

For Fertility, Marriage Still Matters

New report examines worldwide marital behaviors and why they remain closely tied to fertility

WASHINGTON D.C., October 6th, 2022 – While public opinion polls show that fewer and fewer people believe parents need to be married in order to procreate, a new report from the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute finds that marriage still matters for fertility. In fact, marital behaviors remain so closely tied to fertility behaviors that it is virtually impossible to promote marriage or fertility alone without also influencing the other.

The report, *Marriage Still Matters: Demonstrating the Link Between Marriage and Fertility in the 21st Century*, examined tens of thousands of women’s fertility histories across nearly a century of social change to answer two fundamental questions: (1) Does the likelihood that women have their first child increase after they get married? and (2) Does the likelihood that women enter their first marriage increase after they have their first child?

Among the report’s key findings:

- Worldwide, the likelihood of having a first birth always rises dramatically after marriage. Since the 1980s, marital birth rates have been fairly stable, even as premarital birth rates have fallen a bit, so marriage has become more predictive of fertility, not less.
- Single mothers are somewhat likelier to subsequently marry than in the past, and indeed, becoming a single mother increases the odds of getting married versus remaining childless.
- Even in high-income countries with high rates of nonmarital fertility, women who are married still have significantly more children than those who are not.

“Despite the continued rise in nonmarital childbearing, and contrary to widespread belief that marriage is not necessary for bearing and raising children, the fundamental link between the formalized stable, pair bonding of adults and human reproduction remains robust,” said co-author Lyman Stone of the Institute for Family Studies. “By some measures, it is even stronger than in the past. Across all societies, we are seeing that it is ultimately through committed and long-term relationships—usually formalized through marriage—that childrearing is most efficient.”

Other highlights of the report include:

- Fertility is low in Asia, not because of stigma against nonmarital fertility, but because of the adverse economic and social obstacles for childrearing that affect fertility and marriage decisions for all people alike.

- Nonmarital births are not the secret ingredient for high birth rates in the “near replacement” countries like France, Sweden, or the U.S.—these countries also still have marital fertility rates near and sometimes considerably above replacement.
- Wherever unmarried childbearing makes a large contribution to fertility, it does so primarily in the context of long-term committed unions, often with various degrees of legal formalization and rights. Although these unions are not marriages, they bear many of the features that make marriages conducive to childbearing.
- Data from a panel of high-income countries demonstrate that delayed marriage is associated with lower birth rates even in high-income, relatively egalitarian settings.

As a result of these findings, Stone and James highlight several policy implications.

- 1) Policymakers interested in raising fertility rates should prioritize policies that encourage marriage.
- 2) Because nonmarital fertility is not required for a country to achieve high fertility and economic prosperity, policymakers should be cautious about diverting resources towards supporting single parents as a strategy for boosting births.
- 3) Finally, low fertility rates are shared across marital statuses, and the likeliest drivers of low fertility rates are obstacles existing outside of a couple’s relationship (grueling and competitive educational norms, long working hours for insecure and low-paying jobs, crowded housing, etc.). As such, people in countries with low fertility rates would be more inclined to have children if their governments created policies to improve the quality of life for young adults and families.

“Our research shows that even in situations where marriage is rare or delayed, it is still an important factor in fertility,” said co-author Spencer James of the Wheatley Institute. “When marriage is delayed, fertility will most often be postponed and decline. We don’t understand what causes this, but policymakers would be foolish to believe that fertility can be increased by de-prioritizing marriage and counting on non-marital fertility.”

For access to the full report, visit wheatley.byu.edu/for-fertility-marriage-still-matters.

About the Institute for Family Studies

The Institute for Family Studies (IFS) is a research and public education organization whose mission is to strengthen marriage and family life and advance the well-being of children.

About the Wheatley Institute

The Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.