

# Slate

## Why Are So Many Twentysomethings Having Children Before Getting Married?

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The picture of the twentysomething years painted by the pop culture—think *Girls* or *The Mindy Project*—suggests that young adults use their 20s as a kind of “odyssey years” to bridge adolescence and adulthood. Judging by Hannah, Adam, and Mindy, the 20s are about getting educated and established at work, enjoying drinks and coffee with friends, trying your hand at relationships, all before the press of adult responsibilities sets in.

This picture is largely accurate for college-educated young adults as we show in our new report, “Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America,” and it’s a picture that ends up relatively rosy, even if the 20s have difficult moments. These highly educated adults have embraced a “capstone” model of marriage that typically leads them to put off marriage until they have had a chance to establish themselves professionally, personally, and relationship-wise. This capstone model is paying big dividends to the college-educated: Their divorce rate is low, and their income is high. We find, for instance, that college-educated women who postpone marriage to their 30s earn about \$10,000 more than their college-educated sisters who marry in their mid-20s.

But one major and more dystopian feature of actual contemporary twentysomething life is conspicuously absent from small-screen depictions: parenthood. Hard as it might be for Hannah and Mindy—and their viewers—to imagine, most American women without college degrees have their first child in their 20s. These young women and their partners—who make up about two-thirds of twentysomething adults in the United States—are logging more time at the diaper aisle of the local supermarket than at the local bar.

This would not be such a big deal except for the fact that many of these twentysomethings are drifting into parenthood, becoming moms and dads with partners they don’t think are fit to marry or at least ready to marry. For instance, almost 1 in 2 babies—47 percent, to be precise—born to twentysomething women are now born to unmarried parents. In fact, twentysomething women now have the majority of children outside of marriage, which—given that 30 is the new 20—makes them the new teen moms.

The reality is that children born to unmarried twentysomething parents are three times more likely to grow up with a disorienting carousel of adults coming and going in the home, compared to children born to married parents. This kind of carousel, as sociologist Andrew Cherlin notes in his book *The Marriage-Go-Round*, is associated with higher rates of teen pregnancy, behavioral problems in school, and substance abuse. By contrast, “stable, low-conflict families with two biological or adoptive parents provide better environments for children, on average, than do other living arrangements.”

How did twentysomethings become the new teen moms? Progressives stress economics as a cause, conservatives stress culture, but both are a factor. Among college-educated couples who have access to stable, high-paying, and meaningful work, only 12 percent have their first child before marriage. By and large, college-educated women and men don’t want to derail their professional and economic prospects by having a baby before they have established a strong economic foundation for themselves and their future family.

But 58 percent of women who have a high-school degree or some college—women we call “middle Americans” and who make up a majority of young adult women—are now having their first child outside of marriage—a rapid and quite recent development. (Among women without a high-school degree, 83 percent do.) The biggest economic issue is that men without college degrees are less likely to hold the kind of stable, decent-paying jobs that will secure their financial future. Chris, 22, a welder in Ohio interviewed for the *Love and Marriage in Middle America* project at the Institute for American Values, said his recent stint of unemployment “drove the final nail in the coffin” of his relationship with a young woman he was hoping to marry. “[I] was depressed; I was bored out of my mind—no income, not able to do anything. It basically was just like hell,” he said.

Two cultural factors are also in play here. The rise of the “capstone” model of marriage is one such factor, as Cherlin has noted. All Americans, not just the college educated—watch the same TV shows and movies and pick up the idea that adults have to have all their ducks in a row—a middle-class lifestyle, a soul mate relationship—before they settle down. This model sets a high bar for marriage and minimizes marriage’s classic connection to parenthood. So large numbers of less-educated twentysomethings who view the capstone model as unattainable end up having the child before the marriage.

Second, as Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas point out in *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, many young adults have been scarred by the divorce revolution—which hit poor and middle American communities harder than upper- and middle-class communities—and have become gun-shy about marriage. They have seen too many friends and family divorce to have the trust required to move forward with a wedding. So, living amid a climate characterized by a trust deficit, they often choose, or drift “unintentionally” into, parenthood with partners who are not marriageable or who seem good but to whom they are not yet ready to marry.

Melissa, a 31-year-old single mother, had this to say about why she has never married any of her boyfriends: “I just never felt that

anyone's as loyal to me as I am to them," she said. "Even when I feel like I'm in a good relationship, there'll be little things that they'll do that will make me start wondering, 'Do they really have my back?' ", according to the Love and Marriage in Middle America project, a study of Middle American relationships in a small town in Ohio. What's striking about Melissa's comment—which is all too representative—is that it's not just the bad guys who give her pause about marriage; it's also the good guys. She just seems to harbor a general suspicion about the possibility of lifelong love and the whole institution of marriage.

So what can be done to bring women like Melissa and the "good guys" back together? Progressives are right to point to the importance of shoring up the economic foundations of family life in middle America. New infrastructure projects, better vocational training, and the elimination of the marriage penalties built into many of the nation's public policies serving lower-income Americans are all steps that could help to boost the fragile foundations of middle American families. President Obama was right to call in his State of the Unions address for measures "to strengthen families by removing the financial deterrents to marriage for low-income couples."

But conservatives are also right in calling for a new ethic of parental responsibility that is equally binding on all Americans and all parents, regardless of their income, education, or gender. We need a national campaign—like we have had around teen pregnancy—encompassing public, civic, and pop-cultural efforts (yes, Lena

Dunham should get in on the action) to encourage twentysomethings to wait until they have a plan and a partner who will enable them to give their children the life and family they deserve. Isabel Sawhill, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, says young adults need to treat parenthood, not marriage, as the capstone.

This is because becoming a parent, for both mothers and fathers, is a big deal, arguably a bigger deal than getting married. Young adults owe it to their children to try to bring them into a home with two loving parents who are ready to support them and one another in the exhausting, exhilarating, and quotidian adventure that is parenthood. And, at least in the United States, that's most likely to happen within marriage.

The bottom line is this: Today's twentysomethings need to approach parenthood with the same seriousness that they approach marriage. For some, this will mean postponing parenthood into the later 20s or 30s, after their ducks are all in row. But for others, this will mean marrying earlier to someone with whom they are in a "good relationship." But either way, contemporary young adults need to be more intentional about sequencing the baby carriage after marriage, just as the country needs to be more intentional about stabilizing the fragile foundations of family life in poor and middle American communities across the United States.