

# Unwed Mothers Have Difficulty Finding 'Good' Husbands, Study Finds

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Women who have children outside of marriage are less likely than other single women to marry, and when they do marry, their husbands tend to be less well-matched, according to a new study.

The results show that the odds that unwed mothers marry rather than cohabit are about 30 percent lower than those of childless single women.

When they do marry, mothers are more likely to have husbands who are significantly older and less educated than those of childless women.

“It's more difficult for unwed mothers to get married, and if they do, they tend to not marry well,” said Zhenchao Qian, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

The results suggest that efforts by the federal government and states to promote marriage among young, poor Americans need to do more to prevent out-of-wedlock childbearing, Qian said. He conducted the study with Leanna Mellott, graduate student in sociology at Ohio State, and Daniel Lichter, professor at Cornell University .

Their results appear in the current issue of the journal *Social Forces*.

They used data collected in the Current Population Survey (June supplements) between 1980 and 1995. Their final sample included 102,722 women aged 18 to 34.

The data indicated that among never-married mothers slightly more than half -- 55.8 percent -- were black, while about 10.3 percent are Hispanic.

Unwed mothers are disadvantaged economically, Qian said. They are far more likely to live below the poverty line than married women. Over one-third of female-headed families with children live in poverty compared to only 6 percent of married couples with children. However, marriage for unwed mothers may not help them economically if partners lack education and other important qualities, he said.

“Unwed mothers have significant disadvantages when trying to attract suitable mates,” Mellott said. “As a result, single mothers are less likely than childless women to be well matched demographically with their husbands or partners.”

For example, the study showed that single mothers were less likely than childless women to marry a man with at least some college education. That suggests unwed mothers are unlikely to improve their economic prospects through marriage, she said, because potential husbands are less likely to have opportunities for good-paying jobs.

In addition, a white woman who had children outside of marriage was more likely to marry a man who was significantly older -- at least six years older -- than she. That wasn't the case for Black and Hispanic women, but only because they were less likely than whites to be married at all, Qian said.

“Our analysis suggests that Blacks and Hispanics may be less likely to marry or cohabit because they face shortages of potential spouses,” he said. “If they had been married or living with someone, they would likely have husbands or partners much older than themselves.”

Overall, the results show that “women who bear children out of wedlock

do not fare well in the marriage market,” Lichter said.

As a result, federal and state governments need to consider carefully how they craft marriage promotion programs, Lichter said. President Bush launched the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002 to help promote marriage among low-income Americans. In June, President Bush announced a budget request for 2006 which proposed \$100 million in matching funds for states and tribes to develop innovative healthy marriage programs, and another \$100 million to fund technical assistance and research as well as demonstrations targeted to family formation and healthy marriage.

Such programs may be helpful, but only if they tackle the issue of out-of-wedlock childbearing and address the economic disadvantages of these women and their potential partners, according to Qian.

“Most unwed mothers want to have a satisfying marriage and family, but have significant obstacles to finding a good mate,” he said.

“Government efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and provide employment and education opportunities for low-income men and women may have the indirect and long-term benefit of encouraging better matched and therefore more healthy and stable marriages.”

Source: OSU

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