

Marriage rates lowest since 1862

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 **REUTERS**

Marriage rates in England and Wales have fallen to their lowest level since records began in 1862 as a rising population increasingly shuns wedlock, government statisticians said on Thursday.

The Office of National Statistics said a total of 232,990 couples tied the knot in 2008, down from 235,370 in 2007, with the number of marriages at their lowest since 1895.

Both **Labour** and the **Conservatives** have made the issue of marriage and the family a key election battleground.

The Conservatives, who accuse Labour of failing to encourage marriage and sound family values, have proposed tax breaks for married couples.

Labour has countered with a set of its own policy ideas aimed at supporting all parents regardless of their status.

The marriage rate, which the ONS said was the most important figure because it takes account of population changes, fell for a fourth consecutive year.

Both the marriage rate and the number of marriages have been in long-term decline since 1980, the ONS said, adding that over the last decade both men and women have been waiting longer to marry.

It said over last 10 years the average age men marry increased by nearly 5-1/2 years. For women it had increased by just 4-1/2 years.

Family law firm Resolution said the figures highlighted the urgent need to give couples who live together outside marriage the same rights as married ones.

Citing the ONS, it said one in six couples in the UK co-habit.

Resolution said that is predicted to rise to one in four by 2031, but over half of those cohabiting couples believe they have rights as "common law" spouses.

"Today's statistics show clearly that the shape of the modern family has changed almost beyond recognition since the last time family laws were updated," Resolution's vice chairman David Allison said.

"How much more evidence does the government need before it will act to protect vulnerable children and families?"

(Reporting by Stefano Ambrogi; Editing by Steve Addison)

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