Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites

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THE PROPORTION of people who are married and living with their spouses has decreased greatly since the 1960s; the decline has been especially dramatic among blacks. For example, 60 percent of black women 25 to 29 years old were married in 1960, but only 32 percent in the mid-1980s. For white women of the same age, the percentage married dropped from 83 to 62 percent. Marriage became less common partly because women were marrying at a later age and partly because more women, again especially blacks, were remaining single throughout their lives.[1] Higher rates of divorce and separation also contributed to the decrease, but in lesser measure.[2]

That fewer black women are marrying has substantially undermined their socioeconomic well-being. The number of women having babies out of wedlock has grown considerably. This in turn has been the main cause of the tripling in the number of black families headed by women since 1940 and is a major source of the persistently large gap between family incomes of blacks and whites.[3] Half of all households headed by women are poor. Children from these families have lower cognitive abilities and fewer years of schooling. They have less desirable jobs and lower incomes and are more likely to be poor as adults. Daughters from such households are more likely to form female-headed households themselves.[4] Thus fall-

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1. Espenshade (1985)
2. Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986); and Sweet and Bumpass (1987).
3. Espenshade (1985); Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986); and Farley (1984).
4. See Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) for a review of the literature.

ing marriage rates have been an important contributor to high rates of poverty among blacks.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson argued that blacks have been marrying less because labor market conditions for young black men steadily grew worse in the 1970s and 1980s. As rates of employment for young black men and their rates of labor force participation dropped, he argued, the number of attractive potential marriage partners for black women also decreased. His evidence is the decrease in the ratio of marriageable (employed) black men to black women of the same age since the 1950s. This decline is particularly large for blacks in their teens and early twenties.[5]

An alternative view is that the changes in marriage rates have been caused by improvements in the economic position of black women.[6] Since the 1950s their average earnings have increased substantially relative to those of black men. Such changes may have led black women to depend less on marriage for financial security, and marriage has to that extent become less attractive and has led to greater female "independence."

Both arguments focus on changes in blacks' labor market position, ignoring other important changes in the socioeconomic situation of young blacks, especially their rates of school enrollment, which have risen significantly since 1940. Students have lower marriage rates than nonstudents, in part because they are less likely to be employed and, when employed, have lower earnings. Birthrates are also high among black students. Increases in school enrollment may therefore have also contributed to the increase in births to unmarried women.

The total effect of increases in school enrollment on marriage is complex and difficult to predict, however, because higher enrollments eventually lead to higher average levels of educational attainment. Additional schooling improves a person's marriageability, partly because it is an important indicator of future economic success. But whether increases in the overall level of education raise the overall marriage rate is unclear. Among women, higher educational attainment may contribute to greater economic independence and a lower likelihood of marrying.

This paper investigates the effects of labor market and educational trends on marriage rates since 1940. We find some support for Wilson's hypothesis. Changes in the employment of young black men explain about 20 percent of the decline in their marriage rates since 1960, but the

5. Wilson (1987), pp. 84–89.
6. Espenshade (1985); Farley and Bianchi (1987); and Farley (1988).

changes are simply not large enough to account for much more.[7] In addition, the earnings of young black men have increased substantially, which should have increased their rates of marriage and offset much of the effect of decreased employment.

Employment rates for black women have remained relatively stable since World War II, and their earnings have increased both absolutely and relative to those of black men. The increase however, seems to have had little effect on marriage rates. Higher earnings may enhance a woman's attractiveness in the marriage market but also decrease her incentive to marry. Our results suggest that these effects offset each other.

Changes in school enrollment have had varying effects on the marriage rates of young adults. For young men, the changes have had little effect except among black teenagers, for whom increased school enrollment explains about 12 percent of the decline in their marriage rates since 1960. For women under the age of 24, increases in enrollment account for 13 to 29 percent of the decline in marriage rates. The effects of educational attainment on marriage are also mixed. For black women older than age 20, higher levels of educational attainment lead to higher rates of marriage. In fact, their increased years of schooling since 1940 would, in the absence of offsetting changes, have raised marriage rates.

Three Hypotheses about Marriage

We consider three broad hypotheses about decreases in marriage rates: William Julius Wilson's "male marriageable pool" hypothesis; Thomas Espenshade's, Reynolds Farley's, and Suzanne Bianchi's "female independence" hypothesis; and the schooling hypothesis.

The Supply of Marriageable Men

The current and prospective economic statuses of men have always influenced their position in the marriage market.[8] When economic prospects are poor, marriages occur later and less frequently.[9] Economic deprivation may also increase rates of separation and divorce. Since World War II the socioeconomic position of blacks has improved both absolutely and relative to that of whites in terms of educational attainment,

7. Our results are similar to those of Ellwood and Rodda (1990), who use different data and methods.

8. England and Farkas (1986).

9. Hajnal (1965).

economic returns of schooling, and earnings for most age groups but worsened since 1970 in terms of withdrawal from the labor force, relative family income, and earnings for teenagers.[10]

Wilson argued that marriage rates respond mainly to the employment position of young men. This argument is tentatively supported by the parallel trends in employment among young black men and rates of marriage for blacks, both of which declined gradually in the 1960s and rapidly in the 1970s. He showed that the ratio of employed black men to women of the same age, his "male marriageable pool" index, has fallen since the 1960s.[11] The decline of the index among the young is, however, partly the result of rising school enrollment. Increases in enrollment explain almost half of the drop in employment between 1964 and 1981 for black men between the ages of 16 and 19. The increases also explain 20 to 25 percent of the decline among black men between the ages of 20 and 24.[12] Rising enrollments have had little impact on the index for men older than 25; it has declined far less than their rate of marriage.

