

Shortage of “Marriageable” Men in U.S. Found Only Among Blacks, the Highly-Educated, Brookings’ Sawhill Finds

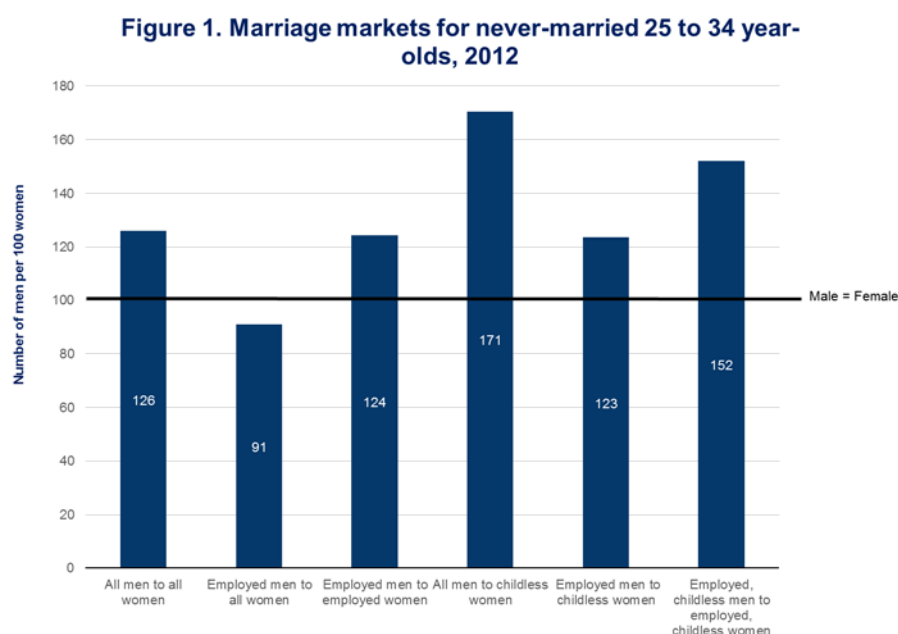
Traditional definition of “marriageable” does not reflect modern realities; Shortages by race and education level likely related to high rates of incarceration and early death among black men, and to a growing education gap by gender

Although many have pointed to a shortage of “marriageable” men as the reason for the dramatic decline in marriage rates in the U.S., under new definitions of “marriageable” for both men and women, that shortage is concentrated in the black population and among the best educated, according to a new policy brief by Brookings Senior Fellow Isabel Sawhill and former Senior Research Assistant Joanna Venator.

In “[Is There a Shortage of Marriageable Men?](#)” Sawhill and Venator argue that the ratio of marriageable men to women depends critically on how one defines “marriageable.”

Traditionally, the definition of “marriageability” was the ratio of employed men to all women of the same age. Using this definition, the authors find a shortage of eligible men available for women to marry (91 men per 100 women). However, the assumption built into the traditional definition—that all women are equally marriageable, regardless of employment status or other characteristics—does not reflect modern realities about the role that women’s earnings play in family finances. It also does not account for the growing proportion of young women of marriageable age who already have children from a prior relationship, which makes men “understandably reluctant” to want to marry them and take responsibility for someone else’s child.

When Sawhill and Venator examined gender ratios that consider the employment of both men and women, as well as whether there are children from previous relationships, as indicators of marriageability, they found no shortage of marriageable men in any of their estimates.



But even these more realistic ratios presented in the aggregate do not tell the whole story, the researchers write. “Assortative mating”—marrying someone from a similar educational or socio-economic background—is the norm in the U.S. As such, the authors further examine marriageability ratios within education groups and racial groups.

Source: Author’s tabulations of 2012 American Community Survey IPUMS data.

Breaking down marriage markets by education tells a somewhat surprising story: it is the group of women who have the highest marriage rates—college-educated women—who are facing the greatest “shortage” of men. Women are now more educated than men overall, and the authors argue this will likely lead to more women marrying “down” educationally, or not marrying at all. They also find that while male earnings have affected marriage rates over the past 4 decades, the magnitude of this effect is not huge and may diminish over time as women’s education and earnings increase and gender roles evolve toward a more egalitarian state.

Sawhill and Venator also find that concerns about a shortage of marriageable men among black Americans are likely due to high rates of incarceration and early death among black men.

Sawhill and Venator suggest policy interventions to help bolster the institution of marriage: improving economic opportunities, particularly for less-educated men, and reducing the number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies. However, they also note that the question of whether marriage can be restored is the wrong one to ask. “What matters for children is the stability of relationships, the maturity of their parents, and their desire to take on one of the most important tasks any adult ever undertakes. Historically, marriage has been the institution which promoted these goals. For some, it will continue to do so. But it is only a proxy for what matters more: the quality of parenting, the stability of a child’s environment, and the circumstances of her birth,” they conclude.

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