

# Center for Marriage and Families

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## **The Benefits of Marriage for African American Men**

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*Currently, many policymakers and civic leaders are interested in developing strategies to improve the well-being of African American men, and to close the achievement gap between black men and other groups. This brief surveys the research on the effects of family structure on African American men and finds overwhelming evidence that getting and staying married has a significant beneficial effect on black men's well-being. Married black men have higher incomes and are less likely to experience poverty. They enjoy better physical and mental health than their unmarried counterparts, and are less likely to engage in unhealthy or antisocial behavior. Moreover, the benefits of marriage are transmitted from married parents to their sons, and these boys do better in life from childhood into adulthood.*

*One of the difficulties in identifying the benefits of marriage for African American men is that individuals who are already doing better in the outcomes of interest—in this case, economic well-being, health, and social integration—are more likely to marry and to remain married. This challenge confronts even the most carefully designed studies. Since researchers cannot assign people to married and single status, they must employ creative techniques to determine whether marriage positively affects men. Despite this issue, existing research suggests that men actually do change their behavior after marrying and that marriage itself makes a difference.*

### **Men's Economic Well-Being**

The positive effects of marriage on men's economic outcomes have been extensively documented for all racial and ethnic groups. Evidence suggests that African American men benefit economically from marriage to a greater extent than other men, because married black women are more likely to be employed than other married women.

#### ***Employment and Earnings***

Married African American men are more likely to be employed than never-married or divorced men, and they work longer hours and earn higher wages than unmarried men with similar characteristics. These facts have been confirmed in the vast majority of economic studies exploring why individuals with similar and distinct characteristics have

different earnings. Studies focusing on black men estimate that married men work two-and-a-half weeks more each year on average and earn wages between 14 percent and 18 percent higher than never-married black men, while controlling for other differences between individuals.<sup>1</sup>

**Research suggests that married men's commitment to their marriage fosters in them a sense of accountability that leads to responsible behavior.**

Of course, such studies must attempt to account for unobservable resources, such as social connections, motivation, and intelligence, which affect both men's employment and their chances of marrying and remaining married. In his 2003 study, sociologist Steven Nock surveyed men repeatedly between 1979 and 1993 to measure changes in their earnings and weeks worked after their first marriage.<sup>2</sup>

By following the same subjects over time, Nock's analysis avoids the problem of comparing different married and unmarried men and provides a better estimate of how men's behavior changes when they marry.

Why do men earn more when they marry? It may be that married men change their behavior to conform to social expectations of what it takes to be a good husband—expectations such as maturity, loyalty, and the ability to provide economically for a family. Or perhaps men delay marriage until they expect to be able to conform to these expectations. To explore this question, economists Sanders Korenman and David Neumark follow the employment patterns of men from two different types of surveys: a nationally representative sample studied over time and a smaller group of men working in a single firm.<sup>3</sup> They find that men's wages increase during each year of marriage, and that, in the long-term study, unmarried men with higher wage growth are actually less likely subsequently to marry. The authors also find that married men in the firm-level sample have higher performance evaluations than unmarried men with similar company experience and other characteristics, which leads the married men to be employed in higher job grades and to earn more money. This study provides evidence that married men's behavior, rather than preferential treatment or selection into marriage, causes them to earn more.

### ***Household Income and Assets***

Married African American men have higher household incomes than never-married African American men, hold higher levels of assets, and are less likely to live in poverty. Households headed by a married black couple earned almost two-thirds more than the average black household, and black men are 30 percent less likely to live in poverty once they marry.<sup>4</sup> A 2004 study of racial and ethnic differences in home equity—the largest component of household net worth—found that household socioeconomic characteristics, including marital status and duration of residence, were the primary factor contributing to black households' lower levels of housing equity relative to white households.<sup>5</sup> If family structure and income were similar across black and white households, black households

would reap an additional \$20,000 in housing wealth. Since marriage is associated with higher household income and residential stability, much of this difference may be directly attributed to lower marriage rates among blacks.