In its simplest form, Wilson's argument also implies that marriage rates for employed black men should *increase* as they age because of their more favorable position in the marriage market. But this has not occurred. Rates of marriage have declined for employed black men as well as those without jobs.[13]

Women's Incentives to Marry

Some social scientists also consider the improved economic independence of women incompatible with universal and stable marriage. Thomas Espenshade and Lenore Weitzman have argued that marriage contracts are gradually shifting away from permanent commitment and toward short-term involvement.[14] Valerie Oppenheimer has added that women's economic independence increases uncertainty in the marriage market.[15] Uncertainty about their own career prospects compounds the uncertainty about the economic prospects of prospective spouses that women in the marriage market have traditionally faced, leading to delays in marriage, somewhat higher rates of cohabitation, and, in the short run,

10. Farley (1984); Mare and Winship (1984); and Smith and Welch (1986).
11. Wilson (1987); and Bennett, Bloom, and Craig (1989).
12. Mare and Winship (1984).
13. Jencks (1988).
14. Espenshade (1985); and Weitzman (1981).
15. Oppenheimer (1988).

higher rates of divorce, although the uncertainty is consistent with widespread and stable marriage.

Some of these observers have also stated that increases in the economic independence of black women have lowered rates of marriage. At first glance the argument is puzzling; the percentage of black unmarried women who work has remained relatively stable since 1940, except for declines among the youngest women. For those who do work, however, wages have increased relative to those of black men.[16] The higher a woman's earnings and the greater her permanent commitment to the work force relative to her husband's, the less likely she is to remain married.[17] This finding suggests that women whose earnings are high relative to those of their potential husbands may also be less likely to marry at all. But although rising wages may have reduced black women's economic need to marry, the higher wages may also have made them more attractive to prospective husbands.[18] Whether this has indeed happened depends on whether men, like women, are attracted to partners who have good labor market prospects.

School Enrollment and Later Marriages

Students are less likely to marry than nonstudents. Those who have recently left school may also be less likely to marry than those who have been out of school for several years, because they may need some time to find stable employment or a suitable spouse.[19] Increases in enrollment are therefore likely to reduce marriage rates more among teenagers and young adults. Because women marry younger and closer to the time they leave school, the effect of increased enrollment may be greater for them than for men. In due course, however, rising enrollment leads to increased educational attainment, which may make both men and women more likely to marry because they probably are able to get better jobs.

Data

To investigate trends in marrying we used the 1 percent Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) of the 1940–80 censuses and the March and June Current Population Surveys (CPS) for 1985–87. The data provide

16. Farley (1984, 1988).
17. Espenshade (1985).
18. Preston and Richards (1975).
19. Oppenheimer (1988).

large numbers of observations and comparable measurement. Our multivariate analyses of entry into marriage were based on persons age 16 to 39 who had never been married or who entered their first marriage during the year before the census. With this focus we analyzed the association between people's characteristics and the rates at which they marry rather than simply whether or not they were married, which reflects both marital disruption and entry into marriage at an unspecified time before the census.[20] Because the 1940 census records only age in years (and not months) of first marriage, for 1940 we included persons who entered their first marriage when their age was the same as or one year less than their age at the census date.[21] Our descriptions of trends in marriage are also based on the 1940–80 censuses and the 1985–87 March and June CPS. To obtain stable estimates, we pooled the CPS estimates for these three years.[22]

20. We focused on first marriages because the census provides no information on the timing (age) of later marriages, and the determinants of entry into first marriage may be distinct from those for remarriage.

21. By this procedure our sample included all marriages occuring during the twelve months prior to the 1940 census, plus about one-half of marriages occurring thirteen to twenty-four months before the 1940 census. In our analysis of marriage rates, however, we adjusted the number of marriages to estimate an annual marriage rate comparable to our estimates for 1950–80. If the marriage rate was uniform between April 1938 and March 1940, we observed about 50 percent more marriages than occurred between April 1939 and March 1940. Thus, we deflated observed marriages by one-third, both for the calculation of rates (table 1) and multivariate models (table 2).

Although each PUMS file is a 1 percent sample, the 1940 persons included in our analysis were less than 1 percent of those marrying just before the 1940 census. We included only recently married persons for whom we could ascertain age at first marriage. Age at first marriage was obtained only for couples in which the wife was part of the 5 percent person sample within the 1940 census (Bureau of Census, 1973). In the 1940 PUMS, all households contained at least one person who was part of the 5 percent sample, but not all sample households contained an ever-married woman who was a sample person (Bureau of the Census, 1983). Only persons from the latter households were included in our sample. The sampling rate for these persons was about 0.4 percent.

Similarly, the 1950 census obtained information on duration of marriage only for persons who were part of the 3.33 percent person sample (Bureau of the Census, 1973). Only persons who were part of the 1950 PUMS and the 3.33 percent person sample were included in our analysis. The sampling rate for this procedure was about 0.3 percent (Bureau of the Census, 1984).

22. We used the March surveys to estimate marital status and the June surveys to estimate rates of entry into marriage. The CPS provides insufficient information to permit us to extend the multivariate analysis to the 1985–87 period. The March surveys contain comparable measures on earnings and weeks worked but no information on age at marriage and school enrollment. The June surveys contain information on age at marriage and enrollment but not earnings and weeks worked.

Trends in Marital Status and Marriage Rates

Trends in marital status and entry into marriage from 1940 to the mid-1980s are summarized in table 1. The percentage of married black men has declined since 1940 within every age group. Among those 20 to 23 years old, for example, it fell from over 30 percent to just under 10 percent, a result of changes both in marriage rates and rates of marital disruption by separation, divorce, and death. For black men, divorce and separation break up far more marriages than do the deaths of their wives, but for those under age 30, rates of divorce and separation have not increased since 1940. Indeed, since 1960 those rates have declined. For black men age 30 to 39, however, the prevalence of divorce and separation has nearly doubled.

Among black men 20 to 23 years old the share of those who are single has increased from about 60 percent in 1940 to nearly 90 percent in the mid-1980s. Since 1950, the percentages of men who have never married has more than doubled among those age 24 to 29 and 30 to 39, and marriage has virtually disappeared among teenagers. The major source of the decreasing percentages of young black men who are married has been the drop in rates of entry into marriages. Except for men in their thirties, marital disruption has not reduced the percentage of those married; the prevalence of divorce and separation has declined because the percentage of men who are married has declined.

