The Class Divide in Marriage

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A project of the Joint Economic Committee – Republicans | Chairman, Sen. Mike Lee

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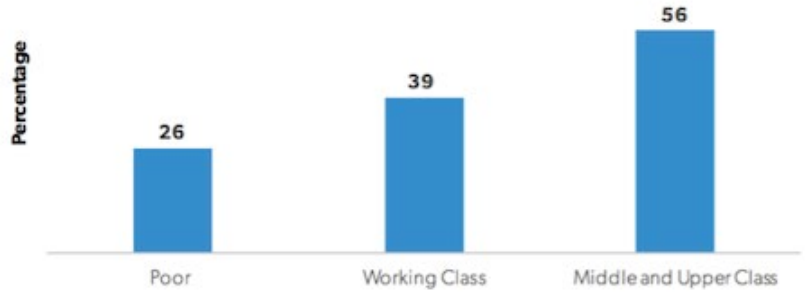
The American Enterprise Institute recently published a new report by Brad Wilcox and Wendy Wang that highlights the class divide in American marriage. As the authors explain, prior to the 1970s family life looked similar across socioeconomic levels, but today there are stark divides across class when it comes to marriage, divorce, and unwed childbearing.

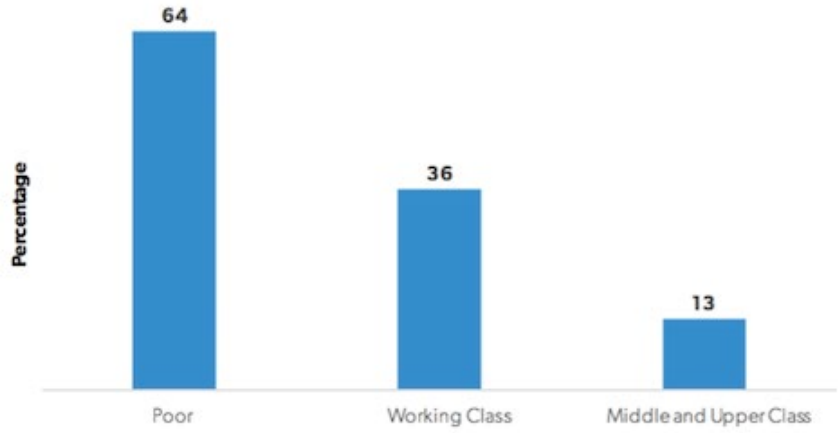
The authors show that poor and working-class Americans are much less likely than their middle- and upper-income peers to marry or remain married. They are also far more likely to have children outside of marriage, such that unwed childbearing has become the norm among the poor and increasingly common among the working class. Middle- and upper-income Americans, on the other hand, nearly always wait until marriage to have children. (The authors define 'poor' as those with less than a high school education or those with a family income below the 20th percentile; 'working class' refers to those with only a high school education or some college, or with income between the 20th and 50th percentiles; and 'middle and upper class' are those with a college degree or an income above the 50th percentile.)

Figure 1. Share of Adults Age 18–55 Who Are Currently Married, by Class



Source: American Community Survey, 2015, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/.

Figure 4. Share of Children Born out of Wedlock, by Mother's Class



Note: Based on children less than 1 year old living with at least one parent. Parents are age 18–55. In 97 percent of these households, a mother is present. In households where the mother is not present, the father's class is used for the tabulation.
Source: American Community Survey, 2015, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/.

The result of the marriage divide is increased disadvantage along several dimensions. Poor and working-class children—and their parents—not only have lower household incomes, but they also fail to benefit from the resources marriage can provide: economies of scale and shared parenting, for example. Children in single-parent households are far more likely to experience poverty and on average are at a greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes. As we show in our recent report on the opioid epidemic, among less educated men, those who are single are much more likely to die of an opioid overdose.

The explanation for the widening economic divide in marriage can't be explained solely by changes in the economy.

One common argument is that the decline of U.S. manufacturing employment in the 1970s resulted in fewer jobs for non-college educated men, which decreased their marriageability and drove down marriage rates for this group, thus increasing family instability. However, as Wilcox and Wang note, economic changes fail to account for other eras of American history that have experienced economic decline—most notably the Great Depression of the 1930s—without experiencing the drastic changes that have taken place in the last 50 or so years.

Furthermore, marriage continued to decline even during economic booms. The authors point to the 1990s as an example, but could also have cited researchers Melissa S. Kearny and Riley Wilson who recently found that areas of the U.S. that experienced rapid employment growth for non-college educated men due to the fracking boom did not see increased marriage rates.

Instead, Wilcox and Wang note that "a series of interlocking economic, policy, civic, and cultural changes since the 1960s in America combined to create a perfect family storm for poor and working-class Americans." They note that cultural factors in particular have affected lower-income Americans to a greater degree for a few reasons. Perhaps most notably, they point out that the breakdown of norms about dating, sex, marriage, and childbearing have made relationship decisions more complicated for everyone. But middle- and upper-class Americans have more cultural and educational resources to help them traverse these complexities—or they may simply feel in greater control over their lives—and thus are better able to make such decisions with a longer time horizon than are their lower-income peers.

Wilcox and Wang also hypothesize that because working-class and poor Americans don't have as large an economic or social stake in marriage, cultural norms are more significant for maintaining their marriages. For example, the authors point to homeownership as a barrier against divorce. But because poor and lower-income Americans are less likely to own a home, the authors note, there are "fewer reasons to avoid divorce."

While it makes sense that having greater assets connected to marriage would provide a barrier to divorce, it also seems plausible that a working class couple would have substantial financial reasons to avoid divorce. Staying married could mean the difference between remaining afloat financially and falling into a

precarious economic situation where each parent now must maintain their own separate household.

Another reason that the authors include for increased family instability among poor and working-class Americans are the marriage penalties of the means-tested welfare system. For example, Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) penalize marriage (among dozens of other means-tested welfare programs that all essentially penalize marriage). This is because when a couple marries, their income is counted together but the household income threshold for benefits remains the same—effectively decreasing the amount of welfare benefits the household is eligible to receive. For example, a single mother of two children with annual earnings of $15,000 would receive about $5,200 in food stamp benefits annually, but if she marries a man who also earns $15,000, they would no longer be eligible for SNAP.

Finally, the authors point to the increased disconnection of poor and working-class Americans to social networks and organizations that have traditionally served to strengthen marriage—in particular, churches. While church attendance has become less common among all Americans, it has particularly declined among the poor and working class. Church attendance is linked with higher marital quality and a lower likelihood of divorce.

Regardless of the marriage divide, the vast majority of unmarried Americans across socioeconomic levels want to get married. However, a large portion of Americans are not getting or staying married. The middle- and upper-class reap the benefits of this vital institution, while the poor and working-class are further disadvantaged for its weakness.

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