

the Atlantic

Getting Married Later is Great for College-Educated Women

For Everyone Else, the Results are Mixed

Americans are getting married later and later. The average age of first marriage in the United States is 27 for women and 29 for men, up from 23 for women and 26 for men in 1990 and 20 and 22 (!) in 1960.

But what are the consequences of this trend? Who benefits and who suffers? “Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America,” a new report from the University of Virginia’s National Marriage Project examines those questions and, unsurprisingly, concludes that the answers are different depending on who you are.

“The new norm has very divergent impacts on different groups of people,” said Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project and a sociology professor at UVa. “The benefits of delayed marriage in America really vary by class.” Indeed: College-educated women have largely benefited from marrying later; other demographic groups, however, are having a harder time adjusting to the rising marriage age.

Financially, college-educated women benefit the most from marrying later. Women who marry later make more money per year than women who marry young. The average annual personal income for college-educated women in their mid-30s who married after age 30 is \$50,415, compared with \$32,263 for college-educated women of the same age who married before age 20—a 56 percent difference. Female high-school graduates who attended some college also enjoy higher wages if they wait to marry, though the gap is not as wide: Those who marry after 30 earn \$22,286 a year by their mid-30s, while those who marry before 20 earn \$18,234, a 22 percent difference.

Financially, men of all education levels benefit from marrying earlier. Men who marry in their 20s make more money by their mid-30s than men who marry after 30, regardless of education level.

College-educated women are unlikely to have a child before getting married. For college-educated women, the average age of first birth (30) has risen along with the average age of marriage (27). Only 12 percent of births by college graduates are to unmarried women.

Women without college degrees are very likely to have a child before getting married. Less-educated women have a much different experience with marriage and childbirth. For women without a college degree, the average age of first birth has not risen apace with the average age of marriage. The average age of first birth for this group is lower than the average marriage age. For women who dropped out of high school, the average age of first birth is 20, while the average marriage age is 25; 83 percent of first births in this demographic are to unmarried mothers. For women who graduated from high school and went to some college, the average age for first birth is 24 and the average marriage age is 27; 58 percent of first births are to unwed mothers.

Couples who are not married when they have children are far more likely to split up. When couples are married when their first child is born, there’s a 13 percent chance they’ll separate within the first five years of the child’s life. When couples are cohabitating, their chances of breaking up within that period are 39 percent.

So the bottom line is, college-educated women are reaping most of the benefits of later marriage: They can enjoy the greater economic security that comes with marrying later, while still being able to have children in the relatively stable context of marriage. Women with lower education levels get a much smaller economic bump for marrying later and are less likely to be married when they have their first child.

