The Decline in the Marriage Trend

Posted on October 12, 2022

Marriage remains an important personal, legal, cultural, and religious institution. However, marriage rates have declined in many countries, while the average age at first marriage has increased. More adults now remain unmarried for longer periods, live independently, or cohabit with romantic partners before marriage. These changes do not necessarily mean that people have rejected love, commitment, or family life. Instead, they indicate that the relationship between adulthood and marriage has become less direct than it was for previous generations.

The decline in marriage is not caused by one factor. Financial insecurity, housing costs, student debt, longer periods of education, women's economic independence, changing gender roles, greater social acceptance of cohabitation, and evolving expectations about relationships all influence decisions about marriage. Digital communication and social media have also transformed how people meet partners, maintain relationships, compare their lives with others, and present their identities.

Marriage therefore needs to be examined as part of a broader transformation in family life. For many adults, it has shifted from an expected starting point of adulthood to a decision made after educational, professional, financial, and relationship goals have been achieved.

Evidence of a Long-Term Decline in Marriage

The decline in marriage can be observed through several indicators, including lower marriage rates, later ages at first marriage, a rising proportion of adults who have never married, and the growing acceptance of cohabitation.

In the United States, married-couple households represented approximately 47% of all households in 2025, compared with 66% in 1975. The estimated median age at first marriage reached 30.8 years for men and 28.4 years for women in 2025. In 1975, the corresponding ages were 23.5 for men and 21.1 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). These changes indicate that adults are not only marrying less frequently but also waiting considerably longer before doing so.

Marriage rates provide similar evidence. The provisional U.S. marriage rate was 6.1 marriages per 1,000 people in 2023, compared with 8.2 per 1,000 in 2000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics [CDC/NCHS], n.d.). Year-to-year rates can be influenced by recessions, population changes, public-health emergencies, and delayed ceremonies. Nevertheless, the longer-term pattern shows that marriage has become less universal.

This pattern extends beyond the United States. Across countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the average crude marriage rate was approximately 4.3

marriages per 1,000 people in 2022. In 1990, most OECD countries recorded rates between five and seven marriages per 1,000 people. The average age at first marriage has also increased substantially, reaching approximately 32 for women and 34 for men in many OECD countries by 2021 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic produced an exceptional decline in weddings during 2020 because gatherings were restricted and ceremonies were postponed. Marriage rates partly recovered afterward, but the temporary rebound did not reverse the broader trend toward later and less frequent marriage.

Economic Insecurity and the Cost of Marriage

Economic conditions strongly influence when and whether adults marry. Although affection and companionship remain major reasons for marriage, many couples believe they should achieve financial stability before formalizing their relationship. Marriage is therefore increasingly treated as something that follows economic security rather than something through which young adults begin building that security together.

Employment uncertainty can delay marriage when young adults do not know whether they can maintain a household, pay rent, purchase a home, support children, or cover healthcare and other expenses. Low wages and unstable employment may discourage couples from making legal and financial commitments even when their relationships are serious.

Pew Research Center found that many unmarried adults regard steady employment and financial readiness as important conditions for marriage. Among cohabiting adults who wanted to marry but were not yet engaged, financial circumstances and career considerations were frequently identified as reasons for postponement. Love and companionship remained more important than money as reasons for entering a relationship, but finances influenced whether couples considered themselves ready for marriage (Horowitz et al., 2019).

The symbolic costs of weddings may add to this pressure. Couples may feel that a respectable wedding requires expensive clothing, venues, food, travel, photography, and entertainment. These expenses are not legally necessary for marriage, but social expectations can make couples feel that they should postpone marriage until they can afford a particular type of ceremony.

Housing costs present another challenge. Stable housing is often considered part of the foundation for marriage and parenthood. In areas where rent and home prices have risen faster than earnings, couples may delay marriage while living with parents, sharing housing with other adults, or remaining in separate residences. Homeownership is not required for a successful marriage, but it continues to function as an important sign of economic readiness for many people.

Economic inequality also affects marriage unevenly. Adults with stable employment, higher incomes, and access to family resources are often better positioned to meet contemporary expectations of financial preparedness. Marriage may consequently become more common among economically secure groups while declining more sharply among people facing unstable work, debt, housing insecurity, or limited opportunities.

Student Debt and Extended Education

Young adults spend more time in education than many members of earlier generations. University study, professional training, and postgraduate education can delay full-time employment and financial independence. As a result, marriage may occur after graduation, career establishment, or repayment of at least part of an educational debt.

Student loans do not affect every person or relationship in the same way. Debt may enable people to obtain qualifications that later improve their earnings. At the same time, monthly repayments can reduce available income and make borrowers feel less prepared for marriage, housing, or parenthood.

