

**Marriage and Divorce Trends in Hong Kong 1981-1993**

During the period 1981 to 1993, men and women in Hong Kong showed a tendency towards delayed marriage. The number of re-marriages was on the rise, echoing an increasing number of divorces in the same period. This article examines the marital condition of the population, tendency to marry and certain socio-economic characteristics of brides and bridegrooms in the past 13 years. The number of divorces and the divorce rates are also discussed.

## Marriage and Divorce Trends in Hong Kong 1981-1993

### Introduction

The study of marriages is important because it provides an insight into changes in fertility. Moreover, marriages often lead to formation of new households and the marriage trend is hence indicative of new housing demand.

2. This article examines the marital condition of the population, the marriage rates and certain socio-economic characteristics of brides and bridegrooms entering into marriage in the past 13 years. The seasonal patterns of marriages are also discussed. As detailed divorce statistics are not available, only the total number of divorces and the crude divorce rates are examined.

3. In examining the time series data on marriage, several important factors need to be noted :

- (a) The total number of marriages registered each year includes not only first marriages and remarriages but also re-registrations of couples<sup>#</sup>.
- (b) Chinese chronology cycles affect the number of marriages. Some lunar years are perceived to be auspicious for marriage, 'blind' years are inauspicious and the remaining ones are sort of neutral. The number of marriages usually increase in auspicious years but decrease in 'blind' years.
- (c) The prevalence of males marrying outside Hong Kong, particularly in China, artificially depresses the marriage rates for males.
- (d) The presence of a large number of female foreign domestic helpers in the prime marriageable ages 20-34 also depresses the relevant marriage rates.

The implications of these factors are discussed separately in more detail in the relevant sections below.

### Marital condition of the population

4. Between 1981 and 1991, there was an increase in the proportion never married (and, concurrently, a decrease in the proportion married) for both males and females. The change in the marital status distribution was not easily recognised if not discounted the difference in the age structure of the population between 1981 and 1991. The increase in the proportion never married indicates further postponement of marriages over the decade (Table 1).

---

<sup>#</sup> Under the Marriage Reform Ordinance which was enacted in October 1971, all marriages taking place in Hong Kong must be registered with the Registrar of Marriages. However, prior to October 1971, it was possible to enter into marriages according to Chinese customs. Those couples who had been customarily married before the Ordinance was enacted could formally register their marriage and they are counted as re-registrations. Re-registration of couples also includes those who had married abroad.

**Table 1 Population Aged 15 and Above by Sex and Marital Status, 1981, 1986 and 1991**

<i>Sex and Marital Status</i>	<i>1981</i>		<i>1986</i>		<i>1991</i>		<i>Standardised Percentage*</i>		
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1991</i>
							<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Male</b>									
Never married	848 037	43.2	843 697	39.7	807 443	36.5	34.2	34.8	36.5
Married	1 059 856	54.1	1 207 549	56.9	1 333 049	60.2	62.5	61.4	60.2
Widowed	41 492	2.1	50 491	2.4	48 584	2.2	2.6	2.7	2.2
Divorced/Separated	12 418	0.6	21 089	1.0	23 871	1.1	0.7	1.1	1.1
Total	1 961 803	100.0	2 122 826	100.0	2 212 947	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Female</b>									
Never married	582 430	32.6	616 955	30.4	626 554	29.0	23.9	26.2	29.0
Married	1 001 503	56.0	1 162 301	57.4	1 290 860	59.8	63.8	61.1	59.8
Widowed	191 474	10.7	225 380	11.1	210 390	9.8	11.6	11.6	9.8
Divorced/Separated	11 843	0.7	21 588	1.1	29 614	1.4	0.7	1.1	1.4
Total	1 787 250	100.0	2 026 224	100.0	2 157 418	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note : \* Using the age distribution of the 1991 male and female population as standard.

