

The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans

A Comprehensive Literature Review

Executive Summary

IN RECENT DECADES the proportion of African Americans who live in married-couple families has declined sharply. Some argue that this decline has serious negative consequences for the well-being of African Americans. Others argue that marital trends in Black America primarily derive from other, more important trends — such as economic trends and patterns of racism — and therefore are not, in and of themselves, especially alarming or important.

While these debates continue — sometimes heatedly, often controversially, and in most cases passionately — scholars still lack a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of marriage for African Americans specifically. To our knowledge, no systematic scholarly review of the issue has been carried out.

The purpose of this report is to begin to close this knowledge gap. We address four main questions.

Four Major Questions

1. What are the economic, psychosocial, and health-related consequences of marriage for African American men, women, and children?
2. Do the consequences of marriage differ for Blacks and Whites?
3. If racial differences exist, what explains these differences?
4. What are the policy implications of these findings?

To answer these questions, we conducted a comprehensive review of scholarly articles, reports, and books focusing in part on the consequences of marriage for African Americans published from 1990 through 2004. We also conducted new research specifically for this report, using survey data collected from 1973 through 2002 by the American General Social Surveys, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Based on this review of the academic literature and our new research, we present the following ten major findings.

Ten Major Findings

1. ***Marriage clearly appears to promote the economic, social, familial, and psychological well-being of African American men and women.*** Even when studies control for a wide range of variables, they consistently find that married Black adults, compared to those who are unmarried, have more income, are less likely to face poverty, and are more likely to be happy. Marriage also appears to promote better family functioning for African Americans. At the same time, the evidence generally suggests that Black adults derive little benefit from marriage in terms of physical health.
2. ***While both Black men and Black women receive a marriage premium, this premium in most cases appears to be larger for men.*** Put a bit differently, Black women overall seem to receive less benefit from marriage than do Black men. This gender gap is especially pronounced in the areas of family life and physical health. In fact, married Black women actually report *poorer* health than do unmarried Black women. The one exception to this pattern is in the economic domain, where Black men and women appear to benefit comparably from marriage.
3. ***Economically, marriage appears to benefit Blacks more than Whites.*** In part because marriage often means an additional wage earner for the family, and in part because marriage typically increases the income and the economic productivity of individuals, married-couple Black families have far more income, and are far less likely to live in poverty, than other Black families. This economic premium stemming from marriage is comparably larger for Blacks than for Whites. In general, marriage appears to contribute greatly to the economic well-being of African American families.
4. ***Overall, Black women appear to benefit from marriage substantially less than do White women.*** By contrast, the differences in the benefit from marriage between Black men and White men appear in most cases to be minimal.
5. ***Black-White differences in marital quality seem to constitute an important reason why Black adults, and particularly Black women, typically benefit less from marriage than do Whites.*** On average, the marriages of Whites appear to be marked by more happiness and less conflict than those of African Americans. The lower average quality of African American marriages, in turn, seems to reduce the benefits to adults that those marriages might otherwise yield. In our analysis of data from the General Social Surveys, we find that controlling for marital quality significantly reduces the Black-White gap in the estimated benefits of marriage.

6. ***Parental marriage produces important benefits for African American children.*** Black children of married parents typically receive better parenting, are less delinquent, have fewer behavioral problems, have higher self-esteem, are more likely to delay sexual activity, and have moderately better educational outcomes. Because many of the relevant studies on child outcomes employ comprehensive controls, there is strong reason to believe that these findings reflect more than mere correlations. *Marriage itself* appears to be generating strong positive results for African American children. At the same time, marriage may have little or no impact on school dropout and drug use among Black adolescents.
7. ***Parental marriage appears to be especially important for the well-being of young African American males.*** In areas including parental support, delinquency, self-esteem, and school performance, having one's father in the home, and particularly one's *married* father, appears to be a crucial determinant of better outcomes for young Black males. When viewed alongside our other finding regarding the larger marriage premium for Black men, as compared to Black women, this finding suggests that marriage is particularly important for African American males at all stages of the life cycle.
8. ***In some areas, Black children seem to benefit more from parental marriage than do White children, whereas in other areas, the reverse is true.*** Regarding both levels of parental support and the risks of delinquency, African American children seem to benefit more from parental marriage than do White children. Yet regarding educational performance, early sexual activity, substance use, and possibly high school completion, White children appear to derive greater benefits from parental marriage than do their African American peers.
9. ***The reasons for some apparent racial differences in the consequences of marriage for children are not clear, and further research in this area is needed.*** One possibility is that studies need more carefully to distinguish the effects of parental non-marriage on Black sons as compared to Black daughters, since the impact on boys appears to be greater than the impact on girls. Another, related possibility is that the institutional contexts and cultural norms affecting African American children are in some respects distinctive, thus making it harder for researchers to tease out the specific effects of marriage and non-marriage when it comes to Black-White differences in child outcomes.
10. ***For policy makers who care about Black America, marriage matters.*** Public and private sector policies aimed at increasing marriage rates among African Americans, and particularly policies aimed at increasing the number and proportion of high quality Black marriages, are important strategies for improving the well-being of African Americans and for strengthening civil society.

About this Report

This report comes from a team of five family scholars: Lorraine Blackman of the Indiana University School of Social Work and the African American Family Life Education Institute; Obie Clayton of the Department of Sociology of Morehouse College; Norval Glenn of the Department of Sociology of the University of Texas at Austin; Linda Malone-Colon of the Department of Psychology of Hampton University and the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center; and Alex Roberts of the Institute for American Values.

As an independent piece of research, this report reflects the views of its authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of its sponsoring organizations.

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