With a few exceptions, marriage rates have fallen in all OECD countries over the period 1970-2004. In 2004, the crude marriage rate - averaged across 26 OECD countries - was 5.1 per 1,000 people, more than 1/3 less than the level recorded in 1970. The pace of the decline in marriage rates differs across OECD countries. The decline was very sharp in Japan and Korea, while Spain, Denmark, Sweden show stable or even rising rates since the late 1990s (Figure GE5.1). Alongside declining crude marriage rates, most OECD countries recorded higher divorce rates. In 2004, the crude divorce rate was - on average - 2.3 per 1,000 people, twice the level recorded in 1970 and 0.2 points higher than in 2000. Over the period 1999-2003, divorce rates were stable or falling in Canada, the United States, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands, while they continued to increase in Spain and Korea (Figure GE5.2). The decline in the marriage rate has been accompanied by a tendency to defer the age at which it occurs. On average, the average age of women at first marriage has increased from 24.8 years in 1990 to 27.7 in 2002/2003, with larger rises in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Iceland (Figure GE5.3).

The decisions to marry and to divorce depend on both the characteristics of individuals and those of society. Those that are economically well-off are more likely to marry and to stay married (Smock, 2004). But the decision to marry also reflects the individual's beliefs that economic conditions would lead to a lasting marriage. Marriage is thus frequently seen as a stage to enter only when economic security has been achieved (e.g. home ownership, financial stability, etc.). The social context also matters for decisions to divorce. Some of the factors involved include the improved financial position of working women, higher awareness of the conflict between women's roles in the family and the workplace, and lower stigma attached to divorce. Cross-country differences in divorce rates may also reflect different legal rules concerning the time required to obtain divorce (which vary from zero in the Netherlands and several eastern European countries, to four years in Ireland and Greece), special norms applying to cases where the divorce is asked by mutual consent, and provisions regarding reconciliation counselling. In some countries (e.g. Poland) divorce is allowed only when there is fault by one spouse.

Family breakdowns can affect children, especially younger ones. The consequences include higher risks of financial poverty, lower school results and a higher probability of experiencing divorce in adult age (Diekmann and Schmidheiny, 2006). Causality is however difficult to establish, as the poor developmental outcomes of children from divorced families may reflect unobserved characteristics; indeed, some research suggests that children are better off if parents split rather than being exposed to parental conflict (Morrison and Coiro, 1999).

Parallel to the decline in marriage rates has been the increased frequency of other types of unions. On average, across European countries, around 8% of respondents declared that they cohabit with a partner, with much higher shares in Nordic countries and among people aged 20 to 40 (Table GE5.4).
GE5.1. **Strong decline in the crude marriage rate in many OECD countries**

Marriages per 1,000 population, 1970 to 2004

GE5.2. **Gradual increase in the crude divorce rate**

Divorces per 1,000 population, 1970 to 2004

GE5.3. **Age at marriage has been deferred**

Mean age of women at first marriage, 1990 (light colour) and 2004 (darker colour)

GE5.4. **Large prevalence of cohabitations and other forms of partnership**

Share of adults that are married, cohabiting or single, in 2002

Further reading
