

People without cars, financial assets less likely to marry: study

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A study published this week in the *American Journal of Sociology* finds that people who lack personal wealth in the form of a car or financial assets are significantly less likely to enter into a first marriage. The results, according to study author Daniel Schneider of Princeton University, shed light on recent changes in marriage patterns in the U.S.

For the past few decades, Americans have been getting married later in life and are becoming more likely forego [marriage](#) altogether. Between 1970 and 2000, the [median age](#) of first marriage in the U.S. rose by about four years, and the percentage of people who decide not to marry at all increased from 5 percent to 10 percent.

"What is perhaps most striking is the increasing [stratification](#) in marriage by race and education," Schneider said. "From 1980 to 2000, the percentage of [white women](#) who had been married by ages 25 to 29 had dropped by 13 percentage points to 68 percent, but the drop was far larger for blacks, dropping 25 points, to just 38 percent." A similar gap has opened for people of different education levels. People with less education have become increasingly less likely to get married.

"These gaps matter because a large body of social science literature suggests that marriage has [beneficial effects](#) on adults and children," Schneider said. "If those who are already disadvantaged are now marrying less and so missing out on these beneficial properties of marriage, that could cement cycles of disadvantage and intergenerational inequality."

What is behind these growing gaps has not been fully explained. Several studies have found that having a steady job and a good income are important factors in determining whether someone gets married. Because blacks and those with less education face disadvantages in the labor market, they might tend to hold off marriage longer, thereby increasing gaps in marriage rates. But income only explains a part of these gaps, Schneider says.

He wanted to see if accumulated wealth—whether or not someone owns a car, has money in a savings account, or owns financial assets like stocks and bonds—might be playing a role along with income. If wealth matters marriage decisions, then existing inequalities in wealth between blacks and whites could be driving the gaps in marriage rates.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979), Schneider tested whether owning such assets increased the probability that a person entered a first marriage in a given year. After controlling for confounding factors such as income, employment, and family background, the analysis showed that owning a car increases the probability that a man will get married in a given year by 2.6 percentage points. Owning a financial asset increases the probability by 1.5 percentage points. Wealth also increases the likelihood that a woman would marry, though to a lesser degree than for men.

The results show that the wealth gap between blacks and whites in the U.S. is contributing to the growing marriage gap even more so than differences in income. According to Schneider's analysis, about 30 percent of the racial marriage gap can be explained by wealth, while income, employment, and public benefits receipt explains about 20 percent. The wealth effect also explains more than half of the gap in marriage rates between those with people who did not finish high school and those with college degrees.

"In all, I find evidence to support the argument that wealth is an important prerequisite of marriage, especially for men," Schneider writes. "What people own, not just what they earn or know, shapes entrance into marriage and so may perpetuate disadvantage across generations."

The findings make a strong argument in favor of social programs designed to help people build their assets, Schneider argues. "Contrary to concerns that such programs are unlikely to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the poor because these individuals are unlikely to accumulate significant savings, I argue that even small amounts of [wealth](#) may help disadvantaged men and women meet the economic standard of marriage."

More information: Daniel Schneider, "Wealth and the Marital Divide." *American Journal of Sociology* 117:2. (study published October 4, 2011).

Provided by University of Chicago

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