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Marriage Only for a Minority? Not Hardly

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The New York Times announced its story on the new Census Bureau data with this headline: “To Be Married Means to Be Outnumbered.” How so?

Here is the lead sentence: “Married couples, whose numbers have been declining for decades as a proportion of American households, have finally slipped into a minority, according to an analysis of new census figures by *The New York Times*.” Here is the quote from the close: “This would seem to close the book on the Ozzie and Harriet era that characterized much of the last century,”

The clear implication of the lead, the headline, and the close is that marriage is losing ground as an institution — and that married couples with children are not really the norm in postmodern American society.

The article presents the data rather straightforwardly in these two paragraphs:

The American Community Survey, released this month by the Census Bureau, found that 49.7 percent, or 55.2 million, of the nation’s 111.1 million households in 2005 were made up of married couples — with and without children — just shy of a majority and down from more than 52 percent five years earlier.

The numbers by no means suggests marriage is dead or necessarily that a tipping point has been reached. The total number of married couples is higher than ever, and most Americans eventually marry. But marriage has been facing more competition. A growing number of adults are spending more of their lives single or living unmarried with partners, and the potential social and economic implications are profound.

Much of the article was devoted to a consideration of alternative living arrangements. Reporter Sam Roberts quoted liberal family theorist Stephanie Coontz, who suggested that “we have an anachronistic view as to what extent you can use marriage to organize the distribution and redistribution of benefits.”

A closer look at the data indicates that the vast majority of Americans do marry. Marriage has been weakened as an institution by several developments. The most important of these is divorce, but the other key development is the delay of marriage. Many of the “households” identified in the study are singles who fully intend to marry — just not yet.

Cohabitation is another issue, of course. The Census Bureau reported a 14% increase since 2000 in the number of unmarried heterosexual couples living together.

The number of households reported as male couples was 413,000 and the number reported as female couples was 363,000. Matt Foreman of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force told Roberts that gay couples were undercounted because they did not want to disclose their sexual identity. Of course, definitions matter: “The survey did not ask about sexual orientation, but its questionnaire was designed to distinguish partners from roommates. A partner was defined as ‘an adult who is unrelated to the householder, but shares living quarters and has a close personal relationship with the householder.’”

These statistics can be very misleading — and some will attempt to present a misleading picture. Marriage is not

falling out of favor. It has been weakened by social trends and divorce, but one big reason that fewer households are reported as married couples is longevity. Put simply, the fact that people live longer means that more persons will spend more years as a widow or widower. This is not due to any weakening of the marriage bond. This trend will be even more significant as the Baby Boomers reach senior adult years.

We should be honest about the challenges now faced in a culture that has progressively weakened marriage over the past four decades. These factors represent very real challenges. But the idea that marriage is falling out of favor with the American people is just not sustained by the data. By common grace, social tradition, and human intuition, most adults find their way into marriage. That ought to tell us something.

SOURCE: The [American Community Survey](#) can be found at the Web site of the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).

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