Addo (2014) found that different forms of debt were associated with relationship transitions among young adults. Educational debt was particularly relevant to women's movement between singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage. The findings do not prove that student loans directly prevent marriage in every case, but they demonstrate that debt can influence decisions about family formation.

Education also changes the timing and criteria of partner selection. Students may prioritize academic progress, relocation, internships, professional examinations, or early-career mobility. A person who expects to move between cities or countries may hesitate to marry until future employment and residence become more predictable.

It would therefore be inaccurate to argue that education simply causes people to reject marriage. Education often delays marriage rather than eliminating it. The more important change is that marriage now competes with a longer sequence of educational and professional transitions.

Women's Education, Income, and Autonomy

The original discussion correctly identifies women's education and economic independence as important influences on marriage. However, these developments should not be described as inherently damaging to marriage. Greater autonomy allows women to decide whether, when, and whom to marry rather than entering marriage primarily for financial survival or because of social pressure.

Historically, women often faced restrictions on education, employment, property ownership, financial decision-making, and independent living. Marriage could provide economic security but could also reinforce unequal dependence. Expanded educational and professional opportunities have given many women greater control over their relationships and futures.

Women who can support themselves may be less likely to remain in abusive, exploitative, or deeply unsatisfactory relationships. They may also take more time to evaluate whether a prospective partner respects their ambitions, shares household responsibilities, and supports an equal relationship. A decline in marriages entered through economic necessity should not automatically be interpreted as social deterioration.

The relationship between education and marriage is also more complicated than the assumption that highly educated women avoid marriage. In the United States, marriage has increasingly become associated with educational and economic advantage. College-educated adults are often more likely to marry and remain married than adults with less education, although they generally marry later (Parker & Stepler, 2017).

Women's advancement has changed expectations within marriage as well. Many couples now expect both partners to contribute economically, share domestic work, participate in parenting, and support each other's careers. Marriage may be postponed when potential partners have incompatible expectations about gender roles or when one partner expects a traditional arrangement that the other no longer accepts.

Women's autonomy therefore contributes to later and more selective marriage, but it may also support healthier marriages by reducing coercion and encouraging relationships based on mutual choice.

Changing Gender Roles and Relationship Expectations

Marriage was once closely linked to clearly separated gender roles. Men were expected to earn income, while women were expected to manage the household and care for children. These roles were reinforced through law, religion, education, employment practices, and family traditions.

Contemporary relationships are generally more flexible, but flexibility can also require greater negotiation. Couples must decide how to divide paid work, domestic labor, childcare, finances, career sacrifices, emotional support, and care for elderly relatives. Disagreement over these responsibilities can delay marriage or create reluctance toward it.

Many adults now expect marriage to provide emotional intimacy, friendship, sexual compatibility, personal growth, equality, economic partnership, and long-term stability at the same time. These expectations may improve relationship quality, but they also create a demanding standard. A potential spouse is no longer judged only by the ability to provide income or manage a household. People may seek a partner who meets a wide range of emotional, social, intellectual, and practical needs.

The pursuit of a "perfect match," mentioned in the original article, should therefore be understood as a change in expectations rather than simple unwillingness to commit. Digital dating platforms expose users to a seemingly large number of alternatives, which may encourage continued searching. However, they also allow people to meet partners outside their workplaces, neighborhoods, religious communities, or existing social networks.

Higher expectations may make people more cautious about marriage, particularly when they have witnessed parental conflict, divorce, domestic violence, or financial disputes. Some adults postpone marriage because they want to avoid repeating harmful relationship patterns.

The Declining Institutional Pressure to Marry

Marriage was traditionally treated as a necessary marker of adulthood. Social respectability, sexual relationships, parenthood, inheritance, household formation, and religious participation were strongly connected to marital status. Unmarried adults, particularly women, could experience considerable social stigma.

These pressures have weakened in many societies. Adults can increasingly live independently, maintain romantic relationships, raise children, travel, purchase property, and build careers without marrying. Single adulthood has become more visible, and lifelong unmarried status is no longer regarded as unusual in the way it once was.

Cherlin (2004) describes this change as the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Marriage remains culturally meaningful, but the rules governing it have become less uniform. Couples have greater freedom to define their relationships, yet they receive less guidance from a single set of social expectations.

Religious participation continues to influence marital attitudes, but the original claim that a growing Catholic aversion to matrimony is responsible for declining marriage is unsupported and overly specific. Catholic teaching continues to regard marriage as a sacrament. A more defensible explanation is that declining religious participation and greater diversity in personal beliefs have weakened the authority of religious institutions over relationship decisions in some societies.