Trends in marital status for black women closely mirror those for black men except that declines in the percentage married and increases in percentages never married have occurred more dramatically among those age 16 to 19 and 20 to 23. Nearly 20 percent of those 16 to 19 were married in 1940; less than 2 percent were in 1985–87. These sex differences mainly reflect the historically lower ages at which women marry.

Trends in marital status among whites have followed the same pattern as trends among blacks since 1960 but have been less dramatic. Between 1940 and 1960 the average age at marriage fell and the percentages of persons who were married rose steadily. In most age and sex groups, percentages of people currently married and ever married peaked in 1960, returning in the mid-1980s to levels similar to those observed in 1940. This development was in marked contrast to blacks, for whom percentages of those never married in 1985–87 far exceeded the percentages in 1940. In 1940, for every age and sex group, whites exceeded blacks in percentages never married; by the 1980s, just the opposite was true.

Trends in marital status reflect the cumulative impact of changes in

TABLE 1. Marital Status and Marriage Rates, by Race, Sex, and Age, Selected Years, 1940–80

Percent

Age and year	Black marital status[a]					White marital status[a]				
	Married	*Widowed*	*Divorced/ separated*	*Never married*	*Marriage rate*[b]	*Married*	*Widowed*	*Divorced/ separated*	*Never married*	*Marriage rate*[b]
					Men					
Age 16–19										
1940	3.1	0.1	1.2	95.7	2.1	1.5	0.1	0.6	97.9	1.1
1950	3.1	0.1	1.7	95.1	2.1	2.3	0.1	1.1	96.6	1.7
1960	3.1	0.0	1.6	95.2	3.3	3.7	0.0	1.1	95.1	3.2
1970	3.3	0.1	1.6	95.0	2.6	3.9	0.1	1.0	95.1	3.1
1980	0.9	0.0	1.3	97.8	1.4	2.5	0.0	0.9	96.6	2.3
1985–87	0.5	0.0	0.3	99.1	0.1	1.5	0.0	0.3	98.2	0.6
Age 20–23										
1940	31.5	0.5	5.4	62.6	12.1	20.5	0.2	2.0	77.3	8.8
1950	31.3	0.4	7.4	60.9	7.6	28.7	0.1	3.4	67.7	10.4
1960	31.2	0.2	9.2	59.5	15.6	38.0	0.1	4.6	57.4	18.0
1970	28.6	0.2	9.3	61.9	15.7	35.3	0.2	5.0	59.6	18.0
1980	13.0	0.1	5.1	81.7	6.5	24.3	0.0	4.6	71.0	11.0
1985–87	9.7	0.1	1.6	88.5	2.1	19.1	0.1	2.6	78.2	6.1
Age 24–29										
1940	59.1	1.2	9.2	30.6	10.7	56.2	0.3	3.6	39.9	13.1
1950	61.2	0.7	11.9	26.3	10.8	68.3	0.2	4.3	26.8	14.2
1960	58.5	0.5	13.8	27.3	16.8	72.3	0.2	5.2	22.3	20.5
1970	58.3	0.7	13.2	27.8	18.6	72.3	0.2	6.4	21.1	23.1
1980	38.9	0.2	15.3	45.6	11.3	56.3	0.1	9.9	33.7	15.1
1985–87	35.4	0.1	8.5	56.1	4.7	51.9	0.1	8.0	40.1	12.1

TABLE 1. *(continued)*

Age and year	Black marital status[a]					White marital status[a]				
	Married	*Widowed*	*Divorced/ separated*	*Never married*	*Marriage rate*[b]	*Married*	*Widowed*	*Divorced/ separated*	*Never married*	*Marriage rate*[b]
					Women					
Age 24–29										
1940	61.8	4.0	14.3	20.0	6.8	69.8	1.0	4.6	24.7	12.0
1950	63.5	2.1	18.8	15.7	7.7	80.0	0.7	5.7	13.6	13.1
1960	60.3	1.5	21.3	16.9	16.8	82.9	0.5	6.0	10.4	19.9
1970	53.9	1.9	21.7	22.5	12.1	78.5	0.9	8.2	12.4	20.0
1980	37.8	0.9	21.6	39.6	8.5	65.7	0.4	12.5	21.4	15.6
1985–87	31.8	0.6	14.3	53.2	4.6	61.5	0.4	11.8	26.3	14.6
Age 30–39										
1940	63.5	11.2	15.2	10.1	4.5	78.4	2.7	5.8	13.1	4.3
1950	70.5	5.6	17.1	6.9	7.9	86.6	1.6	5.1	6.8	6.9
1960	63.5	4.2	23.7	8.7	9.1	86.3	1.4	6.3	6.1	7.7
1970	57.9	4.3	26.2	11.6	7.3	83.6	1.5	8.9	6.1	8.2
1980	47.2	3.2	30.6	19.0	5.8	76.8	1.0	14.5	7.7	8.3
1985–87	43.1	2.3	29.2	25.4	1.2	73.6	0.9	16.0	9.5	8.0

SOURCE: See text.

a. Married denotes married spouse present; divorced/separated includes divorced, separated, and married, spouse absent. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

b. Rate is annual number of first marriages per 100 never-married persons in age, sex, and race group.