5. Although Hong Kong people tend to marry late, their degree of celibacy is quite low. In 1991, of those aged between 50-59, about 6% of men and 2% of women were never married. The proportions never married at ages 50-59 usually are taken as indicative of such a phenomenon. The degree of celibacy among males was moderate compared with Singapore and the UK, but higher than that observed in China. For females, a similar pattern is observed (Table 2).

**Table 2** Proportion of Population Never Married by Age and Sex, Hong Kong and Selected Countries

<i>Sex and Age Group</i>	<i>Proportion of Population Never Married (%)</i>			
	<i>Hong Kong</i> 1991	<i>UK</i> 1989	<i>China</i> 1987	<i>Singapore</i> 1990
<i>Male</i>				
15-19	99.4	99.5	98.6	99.8
20-24	93.5	85.3	61.0	94.2
25-29	67.0	52.2	17.3	64.1
30-34	33.1	24.9	8.0	34.0
35-39	16.0	14.8	5.9	18.1
40-44	9.9	10.5	5.5	10.9
45-49	6.4	8.9	5.1	8.5
50-54	6.0	8.1	4.0	7.4
55-59	6.2	8.4	3.0	7.0
60-64	5.9	8.6	2.6	6.1
65+	4.5	7.7	2.3	5.1
<i>Female</i>				
15-19	98.4	97.5	95.8	98.6
20-24	82.9	70.0	39.9	78.5
25-29	45.5	35.2	4.1	39.3
30-34	19.8	15.5	0.6	20.9
35-39	10.4	8.7	0.3	14.8
40-44	6.8	5.7	0.2	11.5
45-49	3.7	4.9	0.1	7.3
50-54	2.2	5.0	0.2	5.7
55-59	1.8	5.8	0.2	4.1
60-64	2.5	6.8	0.2	2.9
65+	5.3	9.7	0.3	3.9

**Marriages by type**

6. Between 1981 and 1993, the total number of marriages contracted fluctuated between 42 000 and 53 000. Such fluctuations can be attributed to the changing marriage rates, age, sex and marital composition of the population over time and the effect of Chinese chronology cycles.

7. The proportion of first marriages (between bachelors and spinsters) among all marriages, excluding re-registrations of couples, declined steadily from about 95% in 1981 to 87% in 1993. On the other hand, the total number of remarriages, where either party was re-marrying or both parties were re-marrying, has been rising in the past 13 years. The percentage share of such marriages among all marriages increased from 5% in 1981 to 13% in 1993. The number of re-registrations of couples who were customarily married decreased from about 8 600 in 1983 to about 2 000 in 1993 (Table 3).

**Table 3** Number of Marriages by Type of Marriage, 1981-1993

<i>Year</i>	<i>First marriage of both parties</i>	<i>First marriage of one party, remarriage of other party</i>	<i>Remarriage of both parties</i>	<i>Others*</i>	<i>All marriages (excluding others)</i>	<i>All marriages (including others)</i>
1981	41 190	1 891	305	7 370	43 386	50 756
1982	41 554	1 997	350	7 566	43 901	51 467
1983	36 537	2 259	362	8 620	39 158	47 778
1984	43 660	2 276	368	7 105	46 304	53 409
1985	36 346	2 686	431	5 593	39 463	45 056
1986	34 088	2 781	552	5 859	37 421	43 280
1987	39 960	3 036	564	5 001	43 560	48 561
1988	37 380	3 390	682	3 786	41 452	45 238
1989	33 959	3 528	727	5 733	38 214	43 947
1990	37 581	3 786	830	4 971	42 197	47 168
1991	34 522	3 981	911	3 154	39 414	42 568
1992	38 065	4 311	882	2 444	43 258	45 702
1993	34 394	4 286	918	2 083	39 598	41 681

Note : \* Including re-registrations of couples who had either customarily married in Hong Kong before the Marriage Reform Ordinance was enacted in 1971 or had married outside Hong Kong.

### Marriage rates

8. To analyze marriage trends, it is more appropriate to examine the marriage rates which relate number of marriages to the total population where brides and bridegrooms come from. The crude marriage rate for each sex, which is the number of marriages per 1 000 mid-year population, showed a general declining trend for both males and females despite some fluctuations. A similar trend was discerned in the standardised marriage rates which are free from the effect of the changing age structure of the population (Table 4).

