations Office.
15. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.  
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