



Save up to marry? Or marry to save up?

PETER JON MITCHELL

Senior Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



Money might not be the first thing to come to mind when considering getting married – thankfully. Yet, economics can help explain why some folks tie the knot while other couples do not.

At first glance, the cost of a wedding alone might cause couples to reconsider. The estimated average cost of a wedding in 2013 was \$23,458.¹ At even half that amount, the cost might delay or deter getting married. While couples bemoan the price tag (for good reason), larger economic forces are also at play.

There is no doubt that financial insecurity is holding some people back from entering marriage.

Economic barriers to getting married

American-based sociologists Pamela Smock, Wending Manning and Meredith Porter interviewed working and lower middle class cohabiting couples. They asked them about transitioning to marriage.

One-third of their respondents indicated that ‘the money needed to be in place’ before getting married. And yes, one-fifth of respondents wanted to have enough money for a ‘real’ wedding before tying the knot.² Respondents also said that better employment prospects were a prerequisite for marriage, particularly when it came to employment for male partners. Some individuals suggested that a combination of goals like completing

¹ Wedding trends in Canada 2013 (2013) Weddingbells. Retrieved from <http://www.weddingbells.ca/planning/wedding-trends-in-canada-2013/attachment/wedding-trends-budget/>

² Smock, Manning & Porter, *Everything*, pp. 687-691.

education and steady work were needed before considering marriage. In total, 72 percent of the sample identified at least one economic factor as a prerequisite for getting married.³

The sociologists conclude that many believed they needed to be economically stable before getting married. Marriage, for them, was a symbol of finally achieving this stability.⁴

These findings reflect those of Johns Hopkins University sociologist Andrew Cherlin, a professor of public policy. He argues that marriage has become as a capstone. Young adults are marrying after achieving educational goals, establishing a career and reaching financial stability rather than building a life around marriage.⁵ The capstone understanding of marriage puts matrimony out of reach for some working and lower middle class individuals who view improved fiscal status as the admission requirement.

The fault line through the middle class

The decline of marriage among the lowest income earners has been observed in the US for some time. More recently, a number of US academics have indicated that marriage and educational attainment are now splitting the middle class.⁶ Researchers have concluded that it's the economically advantaged – those with post-secondary education and promising income potential – that are more likely to get married. **At the same time, they find that marriage provides economic advantages. Data suggests "married couples seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples."**⁷

Why it matters

Why might it matter if marriage fades among working and middle class Americans?

Even though marriages are not guaranteed to last, healthy marriage relationships do promote human flourishing. Marriage successfully integrates emotional intimacy, parental responsibility and economic cooperation into committed, permanent union.⁸

Working and lower middle class couples who don't marry but choose to live together risk higher odds of union dissolution. Common-law relationships are statistically more vulnerable

³ Smock, P.J., Manning, W.D., & Porter, M. (2005) "Everything's there except money": how money shapes decisions to marry among cohabitators. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 67, p. 687.

⁴ Smock, Manning & Porter, *Everything*, p. 687.

⁵ Cherlin, A. J. (2009) *The Marriage-Go-Round*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

⁶ See Hymowitz, K. (2006). *Marriage and caste in America*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee

Murray, C. (2012). *Coming apart. The state of white America, 1960 – 2010*. New York: Crown Forum.

Wilcox, W. B. ed. (2010). When marriage disappears: The new middle America. *The State of Our Unions, 2010*. Charlottesville: National Marriage Project, University of Virginia.

⁷ Why marriage matters: Twenty-six conclusions from the social sciences. Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values. Retrieved from <http://www.familyscholars.org/assets/Why-Marriage-Matters-summary.pdf>

⁸ Wilcox, W. B. ed. (2010) When marriage disappears: the new Middle America. *The State of Our Unions, 2010*. Charlottesville: National Marriage Project, University of Virginia, p. 38. Retrieved from http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Union_11_12_10.pdf

to dissolution. So are marriages that begin as cohabiting relationships.⁹ These breakups often have economic repercussions, particularly when children are involved.

Sociologist Brad Wilcox recently noted from his analysis of the Add Health data set in the US that teens from intact married families had higher odds of achieving educational success and fiscal wellbeing. He notes that this effect is particularly true for teens from less privileged families.¹⁰ **It's not just economically advantaged married couples who pass on socioeconomic benefits to their children. It is also true that many less advantaged couples still get married despite the economic obstacles. These couples also pass on socioeconomic benefits to their children.**

Quiet in Canada

Obviously, marital status and family structure are not the lone factors in economic prosperity. Nor is marriage a panacea for economic instability. Yet, American data reveals that marriage and educational attainment are creating a fault line through the American middle class.

In the popular mind, entrance into marriage requires financial stability. At the same time, it appears that marriage plays a role in achieving and passing on socioeconomic advantages.

The once academic debate about marriage and class has trickled down to popular American publications like the *Atlantic*.¹¹ In Canada where income inequality is less severe, though no less discussed, there has been little debate about marriage and economic outcomes.

Are Canadians missing a key component in the debate about economic inequality and social mobility? Canadians need to consider our own marriage narrative and what it means for individual and societal economic wellbeing.

Peter Jon Mitchell is a senior researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. He is the co-author of The Marriage Gap Between Rich and Poor Canadians, to be released February 25, 2014.

Permission granted to reprint in full with attribution to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

⁹ Le Bourdais, C., Neill, G. and Turcotte P. with Vachon, N. and Archambault, J. (2000). The Changing Face of Conjugal Relationships. *Canadian Social Trends* No. 56, p. 17.

Weston, R., Qu, L. and de Vaus, D. (2003). *Premarital cohabitation and marital stability*. Melbourne: Australia Institute of Family Studies, p. 6.

Bohnert, N. (2011). Examining the determinants of union dissolution among married and common-law unions in Canada. *Canadian Studies in Population* 38, no. 3-4.

¹⁰ Wilcox, B. (2013, October 29). Marriage makes our children richer. Here's why. *The Atlantic Monthly*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/10/marriage-makes-our-children-richer-heres-why/280930/>

¹¹ For example, see the debate between *Atlantic* editors Jordan Weissmann and Derek Thompson here <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/10/sorry-marriage-is-a-luxury-good/281016/>