



Why Has Marriage Declined among Black Americans?

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One of the most important social changes unfolding in the United States over the past half century has been the decline of the institution of marriage – a decline especially steep among blacks. In 1960, roughly 74% of whites were married, and the rate dropped to 56% in 2008. That is a big drop, but not compared to the plummeting marriage rate for blacks. In 1960, 61% of blacks were married in 1960, but by 2008 it was only 32%. Blacks also get divorced more often and remarry less frequently than whites.

Scholars and public observers worry because, after all, marriage has historically provided many benefits. Individuals who are married enjoy better physical and mental health, have more social ties and higher household incomes, accumulate more wealth, and raise children who do better in terms of health and social outcomes than the children of unmarried parents. Because the decline of marriage has been so sharp among blacks, this group has received close scrutiny. Some analysts argue that black women, in particular, place little value on marriage. But much evidence contradicts this argument and suggests, instead, that social deprivations make it hard for black women to find suitable partners.

A Values Argument Meets Contrary Evidence

In his 1965 research report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a social scientist who later became a U.S. Senator, argued that high poverty rates among blacks were in significant part due to deformed cultural values. After difficult historical experiences, he argued, black women preferred matriarchal families and their values contributed to disproportionately high rates of childbearing outside of marriage. In turn, black families without fathers led to larger social ills such as crime, joblessness, poverty, and over-dependence on welfare. “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family,” Moynihan concluded.

Do empirical data support this argument? Using data from 21 cities, social psychologist Belinda Tucker examined ten different values related to marriage – such as the belief it is important to marry one day, and the view that marriage is important for raising children. She found no racial or ethnic differences between whites and blacks on half of the value measures. And where there were significant differences, *blacks actually valued marriage more than whites*.

Social and Economic Barriers to Marriage

Ever since Moynihan presented his argument, other scholars have accumulated considerable evidence that social and economic impediments to marriage matter more than value orientations. Aspirations are not the issue, in this view, so much as a dearth of what William Julius Wilson calls “marriageable” black men.

In part, the men are just not there in many black communities. Mortality rates are high for black men, and black men are also very often imprisoned. In 2010, 4,347 out of every 100,000 black men were in prison, a rate that was six times higher than the imprisonment rate for white men.

Even more important, the characteristics and life situations of many black men fall well short of women’s preferences. In 2010, the Pew Research Center asked respondents to rate the importance of various factors when choosing a mate, and found that black women have high aspirations.

- Asked how important it is that a “good husband or partner provide a good income,” two thirds of black women said it is very important, compared to 32% of white women.
- Roughly 55% of black women said it was very important for a husband or partner to be well-educated, compared to only 28% of white women.

- Half of black women said that financial stability should be an important precondition for marriage, but only a quarter of white women felt that way.

Men with such ideal characteristics are especially hard to find in low-income minority communities. A highly acclaimed study by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that low-income black and Latina mothers value marriage highly but see many financial barriers, because potential partners often have very low incomes and may be unemployed. Similarly, sociologists William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman found that high unemployment was associated with low rates of marriage; and another study using data from 1990 to 2009 found that a dearth of men with attractive social characteristics was, in fact, associated with high rates of families headed by women. Finally, a truly innovative study by Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan simultaneously tested cultural and socioeconomic explanations. Even though black women in this study had the strongest pro-marriage attitudes, the high ratio of black women to men and an undersupply of employed black men fully explained the lower likelihood of marriage for black women.

To Boost Marriage, Help Black Men

Those who want to boost marriage rates among blacks should focus on improving job opportunities and education for black men. In 2010, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 18.4% of black men were jobless compared to 9.6% of white men. Black men also earn lower wages than similar white men. Racial disparities persist even at the highest levels of education. Even after holding education constant, black men are still more likely to be unemployed or economically deprived – causing them to fall short of what black women are looking for in partners. Finally, contrary to patterns found among other race-ethnic groups, black women have higher educational attainment than black men, yet this adds to their struggle to find the kinds of men they hope to marry.

Black women's values, in short, are not the problem. Black marriage rates are likely to rise only after America's black men receive more economic opportunities.

Read more in Dawne M. Mouzon, "Blacks Don't Value Marriage as Much as Other Groups': Family Patterns and Persisting Inequality," in *What White People Think They Know (and People of Color Aren't Totally Clear on Either): Questioning Conventional Wisdom about Race*, edited by Cherise Harris and Nikki Khanna (Sage Publications, 2013).