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Is There a Shortage of Marriageable Men?

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Summary

In the last half century, marriage rates have fallen dramatically. In this paper, we explore possible drivers of this trend, including declining economic prospects among men, an increase in unwed births that constrain women's later marriageability, rising rates of incarceration, and a reversal of the education gap that once favored men and now favors women. We estimate that the decline in male earnings since 1970 among both black and less-educated white men can explain a portion of the decline in marriage, but that cultural factors have played an important role as well. We argue that the ratio of marriageable men to women depends critically on how one defines "marriageable." Looking just at current data rather than historical trends, and using different definitions of marriageability, we find that there are shortages of marriageable men among the black population, but not among the white population (except among the best educated).

The relationship between male economic prospects and marriage rates

The possible effects of male employment and earnings on marriage have a long history in academic thought, starting as early as the 1965 Moynihan Report. In 1987, sociologist William Julius Wilson coined the term "marriageable male" in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson posited that falling marriage rates and the rise of female-headed families within the black community were attributable to the poor economic opportunities available to black males. A sizeable literature in economics and sociology since then has suggested that Wilson's hypothesis has merit; that is, that the employment rate and the earnings of men within a local marriage market affect marriage. More specifically, based on the magnitude of this relationship found in five such studies, we estimate that the change in men's employment and earnings can explain around 27 percent of the decline in marriage rates since 1980. (See Table 1 in appendix.)

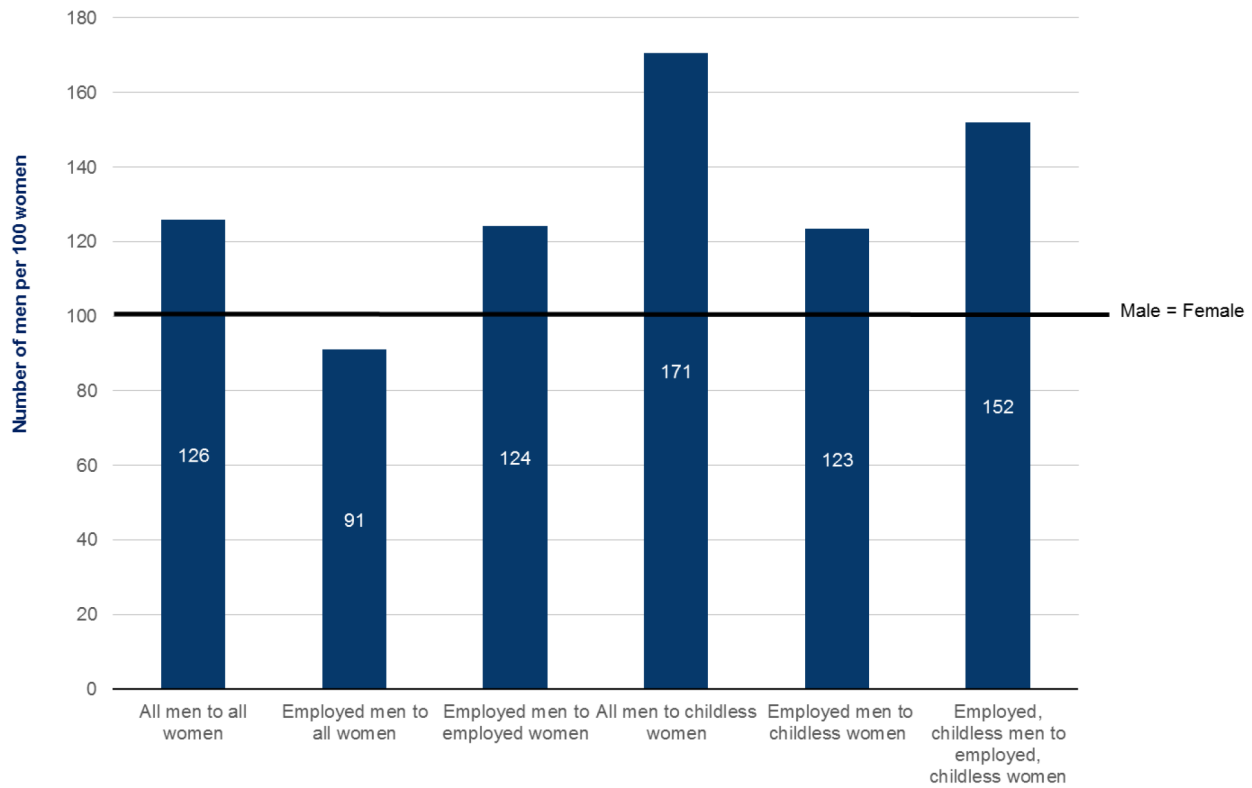
We also conducted our own analysis of this relationship. In an unpublished working paper (available upon request), we estimate the relationship between male earnings and marriage rates over a forty-year period (1970 to 2010), using data from the Current Population Survey and the General Social Survey. We focus on marriage markets characterized by age (between 25 and 35), geographic area (metropolitan area), race (white or black), and education (college or less than college). We examine the effects of three key variables on marriage: changing attitudes, women's earnings, and men's earnings. Different models produce very different results, but we estimate that the decline in male earnings for less skilled men can explain anywhere from none to almost half of the decline in marriage rates since 1970. The midpoint of these different estimates, and the one that accords with our own best judgment about the most appropriate model to use, both suggest that the decline in earnings among non-college-educated white men can explain about one-quarter of the decline in marriage rates between 1970 and 2010. The effects for black men (all education levels) are comparable or smaller than that of non-college-educated whites. For college-educated whites, the effects are smaller still. For blacks and the college-educated of both races, there is a negative relationship between female earnings and marriage rates.