Age 30–39										
1940	69.4	2.5	10.9	17.3	5.3	76.5	0.9	4.6	18.1	7.2
1950	77.0	1.3	11.8	10.0	4.8	86.1	0.4	3.8	9.7	8.3
1960	68.8	1.2	16.0	14.0	11.7	84.4	0.3	5.3	10.1	10.3
1970	68.8	1.2	15.5	14.5	11.1	84.4	0.4	6.3	8.9	10.9
1980	56.9	0.7	22.6	19.8	8.8	76.7	0.2	11.8	11.3	10.4
1985–87	57.3	0.4	18.0	24.4	6.6	74.4	0.2	11.4	14.0	12.0
					Women					
Age 16–19										
1940	19.4	0.5	3.8	76.2	12.6	12.1	0.2	1.3	86.5	8.3
1950	16.2	0.4	6.5	76.9	7.4	14.0	0.2	2.7	83.1	7.6
1960	14.7	0.2	5.0	80.0	9.6	16.9	0.1	3.1	80.0	10.4
1970	9.7	0.3	4.5	85.5	7.1	11.9	0.2	2.8	85.1	8.3
1980	3.8	0.1	2.0	94.1	3.1	9.3	0.1	2.0	88.6	6.1
1985–87	1.8	0.0	0.4	97.0	0.5	6.4	0.0	1.3	92.3	2.5
Age 20–23										
1940	51.0	2.0	10.2	36.9	13.6	44.5	0.4	3.4	51.8	14.2
1950	45.7	1.1	16.2	37.0	14.3	55.2	0.4	5.9	38.6	15.7
1960	45.6	0.6	16.0	37.8	20.1	62.3	0.2	6.6	30.9	26.0
1970	37.1	1.1	15.5	46.4	16.8	53.2	0.6	7.7	38.6	24.8
1980	20.4	0.3	9.2	70.1	8.1	39.8	0.2	7.5	52.5	15.4
1985–87	13.8	0.1	5.5	80.7	2.6	33.8	0.1	5.8	60.3	11.0

TABLE 2. Labor Market and Education Indicators, by Race, Sex, and Age, Selected Years, 1940–80

Percent unless otherwise specified

Indicator	Black					White				
	1940	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1940*	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*
					Men					
Age 16–19										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	30.4	45.7	52.5	80.0	65.2	32.7	65.3	86.4	108.4	105.6
Employment probability[b]	.498	.521	.357	.292	.272	.373	.455	.454	.443	.470
12 grades	4.7	6.7	10.6	16.0	19.0	18.3	19.2	19.5	23.2	25.2
More than 12 grades	0.9	1.3	1.4	3.5	3.4	4.6	4.8	5.0	7.3	5.5
Enrolled	33.3	45.7	59.1	61.8	70.9	50.4	57.8	67.1	73.2	71.2
Age 20–23										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	48.1	80.6	106.6	150.8	151.4	82.7	121.7	165.6	195.3	209.2
Employment probability[b]	.662	.693	.660	.630	.560	.731	.715	.747	.700	.708
12 grades	7.0	16.1	29.6	38.6	42.0	32.8	32.6	36.0	34.2	41.2
More than 12 grades	4.5	8.5	10.3	21.8	27.7	16.9	25.6	33.3	51.2	43.8
Enrolled	4.3	14.0	14.9	17.7	23.5	11.0	26.0	27.8	35.4	32.8

TABLE 2. (*continued*)

Indicator	Black					White				
	1940	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1940*	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*
					Men					
Age 24–29										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	59.6	103.6	137.0	187.1	188.5	110.8	142.7	206.2	261.8	261.1
Employment probability[b]	.682	.685	.695	.701	.630	.808	.767	.808	.808	.809
12 grades	6.8	13.6	21.9	35.0	38.9	25.8	29.4	30.3	32.0	30.6
More than 12 grades	4.2	10.3	13.3	18.0	33.6	21.4	29.0	37.8	47.9	57.6
Enrolled	1.4	12.7	8.9	7.4	13.1	4.1	18.3	16.1	14.8	17.2
Age 30–39										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	67.3	106.3	140.3	177.5	196.6	115.7	148.1	216.1	272.7	281.3
Employment probability[b]	.640	.624	.643	.680	.605	.757	.804	.795	.786	.801
12 grades	3.8	13.0	17.8	24.6	33.5	16.0	25.7	26.4	29.1	25.0
More than 12 grades	5.0	8.7	9.5	12.8	27.6	16.4	17.8	27.5	35.5	58.5
Enrolled	.8	0	2.5	3.6	7.8	1.5	0	4.0	4.9	8.7
					Women					
Age 16–19										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	16.7	29.3	36.7	57.8	50.1	20.5	49.4	66.4	76.4	79.9
Employment probability[b]	.258	.221	.188	.195	.218	.217	.316	.318	.329	.433
12 grades	9.8	11.5	15.1	21.1	23.5	25.9	25.6	23.7	26.9	28.0
More than 12 grades	2.4	2.8	2.7	4.9	6.1	5.5	5.8	5.6	7.9	7.3
Enrolled	36.8	58.1	60.8	62.9	72.4	49.2	60.3	67.7	71.8	73.6

Age 20–23										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	32.3	59.6	77.5	129.0	111.4	58.8	105.5	137.9	165.4	155.6
Employment probability[b]	.489	.469	.479	.532	.474	.573	.685	.655	.651	.698
12 grades	15.3	22.2	34.7	41.8	39.3	45.7	45.0	43.1	37.2	36.9
More than 12 grades	9.0	17.3	18.7	29.5	39.2	19.5	29.9	37.5	53.0	54.6
Enrolled	6.7	18.7	17.2	20.2	29.8	10.5	19.2	23.5	30.2	35.7
Age 24–29										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	44.9	72.1	93.2	151.3	159.0	83.7	132.4	170.7	222.8	216.0
Employment probability[b]	.614	.603	.554	.597	.604	.672	.765	.746	.775	.814
12 grades	10.8	21.4	27.0	37.1	38.7	36.4	43.2	38.4	34.3	28.8
More than 12 grades	11.4	13.2	16.0	19.4	38.7	25.4	26.0	34.4	48.5	62.4
Enrolled	1.6	5.6	6.3	5.6	13.0	3.4	6.9	9.5	9.4	16.8
Age 30–39										
Earnings ($/week)[a]	42.6	79.4	93.9	133.6	174.3	100.7	125.3	172.7	219.7	244.7
Employment probability[b]	.621	.627	.630	.602	.628	.721	.739	.760	.747	.794
12 grades	7.6	13.0	22.5	29.5	38.1	26.1	33.6	38.0	36.4	28.9
More than 12 grades	9.6	11.3	12.9	14.0	29.9	29.4	26.3	27.6	34.2	56.1
Enrolled	1.4	0	2.9	4.0	8.8	2.5	0	3.1	5.6	10.7

