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How Marriage Survives

By JUSTIN WOLFERS

Washington

THE recession has taken a toll on the institution of marriage, we keep hearing. Last month, for instance, when it was reported that the proportion of Americans aged 25 to 34 who are married [fell below the proportion who have never married](#), it was quickly attributed to the economic downturn. Young adults, according to this narrative, have less money to spend on a wedding and are less eager to enter into a lifetime commitment during times of uncertainty.

Again last week, when a report from the Pew Research Center noted that, for the first time, [college-educated 30-year-olds were more likely to have been married](#) than were people the same age without a college degree, the news was interpreted as another side effect of the recent recession. After all, the downturn has been especially hard on young men with no college degree.

But if you look at marriage in the United States over the past century, this interpretation doesn't stand up. Marriage and divorce rates have remained remarkably immune to the ups and downs of the business cycle. Unfortunately, the marriage statistics are easy to misread.

It's misleading to count the wedding rings among people in their 20s and early 30s, because the median age at first marriage in the United States has risen to 28 for men (from 23 in 1970) and 26 for women (from 21 in 1970). The fact that these folks aren't married now doesn't mean they won't marry — many of them just aren't there yet.

Look instead at 40-year-olds, and you see that 81 percent have married at least once. Yes, this number used to be higher — it peaked at 93 percent in 1980 — but, clearly, marriage remains a part of most people's lives. These statistics are not a perfect

barometer either, however, because they reflect weddings that were celebrated years earlier.

To most accurately track marriage rates, you need to focus on the number of wedding certificates issued. In 2009, the latest year for which we have data, there were about 2.1 million marriages in the United States. That does represent a slight decline since the recession began. But it's the [same rate of decline](#) that existed during the preceding economic boom, the previous bust and both the boom and the bust before that.

Indeed, the recent modest decline in marriage continues a 30-year trend. And even as the number of marriages falls, divorce is also becoming less prevalent. So a greater proportion of today's marriages will likely persist 30 years into the future.

This is not to say that marriage looks the same today as it always did — over the past several decades, there has been a tremendous shift in married life.

It used to be that a typical marriage involved specialized roles for the husband and wife. Usually he was in the marketplace, and she was in the home, and this arrangement led to maximum productivity.

But today, when families have easy access to prepared foods, inexpensive off-the-rack clothing and labor-saving technology from the washing machine to the robot vacuum cleaner, there's much less benefit from either spouse specializing in homemaking. Women, now better educated and with greater control over their fertility, are in the marketplace, too, and married couples have more money, more leisure time and longer lives to spend together. Modern marriages are based not on the economic benefits of playing specialized roles but on shared passions.

This new model of “hedonic marriage” has had an effect on who marries, and when — as research I have conducted with my better half, the economist Betsey Stevenson, has documented. In the old days, opposites attracted; an aspiring executive groom would pair up with a less-educated bride. And they would wed before the stork visited and before the couple made the costly investment of putting the husband through business school.

But today, that same young executive would more likely be half of a power couple, married to a college-educated woman who shares his taste in books, hobbies, travel and

so on. Indeed, marriage rates for college-educated women rose sharply through the 1950s and '60s, and have remained remarkably stable since. These women tend to marry after they have finished college and started their careers.

The decline in marriage, it turns out, is concentrated entirely among women with less education — those who likely have the least to gain from modern hedonic marriage.

This is not to say that the economic downturn has had no effect at all on domestic life. Census data show that [the number of unwed couples living together rose sharply](#) last year. With rents high and jobs hard to come by, it's no surprise that people are doubling up.

Still, given that the marriage rate remains on trend, the rise in cohabitation isn't coming at the expense of marriage. Instead, many young couples who might otherwise merely be dating are moving in together. Some of them, no doubt, will eventually marry. Truly, the recession has not torn young couples apart; it has pushed them closer together.

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