

The Marriage Trend Expository Essay

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Introduction

Marriage remains a major social institution, but its timing, frequency, legal meaning, and relationship to family formation have changed. In many countries, people marry later than earlier generations, spend more years unmarried, and are more likely to live with a partner before or instead of marriage. These changes do not mean that marriage is disappearing everywhere. Rates differ by country, age, education, income, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and public policy. The most accurate description is a diversification of adult relationships rather than one universal rejection of marriage. (Cherlin, 2014)

The original essay correctly identifies economic pressure, education, women's employment, cohabitation, secularization, and the COVID-19 disruption as relevant factors. Several claims require qualification. Annual marriage counts cannot be compared without considering population size and age structure. A decline in Catholic ceremonies does not necessarily equal an identical decline in all marriages among Catholics. Women's financial independence should not be described simply as making them "pickier"; it changes bargaining power and reduces the economic necessity of marriage. Current official data also show a post-pandemic rebound in weddings, even though long-term marriage rates remain below twentieth-century peaks. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Cherlin, 2014)

How Marriage Trends Are Measured

Researchers use several measures. The crude marriage rate is the number of marriages per 1,000 total population in a year. It is easy to calculate but is influenced by the proportion of children and older people who are unlikely to marry. Age-specific marriage rates examine particular age groups, while first-marriage rates exclude remarriages. Other measures estimate the probability of ever marrying or the median age at first marriage. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, n.d.)

These measures can move in different directions. A country may record more weddings because its population grew while its rate declines. A lower annual rate may reflect delayed marriage rather than permanent nonmarriage. Comparisons must also distinguish legal marriage from cohabitation and account for same-sex marriage where it is recognized. (Statistics Canada, n.d.)

The Long-Term United States Pattern

Marriage rates in the United States rose and fell with economic cycles, war, demographic change, and cultural expectations. The Great Depression delayed many marriages. The period following World War II produced an unusually early and widespread pattern of marriage, supported by rising employment, housing expansion, and strong cultural pressure to form nuclear families. That postwar pattern is often treated as traditional, but historically it was distinctive. (Cherlin, 2014)

Marriage became later and less universal from the late twentieth century onward. The National Center for Health Statistics reports long-run national marriage-rate trends and provisional data through 2023. The pandemic caused a sharp interruption in 2020 because gatherings, travel, licensing, and venues were restricted. In 2022, the number of U.S. marriages returned to approximately pre-pandemic levels, exceeding two million, but that rebound did not restore the much higher rates of earlier decades. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, n.d.)

Delayed Marriage

One of the clearest changes is increasing age at first marriage. Young adults spend longer in education, take more time to establish employment, and often view financial stability as a condition for marriage. The transition to adulthood has become extended in places where housing is expensive and secure work is difficult to obtain. (Cherlin, 2014)

Delay does not automatically indicate opposition to marriage. Surveys commonly find that many unmarried adults still value it but have not found the right partner or do not consider themselves financially prepared. The meaning of readiness has also expanded. Couples may expect emotional compatibility, shared values, stable income, and personal development before marrying, whereas earlier generations faced stronger pressure to marry before establishing an independent household. (Cherlin, 2014)

Economic Inequality and Employment

Marriage has become increasingly stratified by socioeconomic position in the United States and some other affluent societies. Stable employment and earnings make it easier to plan housing, children, and a ceremony. Job insecurity, debt, and unpredictable schedules can delay commitment. The decline of well-paid employment for workers without university degrees has affected the pool of adults who feel economically prepared for marriage. (Cherlin, 2014)

It is too simple to say that women delay marriage only because men's wages are unequal. Economic matching occurs in both directions. People increasingly partner with others who have similar

education and resources. This can concentrate advantage in dual-professional households while leaving lower-income adults with fewer stable partnership options. Marriage then becomes partly a marker of economic security rather than merely a route to it. (Cherlin, 2014)

Education and Women's Independence

Higher education often delays first marriage because students remain in school longer. Historically, women's education was sometimes associated with lower marriage rates, but the relationship has changed. Highly educated women are now often more likely to marry eventually and less likely to divorce than women facing severe economic disadvantage, although they marry later. (Cherlin, 2014)

Financial independence changes the purpose of marriage. When women have access to education, income, property, and legal rights, they are less compelled to remain in an unsuitable relationship for survival. Marriage can become more companionate and negotiated. This shift may reduce the number of marriages entered from economic necessity while increasing expectations for equality and emotional satisfaction. (Cherlin, 2014)

Cohabitation and Alternative Family Forms

Cohabitation has become a common stage in relationship development. Some couples use it as a test before marriage, some treat it as a long-term alternative, and others move into it because housing and parenting are already shared. Cohabitation is not one uniform arrangement. Its stability and legal protection vary by jurisdiction and by the couple's resources. (Cherlin, 2014)

The rise of cohabitation means that marriage statistics alone do not measure intimate partnership. Canada, for example, records both legal marriage and common-law relationships when describing family structure. In some societies, cohabiting partners have substantial legal rights; in others, they lack automatic inheritance, property, pension, or parental protections. Couples may misunderstand these differences. (Statistics Canada, n.d.)

