



Written by [James Heiser](#) on November 20, 2010

Pew Poll Documents Erosion of Meaning of Marriage

A new data point has been entered in the catalog of leading indicators of the narcissism devouring Western civilization: A new study by the Pew Research Center indicates that 39 percent of Americans believe that marriage is becoming obsolete.

As noted in the “Executive Summary” of the study:



The transformative trends of the past 50 years that have led to a sharp decline in marriage and a rise of new family forms have been shaped by attitudes and behaviors that differ by class, age and race, according to a new Pew Research Center nationwide survey, done in association with TIME, complemented by an analysis of demographic and economic data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

A new “marriage gap” in the United States is increasingly aligned with a growing income gap. Marriage, while declining among all groups, remains the norm for adults with a college education and good income but is now markedly less prevalent among those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. The survey finds that those in this less-advantaged group are as likely as others to want to marry, but they place a higher premium on economic security as a condition for marriage. This is a bar that many may not meet.

On the face of it, such an assertion—that economic security and marriage could be competing values—ought to be unthinkable in a culture worthy of the name. The marital union stands as the fundamental social unit as the bedrock of human civilization, and marriage is the normal context of the next most important level of community: the bond between parents and children. The bonds of husband and wife, father and mother and children, are the fundamental context of human existence, from which economic security is often a secondary benefit. When economics are placed in competition with marriage, the economic situation has gone dangerously awry.

A recent Associated Press article ([“Blacks struggle with 72 percent unwed mothers rate”](#)) delved into the woe caused to one segment of American society by the decline of marriage. The problem, as set forth by the AP, is summarized quite succinctly by Dr. Natalie Carroll, an OB-GYN serving in the Houston area:

Seventy-two percent of black babies are born to unmarried mothers today, according to government statistics. This number is inseparable from the work of Carroll, an obstetrician who has dedicated her 40-year career to helping black women.

“The girls don’t think they have to get married. I tell them children deserve a mama and a daddy.



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They really do,” Carroll says from behind the desk of her office, which has cushioned pink-and-green armchairs, bars on the windows, and a wooden “LOVE” carving between two African figurines. Diamonds circle Carroll’s ring finger.

As the issue of black unwed parenthood inches into public discourse, Carroll is among the few speaking boldly about it. And as a black woman who has brought thousands of babies into the world, who has sacrificed income to serve Houston’s poor, Carroll is among the few whom black women will actually listen to.

“A mama can’t give it all. And neither can a daddy, not by themselves,” Carroll says. “Part of the reason is because you can only give that which you have. A mother cannot give all that a man can give. A truly involved father figure offers more fullness to a child’s life.”

Statistics show just what that fullness means. Children of unmarried mothers of any race are more likely to perform poorly in school, go to prison, use drugs, be poor as adults, and have their own children out of wedlock.

In short, despite the best efforts of an single parent, the statistics measuring the outcome of the marriage crisis is a tale of lives which have been scarred. Anecdotal exceptions to this general outcome simply prove the rule. Regardless of whether or not people “feel” that other familial arrangements ought to be as nurturing as children being raised by a father and mother, the facts simply do not support such flights of fancy.

According to a report by CBSNews covering the Pew study, the Census Bureau will soon revise the way in which it measures families — a move which will, incidentally, dramatically reduce the number of families living in poverty. (Thus we may await word from the Obama administration about the way in which it has reduced the number of families living in poverty, without actually helping anyone.) [In the words of the CBS story](#):

Beginning next year, the Census Bureau will publish new, supplemental poverty figures that move away from the traditional concept of family as a husband and wife with two children. It will broaden the definition to include unmarried couples, such as same-sex partners, as well as foster children who are not related by blood or adoption.

Officials say such a move will reduce the number of families and children who are considered poor based on the new supplemental measure, which will be used as a guide for federal and state agencies to set anti-poverty policies. That’s because two unmarried partners who live together with children and work are currently not counted by census as a single “family” with higher pooled incomes, but are officially defined as two separate units — one being a single parent and child, the other a single person — who aren’t sharing household resources.

Much of the anger that immediately surfaces whenever someone argues for the historic, virtually universal, understanding of marriage is that such a defense is seen as an inherent assault on the “values” of those who have abandoned the norm. Thus another element of the erosion of marriage is found in the moral decline that has accelerated in the past few generations. Again, as noted in the study’s summary:

The survey also finds striking differences by generation. In 1960, two-thirds (68%) of all twenty-somethings were married. In 2008, just 26% were. How many of today’s youth will eventually marry is an open question. For now, the survey finds that the young are much more inclined than their elders to view cohabitation without marriage and other new family forms — such as same



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sex marriage and interracial marriage — in a positive light.

Favorable opinions of the *contradictio in terminis* of “same sex marriage” is a measure of the extent to which polling public opinion and searching for truth often stand in marked contradiction. In this case, it calls to mind the witticism [attributed to Abraham Lincoln](#) that calling a calf’s tail a leg did not make it so. American public opinion may be inclined to label any haphazard agglomeration of adults and/or children as a “family,” but that does not make it so. Rewriting the dictionary will not rewrite human nature, and until there is a restoration of the norm, the variation of public opinion from reality will simply serve as a barometer of human misery.



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