SOURCE: See text.
a. Constant 1979 dollars.
b. Estimated expected probability of employment, which is similar to observed proportions employed at the date of each census.

rates of marriage and marital dissolution. For persons under age 24, a drop in rates of entry into marriage has been the main source of decline since 1940 in percentages of persons who are married. The marriage rate columns of table 1 show the percentages of men and women who married twelve months before each census and Current Population Survey. Except for teenage women, marriage rates for black men and women of all ages increased between 1940 and 1960 and then fell precipitously. Among black women age 20 to 23, for example, the annual rate dropped from 20.1 percent in 1960 to 2.6 percent in 1985–87. In the four broad age groups in table 1, the modal age of marriage was 24 to 29 in 1960 and 30 to 39 in 1985–87 for black women.

Trends in marriage rates for whites resemble those for blacks, but the declines are less pronounced, so that the race difference in rates has widened. Among white women age 20 to 23 the rate exceeded that for black women by about 30 percent in 1960, but by the mid-1980s it was more than four times greater.

If the extremely low rates of marriage in 1985–87 persist, and if rates for marital dissolution remain constant, the relative numbers of people who are married will continue to decline, the number never married will continue to grow, and the number divorced or separated will continue to decline.

Labor Market and Schooling Status of Young Adults

Earnings and employment changed substantially between 1959 and 1979. Table 2 shows that average weekly earnings (in constant 1979 dollars) rose by factors of two to three. Most of the growth occurred before 1970. Real weekly earnings were stable from 1970 to 1980, except among black teenagers, for whom they declined. For blacks age 20 or older, earnings growth was somewhat more rapid than for whites, resulting in some convergence.

Among black men in each age group the employment rate has also declined, but especially for those age 16 to 23 and between 1960 and 1980. The decline was greatest for teenagers, although this was largely the result of their increasing rates of school enrollment.[23] In addition, the labor market position of young black men eroded. For black women, employment rates were essentially stable between 1940 and 1980 because increases in unemployment offset increases in labor force participation.

23. Mare and Winship (1984).

Employment rates for white men were generally stable with the exception of teenagers, for whom the rates have increased since 1940, particularly among students. Employment rates for white women increased substantially between 1970 and 1980.

Table 2 also shows that enrollment rates grew rapidly since 1940, especially among blacks and women. For teenagers, black and white rates converged to near parity by 1980, despite the somewhat lower levels of educational attainment still experienced by blacks. For older groups, black enrollment rates were less than half those of whites in 1940 and grew to approximately 75 percent of the white rates by 1980. Rising school enrollment unambiguously reduces rates of marriage because students delay marrying until schooling is completed. The dramatic increase in enrollment from 1940 to 1980, therefore, may be a source of decline in marriage rates for younger groups.

Because enrollment rates have risen, educational attainment has also risen. Within each period, table 2 shows that the percentages of young persons with twelve or more years of schooling were lower for blacks than for whites. Educational growth, however, was more rapid for blacks, leading to narrower racial differentials in schooling in 1980 than there were in 1940. Among women age 24 to 29, for example, only 22 percent of blacks but more than 60 percent of whites had at least a high school degree in 1940. By 1980 almost 80 percent of black women and 90 percent of white women in this age group had a high school degree.

Labor Market and Schooling Effects on Entry into Marriage

Determinants of Entry into Marriage

We estimated school enrollment, educational attainment, weekly earnings, and employment status expected after marriage on the probability of entry into marriage from 1940 to 1980. The equation reported in appendix table A-1 is based on a logistic regression that also includes dummy variables for census year and two-year age groups. Although we experimented with numerous model specifications, we report a single additive model for these effects within each age group, race, and sex.[24]

One variable, expected employment status, requires explanation. Marriage decisions are affected by the employment status people expect

24. We considered models that included separate effects for labor markets and schooling for each year. We found no large or systematic change in these effects over time.

after marriage. Their actual employment status after marriage is observed, but this is a consequence as well as a cause of entry into marriage. To avoid this problem, we used an estimate of employment potential based on educational attainment and work experience during the previous year, characteristics that are not affected by marriage. We constructed this measure by regressing the employment status for all respondents at the time of the census on their weeks of work during the previous year and their educational attainment.[25]

For men, both expected employment and earnings positively affected the marriage rate at all ages, although the effects were somewhat larger for men less than 24 years old. For example, a 0.1 increase in the expected probability of employment in the census year raised the odds of marriage in the twelve months leading up to the census by about 25 percent for black men age 20 to 23 and by about 15 percent for those age 30 to 39.[26]

25. An equivalent view of this method is that "weeks worked last year" and "educational attainment" are instrumental variables for current employment status. This enabled us to estimate the effects of employment on marriage, while taking into account their potential simultaneous relationship.

The measure was constructed as follows. Using a logit model estimated over the five censuses, we predicted the probability of employment at the date of the census from age, educational attainment, weeks worked during the preceding year, and census year. Given the estimated logit coefficients, we predicted the probability of employment for each person.

We estimated the logit model for current employment separately for each race-sex group and, within these groups, separately for four age categories (16 to 19, 20 to 23, 24 to 29, and 30 to 39). The independent variables included three categories of weeks worked (fewer than 20, 20 to 39, and more than 39), three categories of educational attainment (fewer than 12, 12, and more than 12 years), categorical variables for whatever two-year age groups were included in the four broad age groups, and five categories for year. Within each age-race-sex group, the model included main effects for education, weeks worked, age, and year, plus interactions between census year and each of the other three variables in the model.

