

Love and Marriage

Released: February 13, 2013

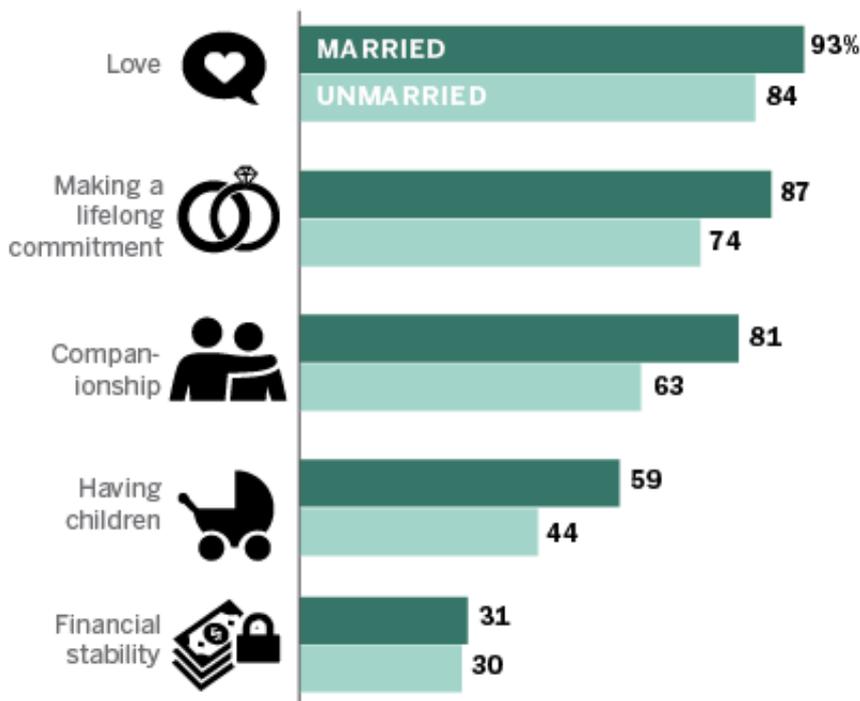
by *D'Vera Cohn*

Americans believe that love is the main foundation of marriage. Most who never have been married say they would like to be at some point in their lives. However, statistics show Americans aren't rushing to the altar, and the U.S. marriage rate is at an all-time low—only 51% of adults were married in 2011, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

The romantic ideal of marriage plays out in survey data that show whether they are married or not, Americans are more inclined to choose “love” as a reason for marriage than any other factor. In a 2010 [Pew Research Center survey](#), love wins out over “making a lifelong commitment,” as well as “companionship,” “having children,” and “financial stability” as a very important reason to wed

Why Get Married?

Percent saying each is a very important reason to marry, by marital status



Asked of married and unmarried separately, n=1,306 for married and 1,385 for unmarried.

Pew Research Center

Among married people, 93% say love is a very important reason to get married; 84% of unmarried people say so. Men and women are equally likely to say love is a very important reason to get married.

But love only goes so far. Most Americans cast cold water on a central premise of many a song or poem, that each person in the universe has only one true love. About seven-in-ten (69%) people do not agree with that notion; only 28% do. Among those who do agree, men (31%) are slightly more likely to do so than women (26%). Young and old, married and unmarried are equally skeptical.

Do You Want to Marry?

Especially for those who have never wed, marriage remains a life goal. About six-in-ten (61%) men and women who have never married say they would like to get married, according to the 2010 Pew Research survey. Only 12% say they do not want to marry and 27% are not sure.

That same survey found that a trip to the altar is not so appealing for those who have been there before. Among divorced adults, only 29% say they would like to marry again, with women more likely than men to say they do *not* want another trip down the aisle. Among widowed men and women, only 8% want to wed again.

Men and women's attitudes about marrying for the first time are not different among young adults. But among never-married adults ages 30 to 50, men (27%) are more likely than women (8%) to say they do not want to marry.

Though they say they would like to wed, most Americans are not in a hurry to do so. In 2011, the median age at first marriage was at a record high—about 29 for men and about 27 for women, according to census data. [The median age at first marriage, which declined for the first half of the 20th century, has been rising since then.](#) As recently as the early 1980s, the median age for men was 25 and for women 22.

Why this apparent disjunction between belief and reality? Marriage now has more competition from other lifestyles, such as living alone or living with an unmarried partner. A rising share of births are to mothers who are not married, meaning that marriage is no longer seen by many as the only gateway to parenthood. (The divorce rate has gone down since the 1980s and is less of a factor than it used to be.)

The postponement of many markers of adulthood also plays a role. A rising share of young adults, especially women, are pursuing advanced degrees, and waiting for marriage until they are done with their education and established in the workplace. The choices of these young adults are in large part responsible for the growing share of Americans who have never married.

Still, so far, the vast majority of Americans do marry at some point. Among those ages 45 and older, about nine-in-ten have been married.

Is Marriage an Important Goal?

Marriage is an important goal for most Americans, although it may not be their top priority. Having a successful marriage is “one of the most important things” in life for 36% of adults, according to a [2011 Pew Research survey](#). An additional 48% said it is “very important but not the most” important. Being a good parent was seen as “one of the most important things” by a larger share of adults (53%).

Men and women overall do not answer differently in rating the priority of a successful marriage to them, but there are differences among young adults, ages 18 to 34. About four-in-ten (39%) young women say that having a successful marriage is “one of the most important things” in their life, compared with about three-in-ten (29%) young men who say so.

Advantages of Marriage?

What are the advantages of marriage? According to the public, it is easier for a married person than a single person to raise a family (77% say so). But in other realms of life asked about in the 2010 Pew Research survey, most people do not think either married or single people have an easier time of it. In fact, about half or more think there is no difference between being married or single in the ease of having a fulfilling sex life, being financially secure, finding happiness, getting ahead in a career or having social status.

Among the minority who say marital status does make a difference in life, marriage is deemed better in all of the listed realms but one. When it comes to getting ahead in a career, being single wins out, 24% to 14%.