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Delayed Marriage On Rise: Good For College Educated, Tough On Middle America

48% OF FIRST BIRTHS OUT OF WEDLOCK

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va., March 15, 2013, 12:01 a.m. — One of the major demographic and social changes of the last four decades has been the dramatic increase in the average age at which Americans first marry, from their early 20s in 1970 to their late 20s today. Delayed marriage in America has helped to bring the divorce rate down since 1980 and increased the economic fortunes of educated women, according to “Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America,” a new report sponsored by the [National Marriage Project](#) at the University of Virginia, the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy](#), and the [RELATE Institute](#).

But another major consequence of this change is that a majority of young parents under 30 now have their first child before they marry. “Knot Yet” explores the causes and consequences of this revolution in family composition.

The average age at which men and women marry has reached historic highs – 26.5 for women, and 28.7 for men. The age at which women have children is also increasing, but not nearly as quickly as the delay in marriage. In fact, for women as a whole, the median age of first birth (25.7) now falls before the median age at first marriage (26.5), a phenomenon the report calls “The Great Crossover,” after a phenomenon documented by the National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

By age 25, 44 percent of women have given birth, while only 38 percent have married, according to new analysis in the Knot Yet report. Forty-eight percent of all first births are now outside of marriage.

Among the least economically privileged, this crossover happened decades ago as part of a dramatic – and well-publicized – rise in unmarried pregnancy. But the crossover among “Middle American” women – those among the 54 percent of Americans who have a high school diploma and perhaps some college education, but not a four-year degree – has been rapid and recent.

“The Great Crossover marks the moment at which unmarried motherhood moved from the domain of our poorest populations to become the norm for America’s large and already flailing middle class,” said report co-author Kay Hymowitz, William E. Simon Fellow at the [Manhattan Institute](#).

By contrast, there has been no crossover for college-educated women, who typically have their first child more than two years after marrying.

“The biggest downside to delayed marriage in America is that many young adults are now putting the baby carriage before marriage,” said report co-author and National Marriage Project director [Bradford Wilcox](#), an associate professor of sociology in U.Va.’s College of Arts & Sciences. “What they often don't realize is that children born outside of marriage are significantly more likely to be exposed to a revolving cast of caretakers and the social, emotional and financial fallout associated with family instability and single parenthood.”

Delayed marriage also has ramifications for the social and emotional health of young adults, including single 20-something men, who are significantly more likely to report lower levels of satisfaction with their lives, to drink to excess, and to be depressed, compared to their married counterparts, according to the report’s analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Americans of all classes are postponing marriage to their late 20s and 30s for two main reasons – one economic and the other cultural, the report explains.

Good jobs for less-educated Americans have withered on the knowledge-economy vine. Jobs that do support a middle-class lifestyle require more training and education, so young adults are taking longer to finish their education and stabilize their work lives.

Culturally, young adults have increasingly come to see marriage as a “capstone” rather than a “cornerstone” – that is, something they do after they have all their other ducks in a row, rather than a foundation for launching into adulthood and parenthood.

But this capstone model is not working well for Middle Americans, the report says. One widely discussed reason for this is that Middle American men are having difficulty finding decent-paying, stable work capable of supporting a family. Another, less-understood reason is that the capstone model is silent about the connection between marriage and childbearing.

“This leaves young adults occupying a foggy middle ground, somewhere between actively seeking parenthood and actively preventing pregnancy,” said report co-author Kelleen Kaye, senior director of research at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “The vast majority of unmarried 20-somethings say it’s very important to avoid pregnancy right now, but a third also say they would be at least a little happy if they did get pregnant. It’s not surprising then, that among unmarried 20-somethings, more than 1.3 million pregnancies each year are unplanned, as reported by the women themselves. The capstone marriage model poses definite challenges to efforts aimed at preventing unplanned pregnancy.”

The Great Crossover also reinforces America’s low levels of economic mobility, said co-author Jason S. Carroll, a senior fellow at the RELATE Institute and associate director of the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. Children born to stable, married parents are more likely to graduate from high school and from college, well-equipped to thrive in a knowledge-based economy and, in turn, more likely to marry and start their own families on a stable footing.

The converse is true for children from homes marked by instability. Without a stable family, their chances of moving up the education and income ladder are stunted, which, in turn, reduces their odds of getting married as adults. The Great Crossover, in other words, creates its own negative economic and cultural feedback loop, and this feedback loop is no longer limited to the most disadvantaged in our society.

“Marriage delayed is the centerpiece of two scripts that are helping create two different outcomes and two different life chances for the next generation,” Hymowitz said. “For the college-educated third of our population, it has been a success. For the rest, including large swaths of Middle America, not so much.”

The report concludes by identifying economic, educational and cultural questions that the nation must address to help make marriage more realizable for today’s young adults, the vast majority of whom say they want to be married; to realign marriage and parenthood; and to make family life more stable for all children, including those whose parents don’t enjoy the benefit of a college education.

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