

## **Is Marrying Later Always Better? New Report Says No.**

*“State of Our Unions 2022” shows little evidence that those marrying over the age of 25 have stronger marriages than those marrying in their early 20s*

February 9, 2022, Charlottesville VA – It’s been a long-held belief that the best marriages consist of two people who have already pursued education and/or secured employment, established themselves financially and, in general, reached a certain level of maturity following a full experience of the single life. In contrast, as the common cultural narrative goes, those who marry early and have not yet reached those milestones, will struggle in their relationships and are much more likely to experience divorce. A new report, however, finds no empirical reasons to favor later “capstone marriages” (over the age of 25) over “cornerstone marriages” (those who married between the ages of 20-24).

The “State of Our Unions 2022” report, a joint initiative by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the Wheatley Institution and BYU’s School of Family Life, employed three recently collected datasets with large, nationally representative samples to examine marital outcomes for both cornerstone and capstone marriages and found little evidence that capstone marriages are more stable than cornerstone marriages. The report even found some evidence that, on average, cornerstone or early marriages may enjoy slightly higher relationship quality than capstone marriages.

“We know that teenage marriage continues to be a significant risk factor. But, after that, age is not the strong indicator of success in marriage that many believe it to be, and yet many couples who marry in their early and mid 20s are swimming against a cultural tide that says they are too young and immature to be taking such a consequential step,” said Alan Hawkins, a professor in the School of Family Life at BYU and the primary author of the report. “Instead of accepting this as preordained, society ought to consider that cornerstone marriages can be just as nurturing, stable and satisfying as capstone marriages – if not more so for many couples.”

Highlights of the report include:

- Many young Americans are marrying and desire to marry in their early and mid-20s. In the United States, 20% of young adults currently marry for the first time between the ages of 20 to 24 and another 25% of young adults report that they desire to marry by those ages.
- Early-married husbands report they are more satisfied with their marriages than later-married husbands (81% vs. 71%) and report greater sexual satisfaction (63% vs. 49%).
- Similarly, early-married wives report they were a little more satisfied with their marriages (73% vs. 70%) and reported greater sexual satisfaction (62% vs. 51%).
- There were no significant differences between capstone and cornerstone marriages on reports of household division of labor and a sense of teamwork. Comparisons on financial values, relationship worries, and couple distress were also minimal, and early-marrieds were not more likely to be getting financial help from their families.

- There were no pronounced demographic differences between early-marrieds and later-marrieds, although early-marrieds tend to have less education. Religious differences are also not as wide as might be expected. Not surprisingly, however, early-marrieds are more likely to report that they feel like adults and feel ready to marry at earlier ages than later-marrieds.
- While current generations are delaying marriage, they are not delaying the age of first residential union or sexual coupling. Young people today are living together as couples at the same age as older generations – they are just doing it outside of the setting of marriage.

The median age at first marriage has increased dramatically over the past 50 years in the United States, from 23 in 1970 to about 30 in 2021 for men, and from 21 in 1970 to 28 in 2021 for women, and there is no evidence that this upward trend is leveling off. Many view this trend as a positive development because of the assumed belief that a capstone model of marriage that emphasizes delaying marriage will give while young adults more time to explore their identities and “get themselves together.”

This delay of marriage approach may be a sensible evolution to changing social norms, but the authors of “State of Our Unions 2022” examined how postponing marriage could also raise concerns in some cases. For example, the capstone model, with its hallmark of delayed marriage, creates an elongated period of individualistic focus in young adulthood that may be challenging to flip at marriage. The report also explores additional research studies that link delayed marriage to patterns of “paradoxical marriage preparation” or behaviors that are associated with an increased risk of future divorce, such as having multiple sexual partners before marriage and pre-engagement cohabitation.

The report also explores research-confirmed links between delayed marriage patterns and declining marriage rates and high levels of nonmarital childbearing, both patterns that have disproportionately risen among disadvantaged individuals in the United States and are pointed to by multiple experts as important drivers of economic inequalities in our society.

“There are legitimate reasons for wanting to delay marriage – financial concerns being the most prominent – and getting married later in life certainly works well for many,” said Jason Carroll, Associate Director of the Wheatley Institution and a co-author of the report. “But we believe that there should be greater cultural acceptance and support of couples who wish to marry in their early 20s, especially as our research and other studies have found no significant differences between early-marrieds and later-marrieds in terms of relationship instability and proneness to divorce. Contrary to the accepted narrative that marrying in the early 20s should be avoided, early marriage can be a solid cornerstone that some couples use to build a meaningful life together.”

“Twentysomething marriage is not for everybody,” added Brad Wilcox, Director of the National Marriage Project. “It requires an extra measure of maturity and intentionality. But, surprisingly, this report finds that those who marry in their early twenties are somewhat more likely to report that they are happy and sexually satisfied compared to those who marry later.”

~~The report also explored what a “21st-century cornerstone model of marriage” might look like and how couples who pursue a cornerstone marriage can be best supported, such as premarital education that includes financial management skills and delaying childbearing for a few years so that both spouses can continue to pursue educational or work goals, reduce financial pressures and further strengthen the foundations of their relationship.~~

Similar to past State of Our Unions reports, this year’s report also contains an updated statistical reference section on the “Social Indicators of Marital Health and Well-Being.” This reference includes updated trends of the past five decades in the United States on marriage, divorce, family formation patterns, and attitudes about marriage and family.

You can read the full report at [http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Wheatley\\_StateofUnions\\_020222\\_v1.pdf](http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Wheatley_StateofUnions_020222_v1.pdf)

### **About the National Marriage Project**

The National Marriage Project (NMP) is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. The Project’s mission is to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability. The NMP has five goals: (1) publish The State of Our Unions, which monitors the current health of marriage and family life in America; (2) investigate and report on the state of marriage among young adults; (3) provide accurate information and analysis regarding marriage to journalists, policy makers, religious leaders, and the general public—especially young adults; (4) conduct research on the ways in which children, race, class, immigration, ethnicity, religion, and poverty shape the quality and stability of contemporary marriage; and (5) bring marriage and family experts together to develop strategies for strengthening marriage. The NMP was founded in 1997 by family scholars David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. The Project is now directed by ~~W. Bradford~~Brad Wilcox, professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

### **About the Wheatley Institution**

The Wheatley Institution at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.

### **About the School of Family Life**

The School of Family Life at Brigham Young University is committed to enhancing the quality of life of individuals and families within the home and communities worldwide. Accordingly, the mission of the School of Family life is to conduct research that contributes to the understanding and enhancement of human development, temporal well-being in the home, and marriage and family relationships.

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