What do we mean by marriageable?

William Julius Wilson's original definition of "marriageability" was the ratio of employed men to all women of the same age. Most of the subsequent literature has focused on indicators of male economic potential, including employment, earnings, and not being incarcerated. Similarly, a recent Pew Research Center report looking at marriage rates among young Americans found that over three-quarters of women surveyed cited having a partner with a stable job as a very important attribute they look for in someone to marry.

The assumption built into this definition is that marriageability is specific to men, but that all women are equally marriageable, regardless of employment status or other characteristics. However, this comparison does not reflect modern realities about the role that women's earnings play in family finances; they are now the primary breadwinner in 41 percent of all families. In addition, rising rates of unwed parenthood mean that a growing proportion of young women of marriageable age already have children from a prior relationship. Not only are many men understandably reluctant to take responsibility for someone else's child, but the single parents themselves have less time, and perhaps less inclination, to look for a new partner, given their child care responsibilities and prior experience with relationships that didn't work out. Women who had their first child outside of marriage are more likely to cohabit and less likely to marry than comparable women without children, and when they do marry, they do not marry as well (i.e., their marital partners are less educated and older).

Figure 1. Marriage markets for never-married 25 to 34 year-olds, 2012

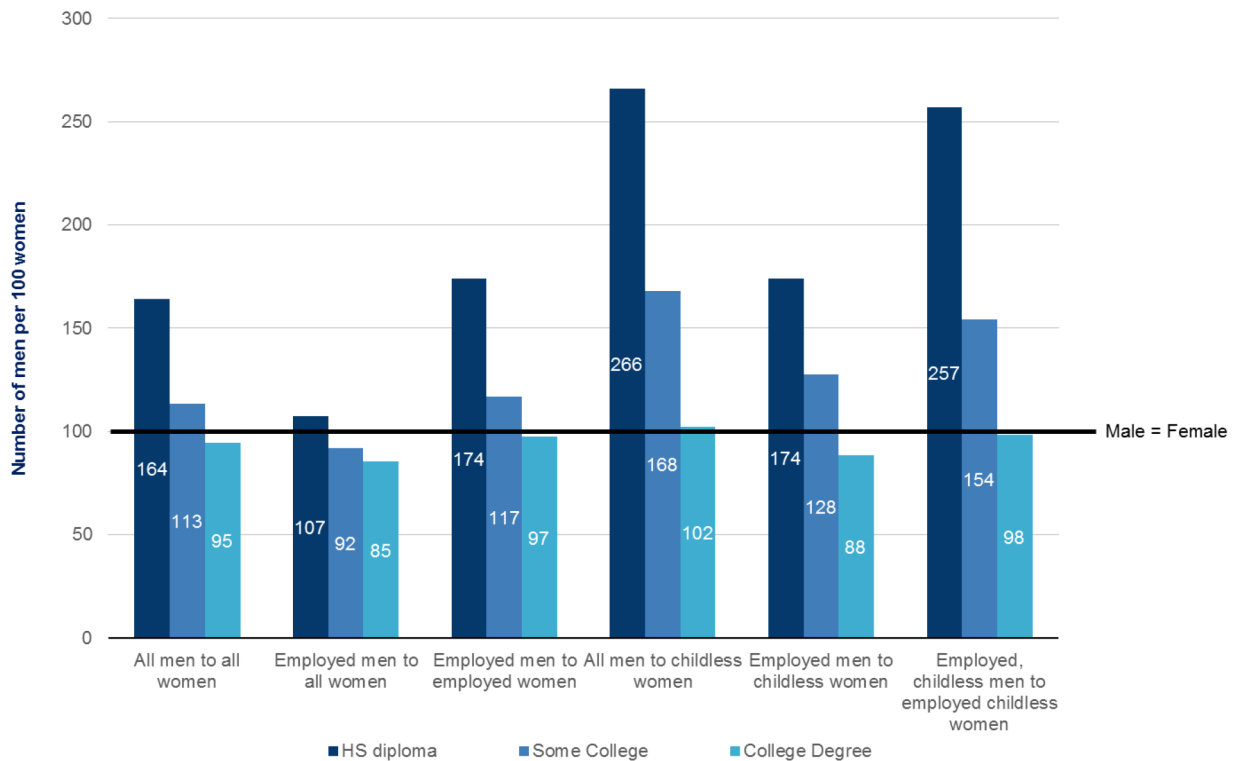


Source: Author's tabulations of 2012 American Community Survey IPUMS data.

With these considerations in mind, we examined gender ratios that consider the employment of both men and women, as well as whether there are children from previous relationships, as indicators of marriageability. As Figure 1 shows, only one definition of marriageability — the original definition used by Wilson comparing employed men to all women — shows a lack of eligible men for women to marry. (Note that the ratio of all single men to all single women shows an excess of men, primarily because of women’s earlier age at marriage.)

Looking at these gender ratios in the aggregate does not tell the whole story, of course. Assortative mating — marrying someone from a similar background — is the norm in the United States. A recent study from Jeremy Greenwood and colleagues finds that not only are Americans more likely to marry someone with the same level of education or income, but also that this tendency has increased since 1960. Similarly, though interracial marriage is on the rise, white Americans still primarily marry white Americans, and black Americans still primarily marry black Americans. Therefore, it makes sense to examine marriageability ratios within education group (Figure 2) and within race (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Marriage markets for never-married 25 to 34 year-olds, by education



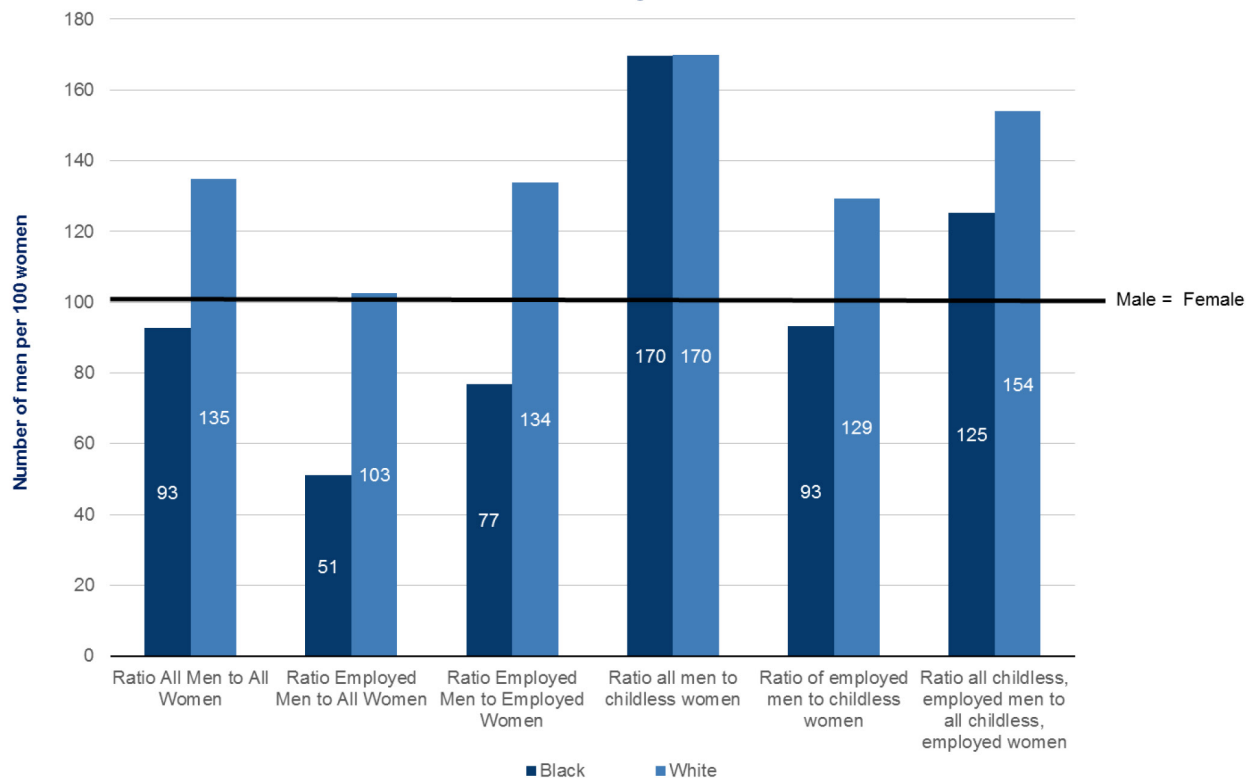
Source: Author’s tabulations of 2012 American Community Survey IPUMS data.