The predicted probability entered the models for marriage as a continuous variable. The schooling and employment measures differ in the degree to which they can be precisely timed relative to marriage. The educational attainment of most persons does not change between their date of marriage and the census date. The census measures the number of weeks worked, and earnings summarize work experience between 4 and 16 months before the census (for example, January 1969 to December 1969), whereas our sample marriages occurred between 0 and 12 months before the census (for example, April 1969 to April 1970). For some persons, therefore, the temporal order of these measures and marriage is unknown. Finally, school enrollment status was measured at the census date and thus followed recent changes in marital status. This may result in some overstatement of the effect of school enrollment status on the entry into marriage.

26. This percentage is calculated as 100 times the difference in the exponent of the amount due to the increase, that is, $\exp(\beta \times 0.1) = \exp(2.179 \times 0.1) = 1.243$, minus the base amount, $\exp(\beta \times 0) = 1$. Stated as a single expression this is $100[\exp(2.179 \times 0.1) - 1] = 24.3$.

A $100 increase in weekly earnings raised the odds of marriage by about 30 percent for black men age 20 to 23 and by about 20 percent for those age 30 to 39. The employment and earnings effects for white men were remarkably similar to those for black men in every age group. For both races, these effects were large.

The effects of expected employment and earnings were much weaker for women than for men and differ by race and age. For black women less than 50 years old, expected employment prospects had almost no effect on the chances of marrying. For those age 30 to 39, a 0.1 point increase in the probability of employment reduced the odds of marriage by about 4 percent. High weekly earnings during the previous year increased black women's chances of marrying, but the effect was small both absolutely and relative to the corresponding effect for men. These results suggest that for black women good labor market prospects have two offsetting effects, increasing their attractiveness to potential husbands but making them feel less pressure to marry.

For white women, good employment prospects reduced the chances of marriage, and the effect increased with age. A 0.1 increase in the expected probability of employment reduced the odds of marriage by 3 percent for women age 16 to 19. This effect increased to 13 percent for those age 30 to 39. Among those age 30 to 39 the negative effect of employment on marriage was as large as the corresponding positive effect for white men. It is not clear why employment should be negative for white women but neutral or positive for black women. The effect of earnings on the odds of marriage was as weak for white women as for blacks.

The labor market's effects on marriage were much larger for men than women. Both employment and high earnings raised men's readiness to marry and their ability to attract a wife. This is consistent with Wilson's claim that employment is a critical aspect of a man's marriageability. But for a woman, labor market success may increase marriage prospects while it reduces the economic need for marriage.

School Enrollment and Educational Attainment. For most groups, students were less likely to marry than those who were out of school, even when employment and earnings were controlled for, although this difference waned with age and was stronger for women than for men. Among 20- to 23-year-old black men, the odds of marriage for students were less than one-half those for nonstudents. For black women of the same age, the odds were less than one-third those for nonstudents. The effects of school enrollment were negligible for 24- to 39-year-old men, but sub-

stantial for all age groups of women. These results suggest that although young adults typically finish school before marriage, men are more likely than women to combine schooling with marriage, at least after labor market factors are taken into account.[27]

White high school graduates were less likely than high school dropouts to marry, although teenagers with some college were somewhat more likely to marry than those with just a high school degree. Among black teenagers the pattern was similar but the effects were weaker. The effects of educational attainment weakened with age for men, although for white men 30 to 39 years old with some college, odds of marrying remained about 15 percent lower than for high school dropouts. For women age 20 to 39, greater educational attainment increased the marriage rate.

These patterns suggest that long-term increases in educational attainment may have contributed to declines in the marriage rate among white teenagers since 1960. Among blacks, however, the within-year effect of educational attainment was weak for men at all ages and for teenage women. For women 20 to 39 years old, moreover, education improved marriage prospects, suggesting that educational trends have tended to raise teenage marriage rates.

Residual Trends in Marriage Rates. Table A-1 also shows the additive effects of census year on the odds of marriage after labor market and schooling factors are considered. The net effects of year on marriage resemble the trends in marriage rates documented in table 1. For all groups except teenage black women, the net odds of marriage peaked or reached a plateau between 1960 and 1970 and then declined. The net changes for 1960–80 were substantial for most age groups and were greater for blacks than for whites. For 20- to 23-year-old black men, for example, the odds of marriage in 1980 were only 40 percent of the odds in 1960. Despite the strong within-year effects of several of the labor market and schooling factors included in the logit models, the net year effects suggest that trends in these factors did not account for trends in marriage.

27. The large effects for women may reflect their tendency to leave school when they marry rather than solely the inhibiting effect of school attendance on marriage. The census measures current enrollment status whereas entry into marriage occurs during the year before the census. The estimated effects of enrollment status, therefore, may be somewhat overstated.

Contributions to Change in the Odds of Entry into Marriage

Appendix table A-2 shows the relative contributions of various influences to the changes in the odds of marriage from 1960 to 1980, the period when most of the decline in marriage rates occurred. The breakdown is based on the coefficients in table A-1 and the means in table 2. We omitted those groups in which change in the marriage rate was less than one marriage for each one hundred people who had never married.

Employment and Earnings. The downward trend in the expected probability of employment was an important component of the decrease in marriage rates for black men of every age group. For those age 20 to 23, who experienced the largest change in marriage rates, about 20 percent of the decrease in the odds of marriage was attributable to trends in employment. However, a significant part of the change engendered by declining employment rates was offset by growth in real earnings between 1960 and 1980. Indeed, for men age 30 to 39, earnings growth did more to increase marriage rates than reduced employment did to reduce them. The overall effect of labor market trends on the marriage rates of black men was modest.