Religious change does not operate uniformly. Some faith communities continue to encourage early marriage and discourage cohabitation, while others have adapted to later marriage and more diverse family arrangements. Marriage trends must therefore be examined within particular cultural and religious contexts rather than attributed to one religious group.

Cohabitation as an Alternative or Step Toward Marriage

One of the most important changes in intimate relationships is the increased acceptance of cohabitation. Living together without marriage may serve as preparation for marriage, a practical arrangement, a long-term alternative, or a response to financial insecurity.

Pew Research Center found that most U.S. adults regarded cohabitation as socially acceptable, including relationships in which the couple did not plan to marry. Among adults aged 18 to 44, experience with cohabitation had become more common than it was among previous generations (Horowitz et al., 2019).

Couples may cohabit because it allows them to share housing expenses, spend more time together, test compatibility, or avoid the legal and financial consequences of marriage. Others may regard their commitment as meaningful without requiring formal recognition by the state or a religious institution.

Cohabitation does not always represent rejection of marriage. Many cohabiting couples eventually marry, while others remain undecided because of debt, employment, previous divorce, disagreements, or the expense of a wedding. It is therefore more accurate to say that cohabitation has diversified the pathways through which relationships develop.

The legal protections attached to marriage remain important. Married spouses may receive clearer rights involving inheritance, medical decision-making, taxation, immigration, parental status, insurance, pensions, and property division. Cohabiting partners may need separate legal documents to obtain some of these protections. Nevertheless, legal benefits alone do not persuade every couple to marry.

Social Media, Dating, and Modern Relationships

The original article includes a substantial discussion of social media that initially appears separate from the decline in marriage. However, digital communication can be integrated into the topic because it has changed how relationships begin, develop, and are evaluated.

One major debate concerns whether online interaction displaces face-to-face relationships or creates additional opportunities for connection. Social media can help people maintain contact with distant friends and relatives, find communities, express creativity, and receive emotional support. It can also enable romantic partners to remain connected across demanding schedules or geographic distance.

At the same time, heavy or problematic use can introduce comparison, distraction, jealousy, surveillance, and conflict into relationships. Public displays of affection, relationship-status announcements, comments from former partners, private messages, and visible interactions with other users may become sources of misunderstanding. Research on Facebook use found that a person's own use was not automatically associated with lower relationship satisfaction, but negative perceptions of a partner's use were related to reduced intimacy (Hand et al., 2013).

Social media can also encourage strategic self-presentation. Users often select photographs, achievements, opinions, and relationship moments that create a favorable public identity. Exposure to carefully edited representations of other couples may make ordinary relationships appear inadequate. People may compare their private difficulties with the polished public images of others.

For adolescents and young adults, online environments can intensify peer approval, public evaluation, and the expectation of constant availability. Nesi et al. (2018) explain that social media transforms peer relationships by increasing the visibility, permanence, quantifiability, and accessibility of social interaction. These features can support connection but may also increase pressure, conflict, and uncertainty.

The online environment also exposes users to cyberbullying, hateful material, sexual content, violent imagery, harassment, and misinformation. These risks can affect emotional development and relationship expectations. Nevertheless, social media should not be treated as a direct or universal cause of declining marriage. Its effects depend on how platforms are used, the quality of offline relationships, individual vulnerabilities, and the couple's communication practices.

Digital technology has changed the relationship landscape, but it can either strengthen or weaken intimacy. The determining factor is not merely the amount of technology used but whether it supports trust, communication, and meaningful interaction.

Marriage, Companionship, and Personal Well-Being

Marriage can provide companionship, emotional support, shared resources, legal protection, and a stable environment for raising children. Many married adults identify love, companionship, and formal commitment as primary reasons for marrying (Horowitz et al., 2019).

Research has also associated high-quality marriages with better physical and psychological health. A meta-analysis by Robles et al. (2014) found a relationship between marital quality and several health outcomes. Supportive partnerships may reduce stress, encourage healthy behavior, and provide assistance during illness or financial difficulty.

However, it is important to distinguish the effects of marriage from the effects of relationship quality. A conflict-ridden, violent, coercive, or emotionally damaging marriage cannot be assumed to improve well-being. Marital status alone does not guarantee companionship or happiness.

Research findings may also reflect selection. Healthier, wealthier, and more socially supported individuals may be more likely to marry and remain married. Couples may gain advantages by combining income and resources, but economic security can also make marriage more attainable in the first place.

The original claim that marriage automatically lowers crime or produces happier lives is therefore too broad. Marriage may be associated with stability and positive outcomes for some individuals, but causal relationships vary. Age, personality, income, neighborhood conditions, social support, parenthood, and prior behavior may all influence the results.

