

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today I'm welcoming Anna Gassman-Pines back to the program. Anna is an associate professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy, where she is also an affiliate with the Center for Child and Family Policy. She also holds an appointment in the department of psychology and neuroscience. And Anna, I thought we talk about one of your journal articles entitled, Why the Death of the Shotgun Marriage Has Been Greatly Exaggerated. A very interesting title. Now shotgun marriage, of course, generally is thought to refer to when a woman marries because she is unmarried and pregnant. In the 1930s, half of all unmarried, pregnant women in the United States married before giving birth. But these days, only 6% of women are getting married in the same circumstances. But you found that these big picture numbers aren't telling the whole story. So tell us about the study and what you found.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So this study used administrative data from the state of North Carolina. So we were able to match up birth records, marriage records and divorce records. So all of these different public records that we keep about family formation, we were able to match up couples across those different sources. And what we found is that among children born to married parents, actually a pretty big share of those marriages were shotgun marriages.

Kelly Brownell:

Interesting. So did this number surprise you?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Well, we know that over time, as you mentioned, for any given unmarried pregnancy, people are becoming less likely to get married before that baby is born. But because so many more couples are unmarried when they have a pregnancy, it actually turns out that among kids born to married parents, which we think might be really important, a lot of those marriages were actually formed during the pregnancy itself.

Kelly Brownell:

So let's run through some of the numbers. I find them staggering. So between 1992 and 2012, shotgun marriages increased by 20% for all black mothers, and 60% for black mothers under 25. This is all from your data. Shotgun marriages also increased by 17% for white mothers under 25, and 41% for white women with a high school diploma or less. So what do you attribute the rise to?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So a few things to say about those numbers because they are pretty staggering. The first is these are exactly the kinds of groups of mothers that policymakers are particularly concerned about. And when I say concerned, what I mean is concerned about low marriage rates among these groups. So in particular people with low levels of education and young women have very low marriage rates, and that's gotten policymakers concerned because there's a whole body of social science evidence that living with married biological parents is associated with better outcomes for children across a whole of different kinds of outcomes, whether it be success in school, physical health, mental health, long run success as adults, and so forth. And so, these are exactly the groups that that policymakers tend to be concerned about when they're concerned about marriage rates.

We're not entirely sure what these rises are attributable to, but part of it is almost certainly that the share of kids who are conceived outside of marriage has actually increased for these very groups. So policymakers who are worried about this are worried about the groups where we are seeing many, many more parents have a pregnancy outside of marriage. And so, there are just so many more couples in that pool who might decide to get married before that child is born.

Kelly Brownell:

So my knowledge on this doesn't go very deep, but it was my impression that there had been lots of programs around attempting to deal with things like teen pregnancy and the like. Have those not been effective and why are the trends going in these kinds of directions?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So that's a really good question. And actually, the teen pregnancy rate has been falling over time, and there are some very successful strategies for reducing teen pregnancy, including increasing access to so-called long acting contraceptive methods. And so, actually we think that these aren't driven by teens necessarily. We actually think these are more kind of women in early adulthood who are never the less at risk for more challenges in having a baby. When you're very early in your career or perhaps even still in school, in college, for example, having a child can disrupt that career path. And so, we're not so much talking about teens necessarily as women and early adulthood.

Kelly Brownell:

Does this instruct us at all about relationships that people are in, and they're thinking about their long-term future relationships that are happening between men and women?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah.

Kelly Brownell:

What is there to be learned by this? I'm just curious and puzzled a little bit by the change.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So that's a really good question. And one thing that we were particularly curious about would be whether these relationships would be more unstable. So as shotgun marriage has kind of fallen out of cultural favor, people started thinking, oh, well, people who have a shotgun marriage, those relationships, maybe they're not formed under the best of circumstances. It's rushed and these marriages may be more unstable or more fragile. And so, that's why we brought in the divorce records because we wanted to know, okay, well, are these marriages more likely to end in divorce? Because there's also a whole body of literature showing that divorce is associated with negative outcomes for kids. So that's actually where our pattern of findings diverged in a very interesting way.

For the white women, the results conform to our hypothesis. So for those women who had a shotgun marriage, those marriages were much more likely to dissolve than marriages that were formed before the conception, but that was not the case for black women. So actually, for black women, the divorce rates look just about the same for those marriages that were shotgun marriages and those that were formed before the child was conceived.

Kelly Brownell:

Oh, that's so interesting. So do you see implications for policies or programs or practices that come from these kinds of numbers?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Well, so I think it's worth mentioning that there has been some policy effort aimed at increasing marriage rates. And unfortunately, those policies really haven't been particularly successful. So there was a federally funded program, a demonstration program, called the Building Strong Families Program, which actually capitalized on the so-called magic moment of a couple having a pregnancy or a brand new born baby, where you've just gone through this momentous life change with this person it's and people are very optimistic about the future. Other survey studies have shown that in that time of a pregnancy or the birth of a new baby, parents are really optimistic about their relationship and its longterm future. And so, there has been some effort to kind of capitalize on that magic moment.

Unfortunately, the results of rigorous evaluation work, randomized experimental evaluation studies of the Building Strong Families Program, and what that program did, was it pretty much provided relationship counseling and kind of relationship skills training for couples, but what the results show is that it didn't actually change marriage rates. So when policymakers are concerned about low marriage rates, it's actually a very tricky problem to solve with the policy tools that we have available. And one of the complicated things that we've found is when these patterns differ for different groups, that makes it actually even more complicated. So there's more thinking to be done about whether it makes sense for policy makers and policy to have a role. And if so, how to craft that policy in a way that actually leads to higher marriage rates if we think that's the outcome that we should be trying to attain.

Kelly Brownell:

Is there information on the researchers could collect that might be especially informative in how to go about making such policy?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So one of the key pieces that our team thinks is missing in that work is really not enough emphasis on the couple's financial wellbeing and kind of their economic circumstances. So simply providing relationship skills training without really taking seriously the financial stability of that couple, we think is an important missing piece. So there's an increasing body of literature that shows that, especially for couples with low levels of education and low income couples, what they really want is to have a sense of financial stability first before entering into marriage. And so, any policy that's not really taking couples' financial wellbeing seriously is probably not going to be successful in changing marital behavior.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, this is very interesting work that done already, and it sounds like you're off onto some interesting new directions as well. So congratulations for doing this work and thanks for sharing it.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Thank you so much.

Kelly Brownell:

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Well, my guest today has been Anna Gassman-Pines. Anna co-authored the study we've been talking about with Christina Gibson-Davis and Elizabeth Ananat, her colleagues here at the Sanford School. We will have a link to more information on our website policy360.org. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.