Breaking down marriage markets by education tells a somewhat surprising story: it is the group of women who have the highest marriage rates — college-educated women — who are facing the greatest “shortage” of men. In fact, using the conventional measure of marriageability — the ratio of employed men to all women — there are only 85 men for every 100 women among 25- to 35-year-old college-educated adults. In contrast, for every employed, childless woman with a high school diploma, there are over 2.5 comparable men. These disparities are the result of women’s rising education levels. Women are now more educated than men, meaning that they

will necessarily face a shortage of marriage partners with the same level of education. What we are likely to see in the future, then, is either women marrying “down” educationally, or not marrying at all.

Among black Americans, concerns about a shortage of marriageable men are much more consistent with the evidence. Only when we look at the number of men compared to childless women (whether employed or not) is the gender ratio among black Americans favorable to women. In contrast, white women have no shortage of options — even the ratio of employed men to all women is slightly more favorable to women than to men. The lack of marriageable men in the black community is affected by the very high rates of incarceration and early death among black men compared to white men. Among black male high school dropouts, 60 percent will be dead or incarcerated before the age of 35. Sentencing reform or other changes to the criminal justice system could improve this picture.

Figure 3. Marriage markets for never-married 25 to 34 year-olds, by race



Source: Author's tabulations of 2012 American Community Survey IPUMS data.

These tabulations are, of course, simplifications. A person's decision to marry is based on many traits that have nothing to do with the earning power of one's partner, whether he or she already has had children with another partner, whether he or she has been married before, and whether he or she is a good match in terms of race or education. But these simple ratios demonstrate that any “shortage” of marriageable partners is heavily dependent both on one's definition of marriageable and on the demographic group being examined. Marriageability may have as much to do with rising rates of education and employment among women, very high rates of incarceration among young black males, and high rates of unwed childbearing among young women as it does with a simple definition focused only on male employment and earnings.

What can be done to support marriage?

There is increasing agreement between liberals and conservatives that there are both economic and cultural aspects to the decline in marriage. While no one policy will be a silver bullet, a combination of policies that address both may help bolster the institution of marriage in America.

Improve economic opportunities, particularly for men without college degrees. Marriage rates remain high among the college-educated, and our research suggests that there is a stronger association between male earnings and marriage among non-college graduates than among college graduates. Policy measures to improve the prospects of less educated men could include:

- Creating more career and technical education and apprenticeships by expanding successful programs such as Small Schools of Choice, Talent Development, and Career Academies, and making access to technical training at the community college level more affordable.
- Making work pay through a more generous Earned Income Tax Credit for single adults, and raising the minimum wage.
- Reforming the criminal justice system to reduce the size of the prison population, especially among black males, and better prepare inmates to reintegrate into society once their sentence is served.

Reduce the number of out-of-wedlock and unintended pregnancies. Around 40 percent of new mothers are unmarried at the time of birth, and the majority of these births are unplanned. Unmarried mothers are less likely to marry than women of the same age and demographic background without children. Delaying childbearing is thus a good way to increase marriage rates, and whatever marriages are formed are likely to be more stable if the partners are older and have had time to complete their educations and find steady work. Reversing the trends in out-of-wedlock childbearing will require that we:

- Encourage young adults to think more about whether, when, and with whom to have children, through cultural messages and social marketing campaigns that emphasize a new ethic of responsible parenthood.
- Improve women's educational and employment opportunities so that they will have greater motivation to delay childbearing.
- Increase knowledge about and access to effective methods of contraception, such as long-acting reversible contraception (the IUD and the implant).