Religion and Institutional Change

Religious communities have historically given marriage sacred meaning, established rules for ceremony, and connected family formation with community membership. Secularization can reduce the number of religious weddings and weaken institutional pressure to marry. However, the relationship is complex. A person may identify with a religion culturally while marrying in a civil ceremony, and a decline in church weddings may reflect venue preference rather than complete abandonment of faith.

Within Catholicism, canon law ordinarily requires Catholics to observe the Church's form of marriage

unless a dispensation is granted. Pastoral preparation, beliefs about permanence, and restrictions concerning ceremony can influence whether couples marry in the Church. Researchers should distinguish sacramental marriage, civil marriage, cohabitation, religious participation, and self-identification rather than treating them as the same variable.

Same-Sex Marriage and Legal Inclusion

The expansion of civil marriage to same-sex couples widened access rather than causing the broader decline in opposite-sex marriage. Legal recognition allowed couples previously excluded from the institution to obtain rights relating to inheritance, taxation, medical decision-making, parenting, and social recognition. It also changed the symbolic meaning of marriage by emphasizing equal citizenship.

Because same-sex marriage became legal at different times across countries, trend comparisons should identify legal changes. An increase in total marriages after legalization may reflect newly eligible couples formalizing long-standing relationships. Public policy affects who can marry, but it cannot by itself reverse economic and cultural forces influencing the whole population. (Statistics Canada, n.d.)

Housing Costs, Student Debt, and Ceremony Expenses

Young adults frequently connect marriage with the ability to establish a household. High rents, home prices, and student debt can postpone that step. The cost of the wedding itself can also create delay when couples believe a socially acceptable ceremony must be expensive. (Cherlin, 2014)

Marriage need not require a large celebration, yet social media and commercial wedding culture can raise expectations. Couples may wait until they can afford an event even when they are already living together. This separates the legal and relational decision from the public ceremony.

Changing Gender Roles and Domestic Labor

Traditional marriage assigned men primary responsibility for paid work and women responsibility for domestic labor and caregiving. As women entered paid employment, households had to renegotiate these expectations. Where men's participation at home does not increase, women may view marriage as adding unpaid labor rather than creating an equal partnership. (Cherlin, 2014)

Contemporary couples commonly expect shared decision-making, emotional communication, and a fair division of work. These expectations can strengthen relationships when fulfilled but discourage

marriage when available partners hold incompatible views. Gender equality changes not only whether people marry but what they believe a marriage should provide. (Cherlin, 2014)

Individualism and the Meaning of Commitment

Modern culture often places greater value on self-development, personal choice, and emotional fulfillment. Marriage is less likely to be treated as an unavoidable adult status. People may prioritize education, travel, career, friendships, or independent living. This individualization can delay marriage and make exit from harmful relationships more acceptable. (Cherlin, 2014)

It would be inaccurate to conclude that individualism eliminates commitment. Long-term cohabitation, chosen singlehood, friendships, and nonmarital parenting can involve durable obligations. The change is that institutions have less automatic authority over life decisions, while individuals carry more responsibility for constructing their own relationships.

The COVID-19 Shock and Recovery

The pandemic caused a sudden fall in marriages in many places because ceremonies were postponed, public offices reduced services, borders closed, and gatherings were restricted. This was a timing shock rather than proof of a permanent transformation. Many delayed couples married in 2021 or 2022, producing a rebound. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024)

The pandemic also affected relationships unevenly. Job loss, illness, caregiving, isolation, and housing pressure increased stress. Some couples accelerated commitment, while others separated. A serious trend analysis should therefore compare multiple years rather than treating 2020 as an ordinary observation.

Social Consequences

Later and less universal marriage can affect fertility timing, household formation, housing demand, caregiving, and inequality. Marriage is associated with economic advantages, but much of that relationship reflects selection: people with stable resources are more likely to marry and remain married. Policy should not assume that a wedding ceremony alone creates security. (Cherlin, 2014)

Children can thrive in different family structures when they receive stable care, adequate income, safety, and supportive relationships. The primary concern is not whether every household follows one form but whether law and public services protect children and caregivers. Unmarried partners may need clearer rights concerning property, parenthood, health decisions, and separation.

Will Marriage Disappear?

There is little basis for predicting the end of marriage. The institution retains emotional, legal, religious, and public significance. Many people continue to marry, including those who first cohabit. What has weakened is the idea that nearly every adult must marry early and remain married regardless of circumstances. (Cherlin, 2014)

Future trends will depend on employment, housing, gender equality, migration, family law, fertility preferences, and cultural change. Countries may follow different paths. Some may experience very late marriage and low fertility; others may retain high marriage rates while changing ceremony and household patterns.

Conclusion

The contemporary [marriage trend](#) is best understood as delayed and diversified partnership rather than a uniform global rejection of marriage. Economic insecurity, longer education, women's independence, cohabitation, secularization, changing gender roles, housing costs, and stronger expectations for relationship quality all influence decisions. Pandemic restrictions temporarily reduced weddings, followed by recovery. Marriage remains important, but it is increasingly one option among several ways of organizing adult intimacy and family life. The social challenge is not to force a return to one historical model; it is to ensure that people can form stable, equal, and legally protected relationships. (Cherlin, 2014; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024)

References

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