**Table 4** Crude and Standardised Marriage Rates by Sex, 1981-1993

Year	Crude marriage rate	Standardised* marriage rate	Crude marriage rate	Standardised* marriage rate
	Male		Female	
	<i>(Per 1 000 population)</i>		<i>(Per 1 000 population)</i>	
1981	16.1	16.1	17.5	17.5
1982	16.1	15.8	17.4	17.2
1983	14.2	13.8	15.2	15.0
1984	16.6	15.9	17.8	17.4
1985	14.0	13.4	15.0	14.6
1986	13.2	12.5	14.0	13.6
1987	15.2	14.3	16.1	15.8
1988	14.4	13.5	15.2	15.0
1989	13.2	12.5	13.9	14.0
1990	14.6	14.0	15.3	15.8
1991	13.5	13.1	14.2	14.9
1992	14.7	14.4	15.3	16.3
1993	13.2	13.0	13.7	14.4

Note : \* Using the age distribution of the 1981 male and female population as standard.

9. A more refined analysis could be made by dividing number of marriages by the population in the respective age-sex groups. These age-sex-specific marriage rates are then free from the effect of the changing age structure of the population.

10. In computing the age-sex-specific marriage rates, the number of marriages has been averaged over a period of three years so as to smooth out both the cyclical effect of Chinese chronology on the year-to-year fluctuations of the number of marriages in the numerator and the impact of migration on population in the denominator.

11. Men tend to marry women younger than themselves, thus the marriage rates for males peaked at ages 25-29 while those for females peaked at ages 20-24. As a result of their delay in marriage, the marriage rates for both men and women decreased at young ages but increased at older ages in the period 1981 to 1993 (Table 5). Some of the increase in the marriage rates at the older age groups were due to an increased number of remarriages.

**Table 5** Marriage Rates (per 1 000 population) by Age and Sex\*, 1980/81/82, 1985/86/87 and 1990/91/92

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
16-19	1980/81/82	2.9	17.2
	1985/86/87	1.7	10.2
	1990/91/92	1.8	9.9
20-24	1980/81/82	37.8	80.7
	1985/86/87	25.9	58.3
	1990/91/92	23.7	58.5
25-29	1980/81/82	71.2	56.9
	1985/86/87	59.4	55.1
	1990/91/92	59.0	60.3
30-34	1980/81/82	37.3	15.0
	1985/86/87	33.8	16.7
	1990/91/92	38.5	20.2
35-39	1980/81/82	15.1	5.2
	1985/86/87	12.7	5.6
	1990/91/92	15.0	7.3
40-44	1980/81/82	6.4	2.2
	1985/86/87	5.5	2.5
	1990/91/92	6.4	3.2
45-49	1980/81/82	3.4	1.3
	1985/86/87	3.0	1.3
	1990/91/92	4.0	2.0
50-54	1980/81/82	1.8	0.7
	1985/86/87	1.9	0.8
	1990/91/92	2.7	1.3
55-59	1980/81/82	1.1	0.5
	1985/86/87	1.1	0.6
	1990/91/92	2.0	0.9
60-64	1980/81/82	0.8	0.2
	1985/86/87	0.8	0.4
	1990/91/92	1.4	0.7
65+	1980/81/82	0.5	0.1
	1985/86/87	0.6	0.1
	1990/91/92	0.9	0.3
16+	1980/81/82	22.4	24.4
	1985/86/87	18.8	19.9
	1990/91/92	18.5	19.1

Note : \* In computing the marriage rates, the number of marriages is averaged over a period of three years to minimize yearly fluctuations.

## SPECIAL REVIEW

12. The marriage rates presented here, however, must be interpreted with caution. There are a large number of men who married in China and who are included in the denominator, but whose marriages are excluded from the numerator, when computing the marriage rate. Also, the population includes a large number of female foreign domestic helpers whose tendency to marry in Hong Kong is low. Thus, the marriage rates for the respective age-sex-specific groups would be depressed by the existence of these two factors.

