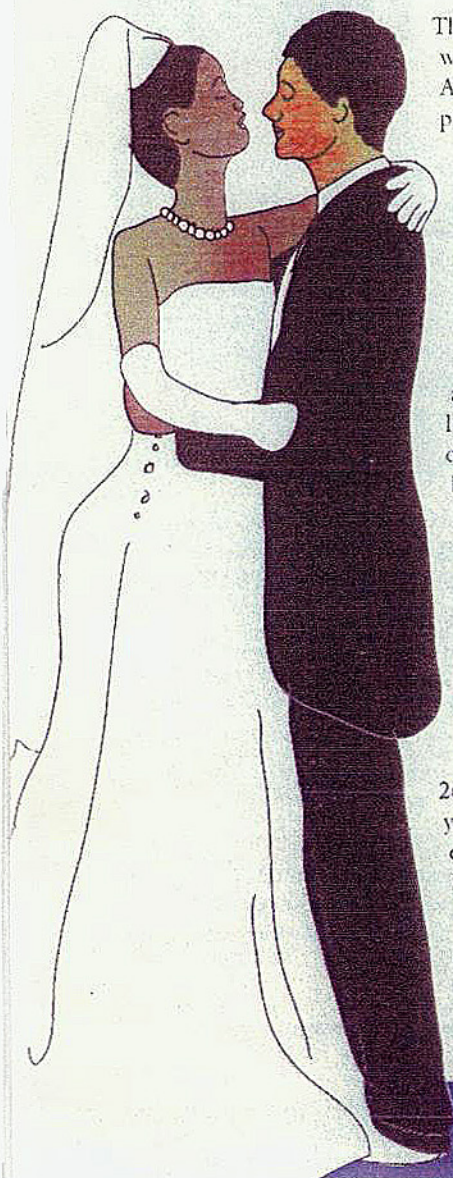


Black Love: Special Report

STATE OF BLACK MARRIAGE

The percentage of African-Americans tying the knot is at a historic low and still plummeting. A new survey explores why. BY JOY JONES

Cleo Lightfoot began preparing while still a child for a future as an unmarried woman. Her own parents divorced when she was 12, but she began forming the impression that commitment was risky years earlier. "I didn't see many happy marriages," says the now-26-year-old graduate student currently living in Washington, D.C. What she did see, she says, was some of the adults around her acting irresponsibly, having on-again-off-again relationships and cheating. Who wants to emulate that? As she entered adulthood, she took pride in the "strong, independent woman" label, worked full time, carried a full course load and handled whatever came her way. She has let every man she dated know that she can manage just fine on her own. "I was taught at an early age that I didn't need a man for anything," explains the doctoral candidate in clinical psychology. Since women currently account for more than 60% of graduate degrees earned by African-Americans, what are the chances of a Sister like her meeting and marrying a true counterpart, anyway?



The views this Gen-Yer grew up with are hardly unique among African-American young people. They are increasingly viewing marriage as an unlikely—and unnecessary—path to partnership, prosperity or parenthood. In fact, a recent study by the Pew Research Center, *The Decline of Marriage and the Rise of New Families*, says the behavior and attitudes of young adults are a large part of what's driving down marriage rates. They are both delaying marriage and entering into less-traditional family arrangements such as single parenthood, cohabitation and same-sex partnerships that may include raising children. In 1960, two-thirds (68%) of all twentysomethings were married. In 2008, that was true of just 26%. Christopher Watkins, a 25-year-old musician in Atlanta, eventually wants to marry, but he acknowledges that among some of his peers, "Being single, being with different women is seen as cool and settling down is not."

"MARRIAGE IS FOR WHITE PEOPLE"

The Pew study, conducted in partnership with Time magazine, finds that among Blacks, 44% believe marriage is becoming obsolete. "It's the way society is now," says Taiwon Prince, a 39-year-old single father of three in Washington, D.C. "Marriage is not sacred anymore."

When I was working in the public schools in our nation's capital a few years ago, a 12-year-old boy told a class discussing relationships and family, "Marriage is for White people." The implications for the future of the our community are unfathomable.

My own father and mother will mark 58 years of marriage in June. The Huxtables they are not. But I suspect what has kept them committed is a larger sense of purpose. Because they know the importance of marriage to family and to the success of our race, there has been a willingness to set aside some of their own preferences for the greater good.

"For our grandparents, [happiness] was not their primary goal. Their happiness was in their kids," says Tony King, a marriage advocate based in Dallas. "I know it takes a village to raise a child," he explains, referencing the African proverb. "But the first unit in the village is a family."

According to the Pew study and folks who offered comments:

■ **In 1960, 61% of Black adults were married.** By 2008, that share had dropped to 32%, compared with 56% of Whites. "Just being married does not make one happy," says Carolyn (not her real name), a 50ish Memphis resident who is twice divorced. "The intent is not to 'settle,'" she explains.

