

Why do low-income couples marry less and divorce more?

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People with lower incomes value the institution of marriage just as much as those with higher incomes and have similar romantic standards for marriage, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. The new research suggests that government initiatives to strengthen marriage among low-income populations should move beyond promoting the value of marriage and instead focus on the actual problems that low-income couples face.

The study, which analysed results from a survey of 6,012 people, was carried out by Dr Thomas Trail and Dr Benjamin Karney from the University of California Los Angeles. Although previous research has shown that divorce rates are higher and [marriage](#) rates are lower among low-income populations in the US, the researchers found that on most measures low-income [respondents](#) held more traditional views towards marriage than respondents on higher incomes.

Although low-income and high-income respondents reported similar romantic standards and similar problems with relationship processes such as communication, low-income respondents were more likely than affluent couples to report that their [romantic relationships](#) were negatively affected by economic and social issues such as [money problems](#), drinking and drug use.

"Over the past 15 years, efforts to tackle declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates among low-income couples in the USA have been guided by assumptions about why there are fewer low-income

marriages and why a higher percentage fail" said Dr Trail. "The aim of our study was to separate the myth from the reality."

Previous research has focused on specific low-income groups including unmarried mothers and cohabiting couples with children. This is the first study to use a comprehensive survey to compare the attitudes and experiences of people from a range of incomes, and the findings provide important new information about how similar people with low- and high-incomes are in their values, standards, and experiences of marriage.

The researchers solicited the views of a stratified random sample of 4,508 Florida residents, with smaller random samples from California (500), Texas (502) and New York (502).

66% of the respondents were female, 53% were married and 61% were white. A further 14% were Black and 19% were from non-White or Black Latino/Hispanic communities. Interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted an average of 27 minutes.

The average age of the respondents was just under 46 years. Self-reported income put 29% in the low-income category, 26% in the moderate-income category and 35% in the high-income category. Just under 10% were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

The team found that, compared to people with higher incomes, those with lower incomes held similar values toward marriage and were less likely to approve of divorce.

However, lower income respondents were more likely than were higher [income](#) respondents to value the economic aspects of marriage, including the husband and wife having good jobs.

"Prompted by the belief that the institution of marriage is in crisis among the poor, the federal government has spent \$1 billion on initiatives to strengthen marriage among low-[income populations](#)," said Dr Benjamin Karney. "Often these are based on the assumption that there must be something wrong with how people on low incomes view marriage or that they just are not very good at managing intimate relationships."

"We found that people with low incomes value marriage as an institution, have similar standards for choosing a marriage partner and experience similar problems with managing their relationships," concluded Trail. "We suggest that initiatives to strengthen marriage among the poor should also take social issues into account, as they can place a tremendous amount of stress on a marriage."

More information: Trail. T, Karney. B, "What's (Not) Wrong With Low-Income Marriages", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, June, [DOI 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00977.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00977.x)

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