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Amanda and Ryan Dona at their wedding. KEVIN MARKLAND

Financial Shift Delays Marriage Age

More young people are now looking for financial stability before the wedding

BY RACHEL WOLFE

Before there was love, there was money.

For centuries, the institution of marriage functioned more as an economic contract than a romantic one—the promise of a better shot at achieving financial success and stability as a couple.

More recently, the script has flipped. Financial security is no longer a goal reached after marriage, younger Americans say, but rather a prerequisite for it.

For Ryan and Amanda Dona, who got married in February, a wedding was a way to signal to their friends and families that they had graduated into a more secure stage of their lives.

“It closed the chapter on all the craziness of the past few years,” said Amanda, who is 32, works in market research sales and has a master’s degree. Ryan, 33, is an insurance adjuster.

The couple had each accomplished many of their financial goals before the wedding, they said, including getting promoted at their respective jobs, purchasing a home together on Long Island, and adopting a dog.

The idea of both parties waiting to build a career or wealth before tying the knot is called a capstone model of marriage. Economists and demographers say that thinking has replaced the old “cornerstone” approach, where people would wed in their early 20s and then work together to buy a home, build a nest egg and progress in their careers.

“You achieve a measure of success educationally and professionally before you put a ring on it,” said Brad Wilcox, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia and fellow at the conservative Institute for Family Studies.

This mindset shift, Wilcox and other researchers say, is a large part of what's driving up the age at which people first get married—or making them less likely to do it. The estimated median age for a first marriage as of last year was 30 for men and 29 for women, according to census data, up from 28 for men and 26 for women in 2008. *Note*

The problem, researchers say, is that a capstone view of marriage raises the bar for what people think their lives need to look like before they wed.

“If the white picket-fence home and the beautiful wedding in the Virginia countryside is out of reach for you,” Wilcox said, “then you are just never going to get married, because you think ‘marriage isn’t for me.’” Still, researchers say, people waiting longer to get married and being more selective about whom they pair off with can result in more stable marriages, contributing to a reduction in the divorce rate. *Note*

The marriage rate, that is the rate of new marriages to the overall population, has been on a long downward trajectory, census data shows. Between 2008 and 2023, the first-marriage rate among 22- to 45-year-olds declined 9%, to 60 marriages per 1,000 never-married Americans, according to Bowling Green State University’s National Center for Marriage & Family Research. *Note*

Overall marriage rates have declined much less for 22- to 45-year-olds with a bachelor’s degree than they have for those with less than a college education, according to an analysis of census data by the Institute for Family Studies. The share of married adults in the top third of earners also fell slightly, while dropping much more for the bottom two thirds of the income spectrum.

“Marriage has become a status symbol,” said Krista Westrick-Payne, assistant director of the National Center for Marriage & Family Research. “People don’t want to get married until they have an education, have that job that can support them and they can afford a house, and they are also looking for a partner that ticks all those boxes.”

Some young people who want to get married say they don’t yet feel financially secure enough to do so. Eugene Hopper said that after joining the military to pay for college, living off the GI Bill and delivering pizzas, he felt like he was always playing catch-up. “When you feel financially poor, you are not going out as much, you’re not having as much fun, you’re not going out meeting people,” said the 34-year-old, who lives in Enon, Ohio, and works as an electrical engineer.

“I was also six or seven years older than all my peers because I had joined the military,” said Hopper. “So I put [marriage] off even further.”

It’s only more recently, after finally feeling secure in his career, that he has felt ready to get married—but after being on his own for so long, he has trouble picturing his life with partnership at the center.

Economists say the diverging economic trajectories of men and women are making the capstone model of marriage harder to pull off.

While women’s relative economic position has improved, many men are floundering. “In the past, men didn’t have to clear such a high bar because they had the ultimate ticket of ‘Well, I’m the breadwinner,’” said Richard Reeves, president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, a think tank. *Note*

People tend to marry along socioeconomic lines in a practice known as “assortative mating.” Although women make up roughly 60% of college grads, outpacing men with degrees, that educational mismatch hasn’t stopped educated women from marrying.

Benjamin Goldman, an economics professor at Cornell University, said women who aren’t marrying other college grads are marrying the highest-earning, non-college-educated men. That leaves less-educated women with fewer options.

Parental wealth is another main determinant of whether someone will be able to achieve the stability now necessary to marry. While 59% of American 37-year-olds with parents in the top income quartile were married as of 2019, according to Goldman’s research, only 30% of those from the bottom quartile could say the same.