

Economy influences marriage rates

Yanyi K. Djamba

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At this year's annual conference of the Population Association of America held in San Francisco, many papers were presented on the impact of economic recession on American family life. The results are preliminary, but raise important questions. Does economic recession lead to lower marriage rates? What impact does it have on divorce rates? Are all ethnic groups affected in the same way?

On July 15, 2009, we reported the disturbing decline in Alabama marriages from an all-time highest rate of 18.8 per 1,000 population in 1946 to 9 per 1,000 population in 2007. According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, the state's marriage fell further to 8.2 in 2010, the year for which most recent vital statistics are available. The same year, the state's average annual unemployment rate was nearly 10 percent.

How much of this decline is due to economic recession? There is no easy answer to that question, but most studies show that marriage and divorce are linked to economic conditions. That is, both tend to fall when economic conditions are bad and rise when good times return.

The argument is that couples will weigh the cost of a wedding; especially those who make it an opulent affair will postpone marriage ceremonies during the time of economic insecurity. Some people may also add the costs of childbearing and child raising into the marriage equation. As a result, economic uncertainty, especially unemployment, can lead to delayed marriage.

In the same way, those who are already married and thinking of divorce may hold on as they consider the cost of union dissolution during periods of economic recession. This perspective led some social scholars to talk of economic recession as a "savior" of marriages. Apparently, many couples who have been considering divorce before the recession might have changed their minds, or at least delayed the union dissolution for economic reasons.

What is the situation in Alabama? Before answering that question, there are two important facts to bear in mind.

First, demographic changes are slower than economic conditions. For example, changes in marriage and birth rates can unfold over decades, whereas the effects of unemployment are usually felt right away. Second, marriage rates are affected by many factors, besides economic conditions. Things such as the availability of suitable mates can also have a significant impact on whom and when one marries.

Our analysis of the marriage and unemployment data confirms that economic downturn of the recent years is associated with further decline in marriage and divorce in Alabama. How strong are those links? Well, statisticians use something called level of significance to determine whether the association is strong enough to account for the observed impact or not.

In the case of Alabama, our data show that, while unemployment rate is negatively associated with marriage, the relationship is only statistically significant for minority populations. For blacks and other racial minorities, weddings are strongly linked to employment.

In statistical terms, a black or a minority person's chance of getting married is significantly associated with their employment status. In 95 percent of cases, unemployment means no marriage for them. In contrast, our analysis shows that a white person's probability of getting married is not significantly associated with their employment status.

Until we sort out differences in education, earnings and savings, such racial differences in the impact of economic recession on marriage are difficult to tease out. For example, 10 years in a row, between 1947 and 1957, blacks and other minorities had higher marriage rates than whites in Alabama. Perhaps historian demographers can provide adequate explanations of the current shift.

Still, one thing is clear: the economic recession that began in the past few years has been negatively associated with marriage in Alabama. If the economic thesis is correct, then we would expect an upsurge of marriage and divorce rates after recession.

For divorce, the argument is that couples who put off union dissolution for economic reasons may come out of their marriages when they can live apart from their spouses because they feel financially secure. Divorce lawyers and all those who keep divorce records will tell us if this is the case. The same logic is echoed in the case of marriage. Job security, higher earnings and savings, and the prospective of upward social mobility will contribute to high rates of marriage in the post-recession period.

The good news is that, since 1959, the Alabama marriage rates have been higher than the corresponding U.S. rates. Even when the state unemployment reached its highest level of 10.1 percent in 2009, the Alabama marriage rate was still higher than the U.S. rate (8.3 percent vs. 7 percent). However, high marriage rates usually lead to high divorce rates. This explains in part why Alabama's divorce rates are consistently higher than the national rates.

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