

ALABAMA VOICES: Marriage matters

Yanyi K. Djamba

Montgomery Advertiser

August, 2007

Recently I visited a coffee store here in Montgomery and saw a young woman in her upper 20s. She looked at me and eventually found out that I was new in the area and then began asking me few questions.

We spoke for awhile and I told her that I am a demographer and sociologist. "What a great surprise," she promptly replied. She said she is a family therapist and a doctoral student in marriage and family therapy.

Our conversation turned to family and marriage. She was very articulate, intelligent, ambitious and seemed to have a very promising and bright future.

Like many other women of her generation, the young therapist at the coffee store was not married, had no children, and she seemed not visibly unhappy for being unmarried. Nonetheless, she considers marriage as one of the most important social institutions, despite widespread belief that about half of marriages end up in divorce.

When I told her that as a demographer I also study marriage and family, she insisted that I let her know her chance of finding a suitable mate. This is consistent with most Alabama residents who continue to value marital union and some even join it at very young age, whereas others still say "I do" toward the end of their lives.

According to data from Alabama Department of Public Health's Center for Health Statistics, the youngest bride was 15 years, as compared to the youngest groom who entered marital union at age 16, among all people who were married in Alabama in 2005.

During the same year, the records show that the oldest bride was 89 years young, whereas the oldest groom was 96 years young.

Age of marriage is continuously increasing, a fact that is also associated with a slight decline in marriage rates, or the number of people who get married in a given year per 1,000 inhabitants. For example, 12 in 1,000 persons got married in 1997, but only 9 in 1,000 said "I do" in 2005.

So where do you have the best chance of getting married? Right now individuals living in Washington County have the highest chance of getting married because the marriage rate there is highest, at 26 per 1,000, among all counties in Alabama. Those living in Macon County

have the lowest chance of marriage. Montgomery County has a marriage rate of eight per 1,000, which is below the state rate of nine per 1,000.

How are we doing compared to our neighboring states? Alabama's marriage rate is similar to that of Florida, higher than Mississippi and Georgia, and lower than Tennessee.

Of course these statistics are based on raw data that do not exclude those who are not at risk of getting married, such as children and other non-marriageable individuals. Nonetheless, from a demographic point of view, any change in rate of union formation signals important changes in fertility, household income, family structure and overall social well-being.

Hence, during the same period when the number of marriages declined, the state also experienced a slight reduction in number of live births, from about 15 births per 1,000 people in 1995 to about 13 births per 1,000 10 years later.

Are we slowing down? Yes, but we are not alone. Many other states are experiencing similar trends in marriage and childbearing.

Still, the implications of these slight but persistent demographic changes have profound consequences for citizens and the society at large. We will explore some of these differences in future articles, and indicate places mostly affected by current demographic changes and the implications of these transformations on marital stability, fertility, migration, labor force participation, criminal behavior, and voting patterns across the state.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.