
DR. VICTOR HARRIS



VICTORHARRIS@UFL.EDU



352-273-3523

3028 D MCCARTY HALL D,
GAINESVILLE, FL 32611

**COMPILED BY:
PRAMI SENGUPTA**

GRADUATE STUDENT
FAMILY, YOUTH AND
COMMUNITY SCIENCES

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UF | IFAS Extension
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA



THE EVOLVING ROLE OF MARRIAGE: 1950-2010¹

Adapted from "The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950-2010" by S. Lundberg and R. A. Pollak, in *The Future of Children*, 25(2), p. 29. Copyright 2015 by the Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

With the beginning of the 21st century, the past, present and future state of marriage in the United States became a topic of extensive academic interest. The following are some of the key findings in relation to the evolving role of marriage in the U.S.:

The Changing Marriage Trend

1. The 1900s saw a record drop in the median age of first marriages: "just over 20 for women, and about 23 for men" (p. 30). Average age of first marriage has been rising since the 1960s (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).
 2. In the 1950s, women's economic status began to improve due to several factors (e.g. women's time available for work due to new technologies), decreasing the gap between men and women by the end of the first half of the 20th century; these differences were pivotal for marriages (Goldin, 2006, p. 6).
 3. In the 1970s, women in the U.S. increasingly started to pursue higher education and join the work force, hence delaying marriage. Additionally, people started to plan for smaller families, divorce rates increased, and the rate of marriage among older men and women also declined (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 30).
 4. Between 1960 and 1980, the annual rate of divorce ("the number of divorces per thousand married couples" more than doubled, increasing from less than 10 to more than 20 per thousand. Additionally, the 1960s and 1970s marked a series of Supreme Court rulings giving greater and more stable financial rights to children born outside of marriage (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007, p. 31).
 5. In the 1980s, the frequency of premarital cohabitation significantly increased among young couples; this in turn further delayed marriage (Bailey, Guldi, & Hershbein, 2014). After the 1980s, the divorce rate stabilized, although this stabilization may be due to an increase in divorces in those over 35 coupled with an increase in marriage selectivity in those under 35 (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014, p. 8).
 6. "Since 1987, the proportion of women who are currently cohabitating has more than doubled" (Manning, 2013, p. 35).
 7. In the 1990s, the number of young adult women with college degrees matched and eventually surpassed the number of male college graduates, further delaying marriage (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).
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8. Additionally, empirical data suggests that due to state and federal laws reducing costs associated with establishing legal paternity, post-natal rates of marriage between biological parents have decreased. (Rossin-Slater, 2015, p. 30).
 9. Currently, “more men and women than ever, though still a small minority, do not marry at all. Cohabitation has emerged both as a predecessor and an alternative to marriage.” Out-of-wedlock child birth has become increasingly acceptable and prevalent (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 30).

“Marriage as a social institution appeared to be endangered (p. 30).”

10. Social stigmas associated with premarital sex, cohabitation, non-marital fertility, and divorce have declined dramatically (Thornton & DeMarco, 2001).
11. Changes in social norms and the judiciary system made divorce easier, weakening commitments related to marital unions (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 31).
12. As the differences between marriage and cohabitation continued to decrease, an increasing number of children started to become part of cohabitating families (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).
13. Compared to other wealthy nations, the U.S. has a relatively higher rate of childbirth outside of wedlock or cohabitating unions (Cherlin, 2009).

Marriage and cohabitation trends according to demographics:

14. The upper and lower extremes of the income distribution exhibit the most profound changes in relation to marriage and childbearing trends (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, p. 775; Lundberg & Pollak, p. 30).
15. Compared to people with less education in Europe, people in the U.S. with lower levels of education are more likely to enter a cohabitation union and have children outside of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010).
16. Within the white population, the decline in the marriage rate has been more profound for males and females with lower levels of education (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 33).
17. Before the 1990s, non-college educated females were more likely to get married than college-educated females (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 33). However, since then, rates of both marriage and remarriage have increased in females with higher levels of education, as compared to females with less education (Isen & Stevenson, 2011).
18. The predicted likelihood of a first marriage continuing for 15 years is significantly higher for females with higher education than females with less education; 80 percent for females with a college degree, 57 percent with females with some college, and 53 percent for females with a high school diploma (National Survey of Family Growth, n.d.).

“The prevalence of cohabitation sharply decreases as education rises (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 33).”

19. Among highly-educated females, cohabitation usually acts as a precursor to marriage, while among poorer and less-educated females, cohabitation in most cases ends before developing into a marital union (Licher, Turner, & Sassler, 2010).
 20. Marriage is more prevalent among females with higher income than females with lower income (Oppenheimer, 2000).
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21. Apart from extremely disadvantaged groups, “income-pooling by unmarried mothers and the unmarried fathers of their children would elevate many families above the poverty line” (Thomas & Sawhill, 2002; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).