### Age at first marriage

13. As a result of the general trend towards delayed marriages, the median age at first marriage for both men and women increased steadily in the past 13 years. However, such statistics are calculated only on the basis of those getting married within a reference year and are thus affected by the age structure of the population. In 1981, the median age at first marriage for men was 27.0 years and for women 23.9 years. In 1993, the corresponding figures were 29.6 and 26.5 (Table 6).

**Table 6** Median Age at First Marriage, 1981-1993

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1981	27.0	23.9
1982	27.2	24.2
1983	27.4	24.4
1984	27.5	24.7
1985	27.6	24.9
1986	28.0	25.3
1987	28.3	25.6
1988	28.6	25.8
1989	28.7	26.1
1990	28.9	26.3
1991	29.1	26.2
1992	29.4	26.3
1993	29.6	26.5

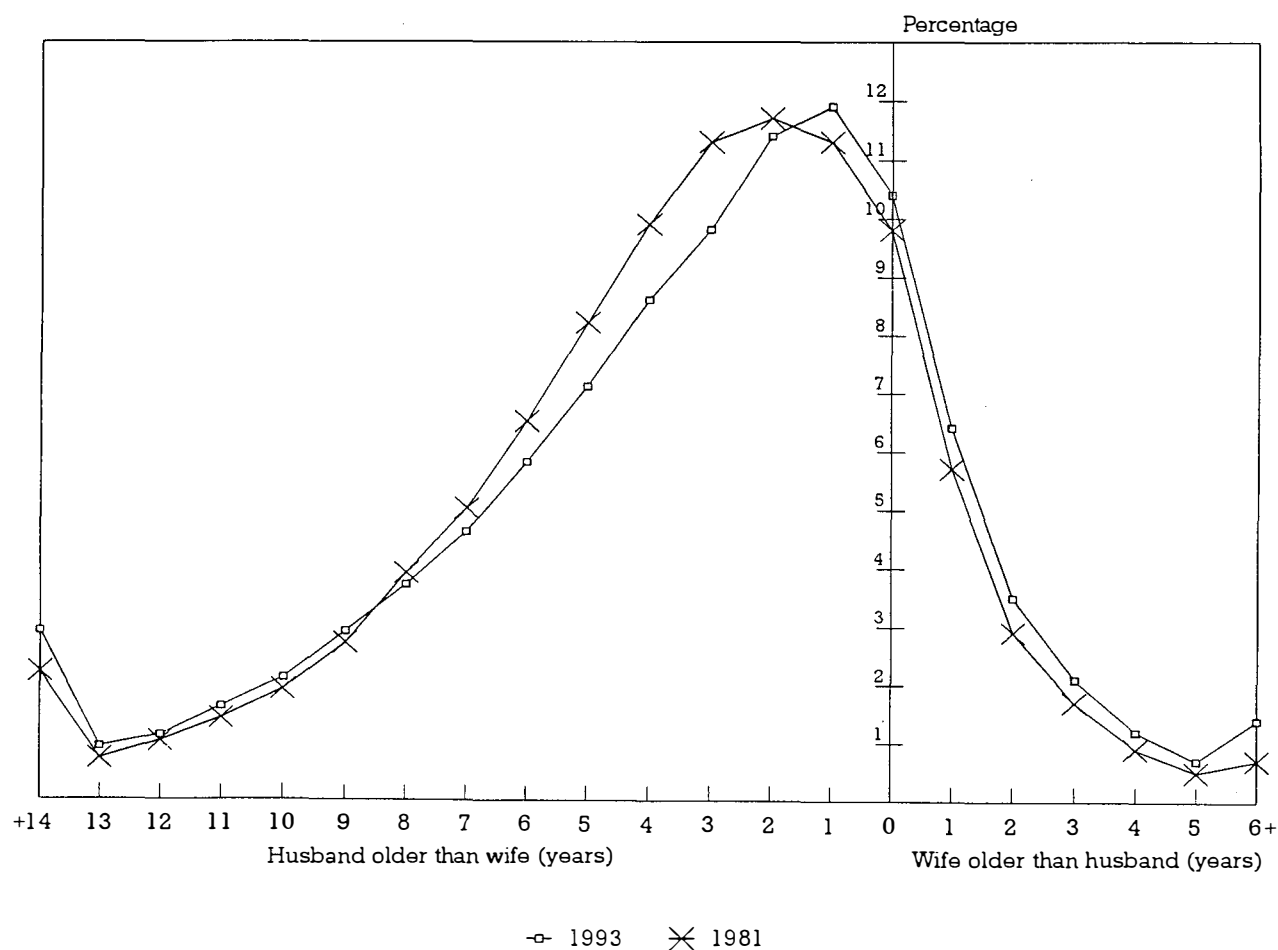
### Ages of brides and bridegrooms

14. The age difference between bachelors marrying spinsters has undergone some interesting changes, although the gap between their median ages at first marriage remained virtually constant at about three years throughout the entire period 1981 to 1993. The proportion of husbands who married wives younger than themselves declined from 78% in 1981 to 74% in 1993. The proportion of husbands marrying wives of the same age remained at about 10%. In contrast, the proportion of husbands marrying wives older than themselves increased from 13% in 1981 to 15% in 1993 (Table 7).

15. Although the overall proportion of husbands who married wives younger than themselves decreased, the proportion of marriages with the husband being older than the wife by nine years or more actually increased. Concurrently, the proportion of such marriages with the husband being older than the wife by eight years or less decreased. In 1993, the most common age difference was that the husband was older than the wife by one year, whilst in 1981 it was two years (Chart 1).

**Table 7** Age difference between bachelors and spinsters, 1981-1993

Year	Percentage of husbands marrying wives of		
