

## **Love and Money: Jobless Rate Influences Marriages, Divorces**

Yanyi K. Djamba

*Montgomery Advertiser*

February 16, 2011

The love celebration on Feb. 14 remained in place despite a climate of economic uncertainty. Lovers exchanged flowers, chocolates and other gifts during this annual celebration, which traces its origins to Saint Valentine's imprisonment for having married people at a time when Emperor Claudius II banned marriage in order to recruit young men into the army.

This year's Valentine's Day was expected to be more joyful as the economy shows some signs of recovery. According to the National Retail Federation's 2011 Valentine's Day Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey, the average person was expected to spend \$116.21 on traditional Valentine's Day merchandise this year, an 11 percent increase over last year's \$103.

An analysis of average of the Valentine's Day spending in the last four years shows that people spent more on Valentine's Day gifts when the unemployment rate was lower and less when unemployment was higher. The link between unemployment and Valentine's Day spending is even more remarkable for spouses and significant others. For these types of relationships, the highest Valentine's Day spending was observed in 2007 when the average was \$80. The lowest amount in the last four years was recorded in 2010 when the average was less than \$64 per spouse or significant other.

If the current predictions were correct, this year's Valentine's Day will be the best year since 2009. The total spending on Valentine's Day celebration is expected to reach \$15.7 billion, according to the National Retail Federation.

But what are the implications for couples? Do people marry more during economic recessions than during periods of economic boom? What about divorce? Do we stick together when economic conditions are better, or do we stray?

To answer these questions, we turn to the situation of our state and counties. Let's consider unemployment rate, which is one of the most intuitive economic indicators for individuals. And let's focus on the year of lowest unemployment (2007) and the year of highest unemployment (2009) for the state of Alabama.

In terms of marriage, more marriages were contracted in 2007 (9 per 1,000 people) and fewer in 2009 (8.3 per 1,000). As for divorce, little change was observed between the two years (4.5 per 1,000 in 2007 to 4.4 per 1,000 in 2009).

What about counties? Our analysis shows a negative association between unemployment and marriage. All counties registered some increase in their unemployment rates between 2007 and 2009. However, the impact of the economic downturn on marriage and divorce varied across the state.

Forty-nine counties registered a decline in their marriage rates between 2007 and 2009 and 42 counties had lower divorce rates in 2009 than in 2007. Overall, counties that registered higher increases in unemployment rates between 2007 and 2009 also saw significant declines in marriage and divorce rates.

For example, Autauga, Baldwin, Calhoun, Clarke, Cullman, DeKalb, Elmore, Hale, Houston, Jefferson, Lawrence, Limestone, Monroe, Walker and Winston counties, whose unemployment rates increased by more than 200 percent between 2007 and 2009, registered significant declines in their marriage and divorce rates. Blount, Fayette and Shelby were the only counties whose unemployment rates increased by more than 200 percent to register increases in marriage and divorce rates.

Montgomery and many other counties also registered a sharp decline in marriage and divorce rates as their unemployment rates peaked in 2009. Clearly, unemployment has a negative impact on both marriage and divorce.

As economic conditions improve this year, we expect more marriages, but eventually more union dissolutions as well. For unmarried people, this year's Valentine's Day offered more prospects for marriage, if the current signs of economic recovery persist. At the same time, those who managed to stay in unhappy marriages during times of economic uncertainty may decide to get a divorce and look for better relationships or live alone.

This Valentine's Day was celebrated with more romantic significance than the previous four years. Having cut back on spending in the last years, lovers were ready to spend more on each other. Couples will spend an average of \$68.98 this year, compared to \$63.34 last year, and men will spend more (about \$158.71) than women (\$75.79).

*Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Website is [www.demographics.aum.edu](http://www.demographics.aum.edu).*