

Is shotgun marriage dead?

November 1 2016



Credit: Jeff Belmonte / Wikipedia

Shotgun marriages have faded in popularity overall, but are on the rise among some groups, says new research from Duke University. And not all shotgun marriages are as rocky as one might think.

In the 1930s, half of all unmarried pregnant women in the United States married before giving birth, according to U.S. Census data. As

premarital sex and out-of-wedlock childbearing became more common, rates of shotgun marriage dropped sharply. By the second half of the 2000s, only 6 percent of unmarried pregnant woman married before giving birth, according to government figures.

But against the backdrop of an overall decline, shotgun marriages have actually risen among certain groups of women, including young mothers and those with less education, according to the new research published online Nov. 1 in *Demography*.

"Some people still want to get married before the baby is born," said Christina Gibson-Davis, who authored the study with Elizabeth O. Ananat and Anna Gassman-Pines. "With apologies to Mark Twain, the death of shotgun marriage has been greatly exaggerated."

The Duke researchers looked at North Carolina birth, marriage and divorce data for 800,000 first births among white and black mothers. (The data available on Hispanic births was inadequate for inclusion.) The state's fertility, marriage and divorce levels mirror those of the U.S. as a whole.

"Not many people have a shotgun marriage, but it's more common among groups who otherwise have low marriage rates—African-Americans, those with less education and those under 25," said Gibson-Davis, a faculty fellow of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy and an associate professor of public policy, sociology and psychology and neuroscience at Duke. "This matters because having married parents may be good for the children involved."

Among children born to married parents between 1992 and 2012, shotgun marriages increased by:

- 20 percent for all black mothers;

- 17 percent for white mothers under 25;
- 60 percent for black mothers under 25;
- 41 percent for white women with a [high school diploma](#) or less;
- and 61 percent for black women with a high school diploma or less.

Some might surmise shotgun marriages are more likely than other marriages to end in divorce. The researchers found that to be true for white, but not black, couples. After a decade, 30 percent of white couples who had a shotgun marriage were divorced, compared to 19 percent of white couples who married prior to a child's conception.

Among African-Americans, though, divorce rates for shotgun marriages and other marriages were nearly the same—23 percent and 20 percent, respectively. Notably, for black women with a high school education or less, shotgun marriages were significantly less likely to end in divorce after 10 years than were other marriages.

Overall, an abundance of research suggests children do better when they live with married parents who don't divorce, Gassman-Pines said.

"Policymakers often worry about kids in marriages that break up and about low marriage rates among [black women](#)," said Gassman-Pines, a faculty fellow of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy and an associate professor of public policy and psychology and neuroscience at Duke. "Our findings suggest that, for black couples, shotgun marriages are just as stable as marriages that started before a pregnancy."

The Duke researchers will continue to look at how marriage affects children in upcoming studies, including whether being born to [married parents](#) improves academic achievement and school behavior.

More information: "Midpregnancy Marriage and Divorce: Why the

Death of Shotgun Marriage Has Been Greatly Exaggerated," Christina M. Gibson-Davis, Elizabeth O. Ananat and Anna Gassman-Pines. *Demography*, November 2016. [DOI: 10.1007/s13524-016-0510-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-016-0510-x)

Provided by Duke University

Citation: Is shotgun marriage dead? (2016, November 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-shotgun-marriage-dead.html>

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