The contribution of labor market changes to the marriage rates of white men was even smaller. For 20- to 23-year-olds, employment accounted for about 14 percent of the decline in the odds of marriage but was entirely offset by growth in average earnings. For 24- to 29-year-olds, employment changes had no effect; the growth in earnings, however, implied significant increases in the odds of marriage.[28]

Trends in employment and earnings among women had little effect on their marriage rates. Labor market factors had negligible net effects on rates for black women within census years, implying that changes in average levels of employment and earnings between censuses did not strongly affect changes in marriage rates. For 24- to 29-year-old white women the trend in expected employment probabilities accounted for about 23 percent of the decline in marriage rates. For older and younger white women, labor market effects were very small.

28. A hypothesis we have not tested is that relative earnings within the black community, not absolute earnings, affect marriage rates. In such a case long-term increases in average earnings would have no effect on marriage rates. This hypothesis would not change our conclusions about the importance of trends in employment.

Overall, employment trends had relatively small effects on changes in rates of marriage. About 20 percent of the changes in marriage rates for black men from 1960 to 1980 are attributable to decreasing employment rates, but much of this change was offset by increased earnings. For black women and whites, employment effects were negligible.

School Enrollment and Educational Attainment. Table A-2 shows that increases in school enrollment and educational attainment accounted for little of the trend in marriage for men. For black teenage men, about 12 percent of the small decline in marriage rates was due to rising enrollment, but enrollment and attainment did not affect marriage trends in other groups. For women, however, school enrollment trends were important to the decrease in rates of marriage. For black women younger than age 24 and white women younger than 30, between 13 and 29 percent of the decline in marriage rates was due to increased school enrollment. For women older than 24, however, growth in educational attainment seems to have led to large increases in rates of marriage. Among black women age 24 to 29, for example, increases in educational attainment completely offset other changes in schooling and the labor market that might have accounted for the decline in marriage rates.

Women's marriage trends are more responsive to changes in enrollment and educational attainment than the corresponding trends for men because women typically marry earlier and marriage and schooling are more likely to be competing activities. Long-term growth in their enrollment rates and educational attainment, therefore, is more likely to alter the marriage behavior of women than of men.

Taken together, the labor market and schooling factors considered here accounted for only modest portions of the decline in marriage rates between 1960 and 1980. The significant residual changes for all ages of both black and white men and women indicate that changes in marriage rates were largely the result of factors not measured in the census.[29]

29. For example, we have relied on a simple specification of labor market effects on marriage. But work experience, wage history, occupational position, local labor market conditions, and other elements that we have not included may also have had effects. In addition, a person's propensity to marry is affected not only by his or her own traits but also those of potential partners. The absolute and relative frequencies of potential partners with varying labor market prospects may affect rates of marriage. But given the modest and sometimes offsetting effects of those aspects of employment and earnings that we have measured, additional labor market factors are unlikely to affect marital trends significantly.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that socioeconomic factors cannot account for the drastic decreases in marriage rates during the past thirty years. It is necessary therefore to seek alternative explanations. Compared with their counterparts a generation ago, young people of both races now come of age much more uncertain about their future family life. Successive cohorts of young adults are increasingly likely to have been raised in unstable or disrupted marriages, and they themselves face higher probabilities of divorce. They are more likely to cohabit without marrying, to want few children or perhaps none, and to consider the separation of childbearing from marriage as feasible and socially acceptable. Therefore young adults may be more likely to view marriage with apprehension and skepticism. Each of these trends is interdependent with downward trends in rates of marriage and in itself requires explanation. But taken together they create a climate of expectations that may contribute to further decreases in marriage rates. Labor market conditions are catalysts for changes in marriage and family life, but a fuller understanding of marriage trends requires attention to the way that family trends, once set in motion, may continue by their own momentum.

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TABLE A-1. Logit Parameter Estimates for Models of Entry into Marriage

	Black men		*White men*		*Black women*		*White women*	
Parameter	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]
Age 16–19								
Intercept	−5.416	.249	−5.941	.111	−1.596	.109	−1.760	.042
Age 16–17 (vs. 18–19)	.686	.116	.778	.046	.404	.065	.590	.026
12 grades (vs. <12)	−.185	.101	−.584	.033	−.146	.067	−.448	.024
>12 grades (vs. <12)	−.120	.240	−.180	.063	−.039	.135	−.395	.043
Enrolled (vs. not)	−1.030	.106	−1.727	.039	−2.153	.071	−2.953	.026
Weekly earnings (/100)	.290	.052	.340	.018	.147	.045	−.092	.012
Weekly earnings**2	−.014	.005	−.017	.002	−.020	.006	.002	.001
Expected employment	1.929	.156	2.154	.061	−.083	.125	−.267	.041
1950 (vs. 1940)	.023	.282	.455	.124	−.388	.151	.163	.056
1960 (vs. 1940)	.952	.228	1.308	.104	−.019	.111	.844	.043
1970 (vs. 1940)	.787	.231	1.411	.103	−.334	.110	.690	.043
1980 (vs. 1940)	.285	.237	.932	.104	−1.075	.116	.383	.044
scaled deviance/d.f.	672	930	2107	1827	863	829	5556	1570
# obs./ # marriages	28,401	636	201,307	5,459	27,547	1,696	185,948	15,053

TABLE A-1. *(continued)*

	Black men		*White men*		*Black women*		*White women*	
Parameter	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]	β	*SE*[a]
Age 20–23								
Intercept	−3.478	.141	−4.028	.054	−1.780	.130	−1.367	.041
Age 20–21 (vs. 22–23)	−.202	.049	−.296	.016	.004	.050	−.107	.017
12 grades (vs. <12)	−.155	.059	−.345	.021	.129	.061	.228	.026
>12 grades (vs. <12)	−.072	.080	−.258	.024	.235	.073	.195	.028
Enrolled (vs. not)	−.726	.095	−.529	.024	−1.179	.085	−1.736	.028
Weekly earnings (/100)	.265	.027	.296	.009	.066	.026	.004	.010
Weekly earnings**2	−.010	.002	−.012	.001	−.002	.002	−.002	.001
Expected employment	2.179	.115	2.310	.044	.011	.091	−.542	.034
1950 (vs. 1940)	−.670	.166	.128	.051	.031	.170	.172	.051
1960 (vs. 1940)	.217	.117	.711	.040	.405	.131	.857	.039
1970 (vs. 1940)	.198	.118	.818	.040	.146	.129	.866	.038
1980 (vs. 1940)	−.682	.121	.137	.040	−.619	.130	.327	.038
scaled deviance/d.f.	1389	1353	4006	2459	1335	1124	7211	1907
# obs./# marriages	18,508	2,022	142,688	20,595	16,514	2,100	104,275	21,100