	younger age	same age	older age
1981	77.7%	9.8%	12.5%
1982	77.2%	9.8%	13.0%
1983	76.3%	10.1%	13.6%
1984	76.1%	10.2%	13.7%
1985	75.1%	10.6%	14.3%
1986	75.0%	10.5%	14.5%
1987	74.7%	10.6%	14.7%
1988	74.9%	10.6%	14.5%
1989	74.5%	10.8%	14.7%
1990	74.0%	10.8%	15.2%
1991	73.9%	10.5%	15.6%
1992	74.7%	10.3%	15.0%
1993	74.3%	10.4%	15.3%

**Chart 1** Age Difference between Bachelors and Spinsters

## Educational attainment of brides and bridegrooms

16. Although both men and women tended to postpone their first marriage, educational attainment did not seem to be an influencing factor, as the median age at first marriage by educational attainment exhibited no distinguishing pattern (Table 8).

**Table 8** Median Age at First Marriage by Educational Attainment, 1981, 1986, 1991 and 1993

<i>Educational Attainment of Bridegrooms</i>				
<i>Year</i>	<i>University/ Post Secondary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>No schooling/ Kindergarten</i>
1981	28.2	26.8	27.0	28.2
1986	29.1	27.5	28.8	28.6
1991	29.6	28.6	31.7	32.8
1993	30.1	29.1	33.3	33.0

<i>Educational Attainment of Brides</i>				
<i>Year</i>	<i>University/ Post Secondary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>No schooling/ Kindergarten</i>
1981	26.4	23.9	23.4	24.3
1986	27.2	24.9	25.8	26.4
1991	27.7	25.8	27.4	29.1
1993	28.1	26.1	27.0	31.6

17. Persons with similar educational attainment tend to marry each other. Apart from figures on number of marriages tabulated by educational attainment of brides and bridegrooms, ratios of the observed figure to the figure which would be expected if persons marry with no preference are also calculated. A ratio above 100 indicates a greater than 'expected' tendency to marry persons with particular educational attainment and vice versa for a ratio below 100. The ratios indicate that there was a strong preference for persons with particular educational attainment to marry persons with the same educational attainment, as depicted by the very high ratios along the diagonal of Table 9.

