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Study: Delaying Marriage Hurts Middle-Class Americans Most

The tendency of young adults to put off marriage has taken a harsh toll on Americans without college degrees, according to a new study by a group of family researchers.

The study, titled Knot Yet, belies the mythology popularized on shows such as “Girls,” with characters spending their 20s establishing careers and relationships before deciding to settle down and have children. While that scenario portrays the experiences of many college-educated Americans, women with only high school degrees or a year or two of college are more likely to have their first child while cohabiting with a man who struggles to find a stable job that pays enough to support a family, the study said.

The study was conducted by researchers for the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and the Relate Institute. It is part of a growing body of research into the impact of delayed marriage as the median age when people marry has risen to 27 for women and 29 for men.

The study found a large educational and class divide. College-educated women typically have their first child two years after marrying. The high school graduates as a group have their first child two years before they marry.

In a statistic that runs counter to the image of unmarried mothers as reckless teenagers, the study said 58 percent of first births to women who have graduated only from high school are out of wedlock.

“Everyone is pushing marriage to their late 20s and early 30s, the Wal-Mart cashier as well as the Wells Fargo executive,” said W. Bradley Wilcox of the University of Virginia, one of the authors of the study. “But the Wells Fargo executive is getting married in her late 20s and having her first child in her early 30s. The Wal-Mart checkout guy is having his first kid in his early 20s, and often marries in his late 20s, often to someone who is not the mother of his first child.”

The Knot Yet study says economic and cultural forces are responsible for current attitudes toward marriage.

The decline in real wages for men lacking college degrees has eroded the economic foundations of marriage. And young adults, many of them children of divorce themselves, are inclined to view marriage less as a cornerstone to their future lives than a capstone to put in place after they have built a foundation, the study said.

“Progressives stress the economics, conservatives stress the culture,” said Wilcox. “We say both matter. They both are undercutting the viability of marriage for young adults today.

Joan Williams, director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California at Hastings, said the trend for working-class Americans to delay marriage and have children before they marry echoes behavior that was noticed in lower-income people several decades ago. As did the Knot Yet study, Williams blamed it on the de-stigmatization of out-of-wedlock births and shrinking blue-collar wages.

“The people who used to have good-paying union jobs, those jobs are going, going gone,” she said. “As the missing middle was robbed of financial stability, it also has been robbed of stable family relationships, exactly as happened to the poor.”

Americans of all classes are more willing to hold out for the ideal, she said — even if it makes the goal more difficult to attain.

“Marriage is linked with the white picket fence in your head,” she said. “When they can’t get the white picket fence, and a certain level of stability,” they defer marriage and have higher rates of nonmarital births. That in turn fuels more poverty, and takes them further away from the white picket fence.”