Age 24–29								
Intercept	−3.479	.150	−3.523	.057	2.925	.201	−1.810	.055
Age 24–25 (vs. 28–29)	.138	.067	.250	.024	.344	.082	.398	.032
Age 26–27 (vs. 28–29)	.028	.072	.126	.025	.114	.089	.237	.034
12 grades (vs. <12)	.111	.066	−.096	.026	.327	.084	.391	.039
>12 grades (vs. <12)	.076	.076	−.185	.026	.507	.096	.549	.041
Enrolled (vs. not)	−.02	.094	−.041	.028	−.539	.128	−.918	.046
Weekly earnings (/100)	.174	.025	.199	.009	.085	.034	.054	.014
Weekly earnings**2	−.004	.002	−.008	.001	−.004	.003	−.005	.001
Expected employment	1.674	.116	1.707	.053	.034	.116	−1.036	.050
1950 (vs. 1940)	−.115	.173	.017	.050	.041	.265	.116	.066
1960 (vs. 1940)	.297	.129	.323	.038	.878	.194	.577	.051
1970 (vs. 1940)	.292	.129	.403	.038	.401	.195	.526	.049
1980 (vs. 1940)	−.221	.128	−.113	.038	−.072	.192	.268	.047
scaled deviance/d.f.	1648	1647	4320	3313	1204	1307	4403	2441
# obs./# marriages	12,790	1,782	88,396	15,989	11,213	1,171	52,649	9,068

TABLE A-2. Components of Change in Marriage Rates, by Race, Sex, and Age, 1960–80[a]

Component	Black Men		White Men		Black Women		White Women	
	Change	%	Change	%	Change	%	Change	%
Age 16–19								
Age	.036	−4.1	n.a.	n.a.	.027	−2.1	.042	−6.4
Education	−.018	2.0	n.a.	n.a.	−.013	1.1	−.026	3.9
Enrollment	−.111	12.4	n.a.	n.a.	−.249	19.4	−.174	26.3
Earnings	.028	−3.2	n.a.	n.a.	.009	−0.7	−.013	1.8
Employment	−.164	18.3	n.a.	n.a.	−.003	0.2	−.030	4.6
Residual	−.667	74.5	n.a.	n.a.	−1.056	82.2	−.461	69.8
Total (logit)	−.894	100.0	n.a.	n.a.	−1.285	100.0	−.660	100.0
Change in rate	−1.9		−0.9		−6.5		−4.3	
Age 20–23								
Age	.005	−0.5	.007	−1.2	−.000	0	.006	−0.9
Education	−.032	2.8	−.044	7.0	.054	−4.9	.019	−2.6
Enrollment	−.062	5.6	−.026	4.1	−.149	13.6	−.212	28.6
Earnings	.090	−8.1	.090	−14.2	.019	−1.7	−.001	0.2
Employment	−.216	19.4	−.091	14.2	−.000	0	−.023	3.2
Residual	−.899	80.7	−.574	89.9	−1.023	93.0	−.529	71.5
Total (logit)	−1.114	100.0	−.639	100.0	−1.100	100.0	−.740	100.0
Change in rate	−9.1		−9.0		−12.0		−10.6	

TABLE A-2. *(continued)*

Component	Black Men		White Men		Black Women		White Women	
	Change	*%*	*Change*	*%*	*Change*	*%*	*Change*	*%*
Age 24–29								
Age	.003	−0.6	.005	−1.2	.002	−0.2	.018	−5.9
Education	.033	−6.4	−.037	9.4	.154	−19.4	.117	−38.8
Enrollment	−.001	0.2	−.000	0.1	−.036	4.6	−.067	22.3
Earnings	.075	−14.5	.077	−19.7	.041	−5.2	.011	−3.6
Employment	−.110	21.3	.001	−0.3	.002	−0.2	−.070	23.3
Residual	−.518	100.1	−.436	111.6	−.951	120.5	−.309	102.7
Total (logit)	−.517	100.0	−.390	100.0	−.789	100.0	−.301	100.0
Change in rate	−5.5		−5.4		−8.3		−4.3	
Age 30–39								
Age	.037	−10.1	n.a.	n.a.	.040	−8.1	n.a.	n.a.
Education	−.029	7.8	n.a.	n.a.	.090	−18.2	n.a.	n.a.
Enrollment	−.006	1.5	n.a.	n.a.	−.039	7.8	n.a.	n.a.
Earnings	.080	−21.6	n.a.	n.a.	.048	−9.8	n.a.	n.a.
Employment	−.050	13.5	n.a.	n.a.	.001	−0.2	n.a.	n.a.
Residual	−.402	108.9	n.a.	n.a.	−.632	128.5	n.a.	n.a.
Total (logit)	−.369	100.0	n.a.	n.a.	−.492	100.0	n.a.	n.a.
Change in rate	−2.9		0.1		−3.3		0.6	

SOURCES: Authors' calculations based on table 2 and table A-1.

n.a. Not available.

a. The components shown are differences in means between 1960 and 1980 of the independent variables weighted by their respective logit coefficients. For variables such as education with two or more coefficients, the weighted differences are summed. "Total" is the difference in the predicted log odds of marriage between 1960 and 1980. "Change in rate" is the difference in observed marriage rates between 1960 and 1980 as reported in columns 5 and 10 of table 1. Percentages of change may not sum to 100 because of rounding.