

## **Disturbing decline in Alabama marriages**

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Montgomery Advertiser

July 15, 2009

One of the most profound social changes in our nation has been the decline in marriage. Demographers, policy advocates and family scholars have argued that the decline in marriage, which has resulted in the decline in marital fertility, is a sign that marriage, one of the oldest social institutions, is in trouble.

What happened to marriage in Alabama, compared to the nation and our neighboring states?

In the past 60 years, Alabama's marriage rate has fallen and its divorce rate has risen, thus changing the defining characteristics of marriage and family. In 1946, the marriage rate was almost 19 percent per 1,000 population, compared to only 9 percent per 1,000 population in 2007. Such decline raises concerns for family formation, welfare of children, and the financial burden to local and state governments.

Some economists and demographers say that the adoption of new modes of production, long hours of work away from the family unit, duration of schooling, and economic crises contribute to low rates of marriage. These societal changes affect the creation of committed relationships, and the timing and survival of marriage.

For many people, the decision to marry or not to marry is complex and difficult. Nonetheless, most data show that more marriages tend to occur during post-war eras and during periods of economic prosperity. In Alabama, for example, the highest marriage rate (18.8 percent per 1,000 population) was registered shortly after World War II. A similar highest national value (16.4 percent per 1,000 population) was recorded for the United States during the same year (1946).

Marriage rate has also fluctuated during the economic boom and bust periods of the past 60 years, and there are some indications that we may witness more marriage formation and marital stability during the current economic recession period. In other words, some people may be attracted to marriage or remain married as a survival strategy in this time of economic uncertainty.

In the past, Alabama's marriage rates have been higher than the nation's, with the exception of the years 1948-1958 when the national marriage rates posted at consistently higher levels than the state's. Still, we are doing better than many states.

In fact, Alabama's marriage rates in the past two decades have been higher than those of its neighbors, except Tennessee. Among all 50 states, the highest rate of marriage in 2007 was registered in Nevada (49.3 percent per 1,000 population) and the lowest rate came from Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, (4.1 percent per 1,000 population).

A lower marriage rate means more children will be born out of wedlock. In March of this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that about 4 in 10 births in the United States in 2007 were to unmarried mothers. Last year, the Center for Demographic Research at Auburn University at Montgomery released a similar figure for the state of Alabama. Because of the disproportional marriage rates, there are more out-of-wedlock births among African Americans than whites.

If contemporary societies cannot support marriage, is there an alternative? The answer is no. Despite its continuous decline, marriage remains the fundamental social institution for the majority of people.

In the state of Alabama today, more than half (51.5 percent) the population aged 15 and older is married; about 1 in 10 (11.7 percent) is divorced, and only slightly more than one-fourth (26.8 percent) has never married.

Unlike childbearing, which has a biological age limit, at least for women, there is no age limit to marriage for adult persons. In 2006, for example, the oldest groom was 94 years old and the oldest bride was 86 years old. The youngest groom during that same year was 16 years and the youngest bride was 15 years. According to 2007 vital statistics released by the Alabama Department of Public Health, more marriages (12 percent) occurred in June and the fewest (5.8 percent) in January.

As in other states, there are remarkable differences in marriage and divorce among counties. Marion County registered the highest rate of marriage (41.1 per 1,000 population) in the state of Alabama in 2007. The lowest marriage rate (3.8 per 1,000 population) was in DeKalb County. Interestingly, divorce rates are relatively lower in both of these two counties (4.7 per 1,000 in DeKalb and 3.4 per 1,000 in Marion).

These differences in marriage and divorce rates reflect variances in age distribution and sex ratio, as well as socio-economic factors specific to each county. But certainly one's chance, decision or opportunity to marry depends on the availability of potential mates with desirable characteristics, or what demographers refer to as marriageable individuals.

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