Marriage and Children’s Outcomes

Marriage is often promoted because of its possible benefits for children. Married-parent households may have access to combined income, shared caregiving, legal protections, and greater residential stability. These resources can support education, health, and emotional development.

However, family structure alone does not determine children’s well-being. Poverty, parental conflict, domestic violence, unstable housing, discrimination, neighborhood conditions, and the quality of parenting are also important. Children may be harmed by a high-conflict marriage and may thrive in a stable single-parent, cohabiting, blended, or extended-family household.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) concludes that family structure is related to economic circumstances and children’s outcomes, but these relationships are shaped by selection, instability, parental resources, and broader social conditions. It would therefore be misleading to treat marriage as an automatic solution to child poverty or developmental disadvantage.

Policies intended to support children should strengthen family stability, income, healthcare, childcare, education, and safe relationships rather than assuming that promoting marriage alone will address every problem.

Emotional and Financial Risks of Marriage

Marriage can offer support, but it also involves emotional and financial responsibilities. Partners may become jointly responsible for debts, housing, childcare, healthcare, and long-term financial planning. Separation or divorce can produce legal costs, property disputes, reduced household income, and emotional distress.

Fear of divorce may discourage marriage among adults who have observed painful family breakdowns. People may also hesitate because they are uncertain about the legal consequences of sharing assets, assuming debt, or becoming financially dependent on a spouse.

Emotional risks include betrayal, loss of independence, unequal domestic responsibilities, controlling behavior, and conflict over family expectations. These concerns do not mean that marriage is inherently dangerous. They demonstrate why many adults approach it more cautiously than previous generations were permitted or expected to do.

Greater caution may reduce the number of marriages, but it can also reduce marriages entered under pressure or without sufficient compatibility.

Public Policy and Social Structure

Public policy can influence marriage indirectly by shaping the conditions under which people form households. Employment security, wages, affordable housing, childcare, healthcare, education costs, family leave, and tax systems all affect whether couples feel prepared for marriage and parenthood.

Policies that reduce economic instability may make long-term commitment more attainable. Affordable housing and childcare can ease the pressure faced by couples who want to establish a household. Student-debt relief or more affordable education may allow young adults to reach financial independence earlier. Paid family leave can reduce conflict between employment and caregiving.

Public policy should not pressure people into unsuitable marriages or treat unmarried families as morally deficient. Instead, it should remove unnecessary economic barriers while allowing adults to make voluntary decisions.

Marriage policy must also recognize diversity. Contemporary families include married couples, cohabiting partners, single parents, blended families, same-sex couples, multigenerational households, and adults living alone. A fair social system should protect children and vulnerable adults across these arrangements while preserving the distinctive legal significance of marriage for those who choose it.

Is Marriage Becoming Obsolete?

The decline in marriage rates does not mean that marriage is disappearing. Surveys continue to show that many adults value marriage and hope to marry eventually. What has changed is its timing, meaning, and relationship to adulthood.

Marriage was once an expected early-life transition that often preceded financial security, sexual relationships, household formation, and parenthood. Today, it is more commonly treated as a later achievement reached after education, employment, financial preparation, and relationship evaluation. Sociologists sometimes describe this as a shift from marriage as a foundation to marriage as a "capstone."

The institution has also become more voluntary. People face greater freedom to remain single, cohabit, end harmful relationships, or define commitment outside conventional expectations. This freedom can weaken marriage as a universal social rule while strengthening its meaning as a deliberate personal choice.

Marriage is therefore not necessarily obsolete. It is becoming more selective, delayed, and differentiated according to education, income, culture, religion, and personal preference.

Conclusion

The decline in marriage is a complex social development rather than evidence of one moral, religious, or generational failure. Economic insecurity, high housing costs, debt, extended education, changing gender roles, women's autonomy, cohabitation, reduced institutional pressure, and evolving relationship expectations all contribute to the trend.

Social media has further transformed how people meet, communicate, compare relationships, and construct identities. It can strengthen long-distance connections and social support, but it can also introduce jealousy, distraction, surveillance, cyberbullying, and unrealistic comparisons. Its influence on marriage is indirect and depends on individual and relational circumstances.

Marriage continues to offer companionship, legal protection, shared resources, and potential benefits for adults and children. However, these benefits depend heavily on relationship quality, stability, economic resources, and mutual respect. Marriage itself cannot guarantee happiness, health, responsible parenting, or freedom from conflict.

The central change is that marriage has moved from being a nearly compulsory step in adulthood to one option among several forms of intimate and family life. Understanding this transformation requires attention to economic conditions, personal autonomy, cultural expectations, technological change, and public policy. Rather than assuming that marriage is simply disappearing, it is more accurate to conclude that people are redefining when, why, and under what conditions they are willing to marry.

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