■ **Among Black women giving birth in 2008, 72% were unmarried.** This compares with 53% of Hispanic women and 29% of Whites. "It's hard to find a good man," says Monica Marcelli, a never-

44 percent of Blacks believe marriage is BECOMING OBSOLETE. 'Marriage is not sacred anymore,' says Taiwon Prince, a single father of three.

married 39-year-old mother of two in Washington, D.C. "They have too many skeletons, too many women. And it's hard for a man to find a good woman. A woman who has been mistreated has baggage. Even if he's a good person, she's going to insinuate that he's going to do the same thing that other guys have done to her."

■ **In 2008, slightly more than half of all Black children under the age of 18 (52%) were living in a household with one parent.** A third (32%) were in a household with two married parents. The rest were living in households with cohabiting partners (6%) or no parent at all (10%). By comparison, 74% of White children younger than age 18 lived in households with two married parents. Some observers feel the Black community has become too comfortable with a heavily matriarchal culture: "We now have a mythology of the struggling-but-triumphant single mother," says Bill Stephney, a media executive and family-issues advocate based in Morris County, N.J. Accepting that Big Mama is the center of everything and assuming Papa is a rolling stone leads to the view that men are optional in a family.

■ **Nine-tenths of Black respondents (88%), compared with 62% of Whites and 77% of Hispanics, say that to be ready for marriage, a man must be able to financially support a family.** But half (50%) of Black respondents say that a woman must be able to support a family. "Owing to their relatively low median income, many Blacks do not meet that bar," the researchers conclude. "The woman is going to be looking for the man to take care of the family. Who wants to go into a marriage broke?" says Prince.

■ **Only a quarter of Blacks (24%) say the growing variety in the types of family arrangements is a bad thing, compared with a third (32%) of Whites.** Interestingly, Blacks are highly critical of the trend toward more single women having children without a male partner to help raise them. Three-quarters of Blacks (74%) say this trend is bad for society. "The thing is, it's the breakdown of the family. If marriage is that hard, then have as much sex as you want, but don't have children," says King.

"PLAN B" PARTNERSHIPS

Growing up, I envisioned love, marriage and a baby carriage. I'm surprised that life is so good even though I didn't follow the script, yet I'm puzzled as to why Plan A didn't work out. Approximately 70% of single adults with children say things didn't turn out as planned, as do 67% of unmarried adults raising children with a partner. "The marriage gap," as Pew researchers call it, is more by default than design. But turning things around in our communities is going to take decisive, deliberate and determined measures.

When I discussed declining Black marriage rates—and that 12-year-old boy—in a 2006 Washington Post editorial, I received 1,300 impassioned e-mails from Black men and women. At workshops, folks will often tell me how life is much better now that the ex is gone, and that the children are adjusting just fine. But when the same person talks about his or her own childhood, the conversation changes. Then I hear adults say how much they missed having a dad

MARRIED AND PROUD OF IT!

That's the theme of this year's Black Marriage Day. The grassroots initiative, launched by the Wedded Bliss Foundation, aims "to change the hearts and minds of the Black community to cherish and celebrate the marriages that we currently have. And to encourage more couples to commit themselves to marriage so more children grow up with the gift of a two-parent family." On March 27, more than 300 community groups nationwide will host film screenings, talks, even red carpet ceremonies inducting local couples into the Black Marriage Hall of Fame. To get your group involved, visit www.blackmarriageday.com.

or that they felt less than by not having an intact family.

But how do you champion two-parent families without putting down [the single mother]? "There's the politically correct response, and then there's what's in our hearts," says Nisa Muhammad, the founder/director of Wedded Bliss, a Washington, D.C., organization that promotes Black marriage. And what's in our hearts, say authors of the Pew study, is that unmarried Blacks are just as likely as unmarried Whites to say they would like to marry in the future.

"Our family structures aren't serving our families very well," notes Muhammad. What does are programs and policies addressing the income and educational disparities that are both feeding, and feeding off, plummeting marriage rates. Positive partnership role models in our communities and houses of worship also help. The Rev. Dr. Anthony Michael Chandler is senior pastor of Cedar Street Baptist Church of God in Richmond, Va. His wife, Taleshia, was his high school sweetheart. Congregants see the couple as the model of a healthy marriage. Pastor Chandler offers premarital counseling to young folks in his flock looking to jump the broom.

One graduate of his six-month program is Cleo Lightfoot-Booker. That's right, the "strong, independent woman" who never planned to marry walked down the aisle last April with James A. Booker Jr., whom she'd known since her first day of college. "It took six years before I actually let my guard down," she says of how her friendship with the "patient and persistent man" blossomed into a lifetime commitment. She adds that finding flesh-and-blood examples of what good marriages looked like helped her learn to trust him and the prospect of a future together. Looking back at the long road to love, she says, "I now believe that marriage is a learning process, [as is] being in a relationship. To learn something, you must be patient, make mistakes and overcome obstacles without giving up."

Overcoming obstacles is something we, as a people, are accustomed to doing. A majority of survey respondents from all walks of life express high levels of optimism about the future of marriage and the family. It's time we harnessed that hope—and that resilience—in making the right changes and choices.

—Joy James is the author of *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear*, a book on relationships. Learn more at www.joyjamesconsulting.com.