Understanding Retreat from Marriage

The two broad focuses of social science studies on the prevalence, stability and longevity of legal marriages have been: (a) “decreasing economic opportunities for many men,” and (b) “increasing economic opportunities for women” (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 34-36). The following are some of the key findings:

1. The substitution of cohabitation for legal marriage has contributed substantially to the overall decline of the marriage rate (p. 36).
2. The retreat from marriage has been encouraged by “changing social norms about divorce, cohabitation, and gender roles” (p. 34); these social norms have been largely influenced by behavioral responses to market forces (p. 34) (Bachrach, Hindin, & Thomson, 2000).
3. There are two broad possible advantages of a marital union: (a) joint production, and (b) joint consumption (p. 34).
4. The benefits of marriage can be enhanced by children in two ways: (a) children act as household public goods by providing their parents with the benefits of joint consumption, and (b) co-residing parents are more efficient in coordinating child-care and other investments for their children (Weiss & Willis, 1985).
5. In the 1970s, birth control became accessible to young single women due to technical advances in

“The rapid changes in cohabitation, marriage, and non-marital fertility since 1960 are more easily explained as responses to changing incentives, rather than as responses to cultural changes in the significance of marriage” (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 38).

contraceptives and changes in state laws including access to oral contraceptives and legalization of abortion (Goldin & Katz, 2002; Myers, 2012). As a result, social stigma related to premarital sex decreased and cohabitation became more common.

6. As women gained more education, earned higher wages, and spent more time in the labor market, the division between men and women in the work force began to decrease. This in turn, lessened the potential benefits of marriage for women (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 35).

“Delaying ‘union formation’ no longer required choosing between abstinence and the risk of an unplanned pregnancy” (p. 35).

7. The availability of marriageable men, especially black men, decreased with the loss of inner-city industrial jobs and increased incarceration rates. This reduced marriage rates among the black population (Wilson, 1987; Charles & Luoh, 2010).
 8. Decline in marriage rates can also be attributed to government welfare benefits and welfare policies. However, this hypothesis is only applicable to individuals who are eligible or almost eligible to receive welfare benefits (Murray, 1984; Murray, 2012).
 9. One cultural explanation for the decline of marriage in low-income communities, posited by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, attributes the change to some women’s unrealistically high expectations for marriage. For these women, marriage is not connected to parenting; it is, however, “the white picket fence dream”
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that includes a stable income, a mature partner and a steady family structure (Lundberg & Pollak, p. 38; Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

10. Patterns of traditional marriage and child-bearing are relatively more stable among individuals with higher levels of education. One supposition for these patterns is that college-graduate men and women are more committed to traditional norms and social values than individuals with lower levels of education (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 38).

The Difference between Marriage and Cohabitation in an Economical Way

1. Cohabitation is less costly than divorce. Ending a marriage involves financial, social, and psychological strains (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 36).
2. "Marriage serves as a commitment mechanism that fosters cooperation and encourages marriage-specific investments" (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 36; Matouschek & Rasul, 2008).
3. Many people perceive divorce as a personal failure and thus try to avoid it, sometimes by avoiding marriage altogether (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).
4. The difference between marriage and cohabitation arises from "the public commitment to the permanent and exclusive relationship that a marriage entails" (p. 36) (Manning & Smock, 2005).

In the United States, "the institution of marriage retains considerable cultural significance" (p. 36).

Marriage and Investments in Children

"Long-term commitment is valuable in early 21st century America, primarily because it promotes investment in children" (p. 39).

1. People in different socio-economic groups view their joint investment towards their children differently. This may explain the heterogeneity in the decline of marriage in different socio-economic groups over the past three decades (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 39).
 2. Marriage among older couples becomes more about providing care for each other, and as such is not related to parenting (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 39).
 3. "The debate over same sex marriage is best understood as a contest over social recognition and acceptability, where considerations involving children play a secondary role" ((Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 39).
 4. The decline in marriage rates and the rise in non-marital fertility can be largely connected to the disparities in child outcomes. However, the causation may run in the opposite direction. "Parents who are able to adopt a high-investment strategy are possibly those most likely to get married and stay married, using marriage as a commitment device to support joint investments in their children." If this is found to be true, then equality of opportunity will be a major challenge in the 21st century (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015, p. 46).
 5. Inequality in parental resources can be attributed to "the rise in single-parent families," "widening gaps in divorce rates" and" the "age at which women have children" (p. 33) (McLanahan, 2004).
 6. Compared to children with less-educated mothers, "young men and women today whose mothers attended college are more than twice as likely to graduate from college" (p. 34) (Lundberg, 2013).
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7. “A strong positive correlation exists between younger children’s stocks of human capital and the productivity of later investment in those children. That is, the returns to investments in older children are greater if investments were made when the children were young” (p. 43).

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