18. The prevalence to marry someone whose educational attainment is lower than oneself is higher among males than females. This is indicated by the ratios above the diagonal being greater than the corresponding ratios below the diagonal (Table 9).

**Table 9** Total Marriages\* by Educational Attainment of Brides and Bridegrooms, 1981 and 1993

Year	Educational attainment of bridegrooms	Educational attainment of brides				Total
		University/post secondary	Secondary	Primary	No schooling/Kindergarten	
1981	University/Post secondary	1 826	2 549	144	6	4 525
	Secondary	352	17 487	6 281	167	24 287
	Primary	17	3 211	9 965	644	13 837
	No schooling/Kindergarten	3	48	193	455	699
	Total	2 198	23 295	16 583	1 272	43 348
1993	University/Post secondary	4 317	4 020	95	2	8 434
	Secondary	1 102	23 847	1 833	56	26 838
	Primary	47	1 897	1 985	167	4 096
	No schooling/Kindergarten	-	40	81	89	210
	Total	5 466	29 804	3 994	314	39 578
<i>Ratio of observed to expected<sup>@</sup> figures x 100</i>						
1981	University/Post secondary	796	105	8	#	
	Secondary	29	134	68	23	
	Primary	#	43	188	159	
	No schooling/Kindergarten	#	13	72	2 218	
1993	University/Post secondary	371	63	11	#	
	Secondary	30	118	68	26	
	Primary	8	62	480	514	
	No schooling/Kindergarten	#	25	382	5 342	

Note : \* Excluding re-registrations of previously married couples and cases where the educational attainment of either party or both parties was unknown.

# Ratios not computed because the number of observations is small.

@ The expected figures  $e_{ij}$  are derived based on observed row totals  $r_i$ , column totals  $c_j$  and grand total  $T = \sum r_i = \sum c_j$  and the formulae are given below :

	Group A	Group B
Group 1	$e_{11} = (r_1 \times c_1)/T$	$e_{12} = (r_1 \times c_2)/T$
Group 2	$e_{21} = (r_2 \times c_1)/T$	$e_{22} = (r_2 \times c_2)/T$

## SPECIAL REVIEW

### Occupation of brides and bridegrooms

19. The extent of marriages among persons in different occupational groups is presented in Table 10. A large number of marriages between persons in the same occupational group is expected, as there is usually a high correlation between people's educational attainment and their occupation. The high ratios along the diagonal of Table 10 confirm these expectations.

**Table 10** Total Marriages\* by Occupation of Brides and Bridegrooms, 1981 and 1993

Year	Occupation of bridegrooms	Occupation of brides				Total
		Professional, administrative & managerial	Clerical, Sales & Service	Production	Others	
1981	Professional, administrative & managerial	1 590	2 216	482	-	4 288
	Clerical, sales & services	847	6 337	4 511	12	11 707
	Production	382	3 198	14 384	27	17 991
	Others	9	62	204	331	606
	Total	2 828	11 813	19 581	370	34 592
1993	Professional, administrative & managerial	3 660	4 576	173	4	8 413
	Clerical, sales & services	1 555	11 899	847	25	14 326
	Production	507	6 066	1 690	49	8 312
	Others	14	87	30	84	215
	Total	5 736	22 628	2 740	162	31 266
<i>Ratio of observed to expected figures x 100</i>						
1981	Professional, administrative & managerial	454	151	20	#	
	Clerical, sales & services	88	159	68	10	
	Production	26	52	141	14	
	Others	18	30	59	#	
1993	Professional, administrative & managerial	237	75	23	#	
	Clerical, sales & services	59	115	67	34	
	Production	33	101	232	114	
	Others	35	56	159	#	

Note : \* Excluding re-registrations of previously married couples and cases where occupations were unknown or unclassifiable or either or both of the parties was economically inactive.