Conclusion

If there is a shortage of marriageable men, it is most apparent among blacks and the highly educated of both races. That shortage is likely related to high rates of incarceration and early death among black men, and a growing education gap in favor of women among both races. Surprisingly, we find no shortage of marriageable men among less-educated whites based on various definitions of "marriageability." Among the college educated, on the other hand, there is a shortage that is likely to discourage marriage unless women are more willing to "marry down" or men catch up to women in terms of education.

Looking back over the past 40 or more years, we find that male earnings have affected marriage rates, but the magnitude of this effect is not huge and may diminish over time as women's education and earnings increase and gender roles evolve toward a more egalitarian state.

Finally, the question of whether marriage can be restored may be the wrong question. What matters for children is the stability of relationships, the maturity of their parents, and their desire to take on one of the most important tasks any adult ever undertakes. Historically, marriage has been the institution which promoted these goals. For some, it will continue to do so. But it is only a proxy for what matters more: the quality of parenting, the stability of a child's environment, and the circumstances of her birth.

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Table 1: Summary of the Literature on the Decline in Marriage

Study Title	Cite	Sample/Survey	Description of Study
Local Marriage Markets and the Marital Behavior of Black and White Women	Lichter, LeClere, McLaughlin (1991)	1980 decennial US census, 382 labor-market areas, black and white Americans ages 20-29	The authors use a weighted least squares model to regress the percent of women ever-married on non-employment rate for men, mean earnings for men, and a series of other variables, such as LFP of unmarried women, and controls for demographic traits. Male-supply variables explain an additional 14.6% of variation in proportion of ever-married, whereas female-supply variables explain an additional 14.2% of variation.
Male Incarceration, the Marriage Market and Female Outcomes	Charles and Luoh (201)	Census CPS IPUMS from 1970 to 2000, marriage markets defined by state, age group (splits ages in 2) and race, resulting in 206 marriage markets	The authors use a fixed effects model regressing proportion of ever-married women in a marriage market on male incarceration rates, controlling for education, gender ratios, and criminal behavior in the geographic area. Their coefficients suggest that increasing the percent of men institutionalized by 100 percentage points would reduce ever-married rates by 2 percentage points. Our analysis of their findings: estimates from Pew of BLS and CPS data show that male incarceration rates have increased by 312.5% since 1960 — which would indicate a reduction in marriage of 6.25 percentage points, or about 28.4% of the total decline in marriage over that time period.
How Do Sex Ratios Affect Marriage and Labor Markets? Evidence from America's Second Generation	Angrist (2002)	Census CPS IPUMS from 1910, 1920, and 1940, looks at first and second generation immigrants and splits data into 33 ethnicity-year cells (11 ethnicities and 3 years)	The author uses OLS and 2SLS IV models to regress the probability of a woman being ever-married on the gender ratio in a given ethnicity-year cell, instrumenting with immigration levels for each sex. The coefficient in their 2SLS model on sex ratio is 0.203. Our analysis of their findings: If we extrapolate this to the current time period, the gender ratio has declined from about 1.80 in 1960 to 1.26 in 2012 according to Pew — which would indicate a reduction in marriage of 10.9 percentage points, or 49.8% of the total decline in marriage over that time period.
Marriage Rates and Marriageable Men: A Test of the Wilson Hypothesis	Wood (1995)	CPS data from 1970 and 1980, uses 76 SMA level groups for black Americans	The author uses a first differences model to regress the change in the ever-married rate for a given metropolitan area on the change in Marriageable Men Ratio (employed men with income >\$8000 to all women), along with set of covariates. Wood calculates that his findings explain 7 to 10% of the decline in marriage rates between 1970 and 1980.
Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education	Autor and Wasserman (2010)	Census IPUMS from 1979 and 2009	The authors plot the relationship between changes in female marriage rates and changes in male hourly earnings by race and education group on a scatter plot. They show that a 10% increase in wages is associated with a 4% increase in female marriage rates. Since 1979, real hourly wages have declined by about 20 percent, which would indicate an 8% decline in marriage rates, or about 36.4% of the total declines in marriage across generations.
Unpublished Working Paper	Venator and Sawhill	1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010 CPS IPUMS data at the metropolitan level, combined with attitudinal data from GSS	We used three different models (first differences, fixed effects, and IV model) to regress the proportion of ever-married women on logged male earnings and logged female earnings, controlling for attitudinal data on gender roles and attitudes towards premarital sex. We restrict each analysis to marriage markets based on race, education, and age. We find that changes in male earnings for non-college educated explain somewhere between 0.1 to 46.3% of the decline in marriage rates over time with our preferred specification explaining 24.4%. In contrast, the cultural variables explain about 12% of the decline.

Additional Reading

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