

Poor people value marriage as much as the middle class and rich, study shows

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Poor people hold more traditional values toward marriage and divorce than people with moderate and higher incomes, UCLA psychologists report in the current issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family.

The findings are based on a large survey about marriage, relationships and values, analyzed across [income](#) groups. They raise questions about how effectively some \$1 billion in [government spending](#) to promote the value of marriage among the poor is being spent.

"A lot of [government policy](#) is based on the [assumption](#) that low-income [people](#) hold less traditional views about marriage," said Benjamin Karney, a UCLA professor of [psychology](#) and senior author of the study. "However, the different income groups do not hold dramatically different views about marriage and divorce — and when the views are different, they are different in the opposite direction from what is commonly assumed. People of low income hold values that are at least as traditional toward marriage and divorce, if not more so."

Karney, who is co-director of the Relationship Institute at UCLA, added: "The United States is spending money teaching people about the value of marriage and family, and we are saying, congratulations, the battle has been won."

The study consisted of 6,012 people, 29.4 percent of low income, 26 percent of moderate income and 34.7 percent of high income. In the sample, 4,508 people lived in Florida, 500 in California, 502 in New

York and 502 in Texas. The results from the four states were very comparable. The research was based on phone surveys that lasted an average of 27 minutes each. The participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements.

Lower income people held slightly more traditional values on the following statements than people with higher income:

- "Divorce can be a reasonable solution to an unhappy marriage."
- "When there are children in the family, parents should stay married even if they no longer love each other."
- "It's better for a family if the man earns a living and the woman takes care of the family."
- "A husband and wife should be of the same race or ethnic group."

The values among all groups were equally traditional on the following statements:

- "A happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life."
- "Children do better when their parents are married."
- "People who have children together should be married."

Low-income people hold much more traditional attitudes about divorce and are less likely to see divorce as a reasonable solution to an unhappy marriage, Karney said. One area where low-income groups are less traditional, he said, is on the acceptability of single parenting.

These findings raise an obvious question: If poor people hold traditional values about marriage and divorce, why are their marriage rates lower

and their out-of-wedlock births much higher than those of higher incomes? The answer, Karney said, is that values often do not predict behavior, and they don't in these areas. He noted that most people do not consider lying to be a good value, yet large numbers of people lie nevertheless.

"Why are low-income women postponing marriage but having babies?" Karney asked. "Because they don't want to get divorced. They think if they marry their current partner, they are likely to get divorced — and couples that have financial strain are much more likely to have marital difficulties. It's like these women have been reading the scientific journals about marriage; their intuition is absolutely correct.

He said many of these low-income women have no models for a successful marriage, and the marriages they see are in trouble. Also, they do not trust their financial and family future with the men they know. "However, they know they can raise a child," he said. "They may have been raised by a single mother, and people all around them were raised by single mothers. They see single-parent families that succeed, and they see the role of mother is valued."

Karney said that an affluent 18-year-old girl does not want to get pregnant because that would interfere with her plans for college, her career and a future husband. A poor 18-year-old looks at what awaits her; she doesn't see herself becoming a lawyer or even a college graduate. "But if she becomes a mother, she gets respect, purpose and someone to love her — and she doesn't need to be married to do that," he said. "She knows she can be a mom; she doesn't know if she can be married forever."

Why are low-income women willing to have babies before they are willing to get married?

"It's not because they don't care about marriage," Karney said. "They care about marriage so much that they are unwilling to do it the wrong way. In their communities, motherhood and marriage are two separate things. Girls who think they have somewhere to go in life don't get pregnant; girls who think they have nowhere to go are less careful about contraception."

Thomas Trail, UCLA postdoctoral fellow in psychology and lead author of the study said that lower income partners are no more likely to struggle with relationship issues than are higher income partners. "They have no more problems with communication, sex, parental roles or division of household chores than do higher income couples," he said.

Do low-income people have unrealistically high standards toward marriage? Karney and Trail found no evidence of that.

"They're more realistic," Karney said.

Sustaining a marriage or long-term relationship depends on how well you are able to manage the daily tasks of life, he noted.

"For some people, those tasks are more challenging because of what they have to contend with," Karney said. "A marriage is part and parcel with the rest of your life. Your values turn out to be a pretty small factor in the success of a marriage. Even if you love marriage and are deeply committed to the institution of marriage, practical issues that are making your life difficult matter more.

"Low-income couples are practical and realistic in their views on marriage. We should listen to what they are telling us, rather than imposing 'solutions' that do not match what they really need."

The best way to lower teen pregnancy rates, he said, is to increase social

mobility. Government money would be better spent helping low-income people with the day-to-day challenges in their lives, he said.

"There is a lot you can do with a billion dollars to promote marriage, including helping people with child care and transportation; that is not where the money has been spent," Karney said. "Almost all of that money has been spent on educational curricula, which is a narrow approach, based on false assumptions. Communication and emotional connection are the same among low-income people as in more affluent group. Their unique needs are not about relationship education. None of the data support the current policy of teaching relationships values and skills. Low-income people have concrete, practical problems making ends meet."

The study, titled "What's (Not) Wrong With Low-Income Marriages," is based on data collected in 2003, after the federal government (under President George W. Bush) began a "healthy [marriage](#) initiative" that still exists. The data predate the recession, but Karney suspects the findings would apply to an even larger extent today than when he collected the data.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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