# Ratios not computed because the number of observations is small.

## Seasonality of marriages

20. There is pronounced seasonality in the marriage pattern. The number of marriages is generally at the peak in November, December and sometimes March. These are the months which precede or follow the Chinese New Year. People tend to avoid 'clashing' their marriage with the most important festival in the year - Chinese New Year. Therefore, in February the number of marriages was usually low. April is not popular for marriage because of the Ching Ming Festival and August is also not popular because of the Ghost Festival (Table 11).

**Table 11 Monthly and Quarterly Incidence of Marriages, 1982-1993**

<i>Month and Quarter</i>	<i>Number of marriages (yearly average)</i>				<i>Index*</i>			
	<i>1982-1984</i>	<i>1985-1987</i>	<i>1988-1990</i>	<i>1991-1993</i>	<i>1982-1984</i>	<i>1985-1987</i>	<i>1988-1990</i>	<i>1991-1993</i>
January	3 984	4 191	3 845	3 792	92	108	100	103
February	3 610	3 111	2 996	3 057	92	89	86	92
March	5 289	4 335	4 540	4 257	122	112	118	116
April	3 774	3 531	3 063	2 718	90	94	82	76
May	4 402	3 848	4 027	3 704	102	99	104	101
June	3 688	3 227	3 237	3 368	88	86	87	95
July	3 653	2 961	2 933	2 735	85	76	76	74
August	3 697	3 126	3 089	2 750	86	81	80	75
September	4 404	3 681	4 212	3 939	105	98	113	111
October	4 380	4 326	4 146	4 079	101	112	107	111
November	5 015	4 426	4 546	4 419	120	118	122	124
December	4 991	4 868	4 817	4 500	115	126	125	122
Jan-Mar	12 883	11 637	11 381	11 105	103	103	102	104
Apr - Jun	11 863	10 606	10 328	9 790	94	93	91	91
Jul - Sep	11 753	9 768	10 233	9 423	92	85	89	86
Oct - Dec	14 386	13 620	13 509	12 999	112	118	118	119
Jan - Dec	50 885	45 632	45 451	43 317	100	100	100	100

Note : \* Ratio of daily average for month/quarter to daily average for year multiplied by 100.

## SPECIAL REVIEW

### Divorces

21. Two sets of divorce figures exist, viz. divorce petitions filed and divorce decrees granted. As there is usually some time lag between a petition for divorce being filed and it being granted, the two totals are not equal for each year. This time lag is often due to the necessary legal proceedings which may arise in order to settle questions on the custody of children or the disposal of property.

22. Both the number of divorces filed with the courts and the number of divorce decrees granted increased dramatically in the period 1981 to 1993. In 1981, the number of divorce petitions filed was only 2 811 and the number of divorce decrees granted 2 060. By 1993, the former had increased by 207% (or 9.8% per annum) to 8 626 and the latter by 262% (or 11.3% per annum) to 7 454.

23. The crude divorce rate, which relates the number of divorce decrees granted to the mid-year population, increased rapidly over the same period. The general divorce rate, which is a better measure relating the number of divorce decrees granted to the population aged 15 and above, also showed a rapidly increasing divorce trend (Table 12).

**Table 12**      **Number of Divorces and Crude Divorce Rates, 1981-1993**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Divorce petitions filed</i>	<i>Divorce decrees granted</i>	<i>Crude divorce rate (based on decrees granted)</i>	<i>General divorce rate (based on decrees granted)</i>
			<i>(Per 1 000 population)</i>	<i>(Per 1 000 population aged 15 and above)</i>
1981	2 811	2 060	0.40	0.53
1982	3 120	2 673	0.51	0.67
1983	3 734	2 857	0.54	0.71
1984	4 764	4 086	0.76	0.99
1985	5 047	4 313	0.79	1.03
1986	5 339	4 257	0.77	1.00
1987	5 747	5 055	0.91	1.17
1988	5 893	5 098	0.91	1.17
1989	6 275	5 507	0.98	1.25
1990	6 767	5 551	0.98	1.25
1991	7 287	6 295	1.11	1.40
1992	8 067	5 650	0.98	1.23
1993	8 626	7 454	1.27	1.58