Why are married African American households able to accumulate more assets and enjoy a higher standard of living than similar households headed by single or cohabiting men? By living together and sharing costs, married individuals can afford better housing and other goods. Spouses also provide protection for each other against economic risks such as job loss. Although cohabiting partners can adopt this behavior to some extent, the more fragile and temporary nature of their unions makes it riskier for them to invest significantly in the more permanent (and ultimately profitable) aspects of being a couple, such as purchasing a home together.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence suggests that African American men benefit from resource sharing within marriage to a greater extent than other men. Although married black men receive a smaller boost in their wages upon marriage compared to married white men (18 percent versus 22 percent), married black households earn 31 percent more than their never-married counterparts, while married white households earn only 23 percent more.<sup>7</sup> The explanation for this is the employment patterns of married black women. As a consequence of historic inequalities and ensuing cultural differences, married black women are more likely to work outside the home than married white women,<sup>8</sup> and since 1980, married black women are more likely to work than *unmarried* black women.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, black wives with high earning husbands are more likely to work than black wives with lower earning husbands, which suggests that employment decisions for married black women are influenced by their beliefs about their proper roles and responsibilities as much as by economic need.

## **Men's Physical and Mental Health**

African American men also change their behavior after marriage in ways that are beneficial to their health. The social and emotional support that married black men receive from their wives is instrumental in encouraging healthy activities and protecting men's emotional health.

### ***Risky Behaviors and Physical Health***

Married black men are more likely to report excellent or good physical health, as opposed to fair or poor health. They are less likely to experience physical distress such as headaches, back pain, stomach or bladder problems, and limited upper or lower body mobility, and are less likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as arthritis, hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. As a result of their improved health overall, married black men are less likely to report being disabled or having limitations in physical and social functioning, work activity, or activities of daily living such as household chores, bathing, and dressing.<sup>10</sup>

Married black men are healthier because they engage in more activities that promote good health and fewer risky activities that endanger health. A nationally representative study including over 10,000 African American men found that married men report higher levels of physical activity during leisure time and lower incidence of cigarette smoking and heavy

**Research seems to indicate that as wives see their husbands' enduring commitment to them, they in turn develop a committed concern for their husbands' well-being.**

drinking. In fact, the only health indicator for which married men were worse off than unmarried men was obesity—never-married men were less likely than married men to be overweight or obese.<sup>11</sup> Other studies confirm differences in leisure time physical activity and cigarette smoking between married and unmarried black men, and also find that marijuana and cocaine use are less prevalent among married black men.<sup>12</sup>

Although these studies did not explore the underlying causes of healthy behavior among married men, the authors controlled for differences in age, income, poverty status, and occupation and still found that married black men were healthier. Of course, we do not know if marriage is the cause since men who abstain from risky behaviors are probably more likely to attract and keep a wife. A study by a group of public health researchers, however, provides evidence that becoming married actually influences men's behavior. By following the smoking, drinking, and drug use patterns of a sample of young men from late adolescence into their thirties, Jerald Bachman and his colleagues find that in the year preceding marriage, men decrease their consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, and cocaine, while their unmarried counterparts increase their drinking and cocaine use.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Healthy Partnerships and Emotional Health***

How do wives have a direct positive impact on African American husbands' health? Married black men benefit from the social and emotional support of their wives and from their wives' encouragement towards healthy behavior. Married men are more likely than single men to report that someone monitors their health and reminds them to do healthy things, such as exercising or seeing a doctor regularly. The everyday interaction provided by marriage also protects men against loneliness and social isolation, which can negatively impact physical and mental health. Marriage can also bolster men's belief that their lives have meaning and purpose because someone relies on them and cares for them.<sup>14</sup>

Studies also indicate that marriage seems to be beneficial for emotional health. Married black men have lower suicide rates than never-married and divorced men in each age category, and married men are less likely to report that it is acceptable for a person to take his own life when confronting serious problems.<sup>15</sup> Among black men, being married contributed significantly to self-reported personal happiness, and among married black men, marital satisfaction was the most important factor contributing to happiness.<sup>16</sup>

## **Men's Social Integration**

Married African American men receive more support from their extended families and religious communities, and in return contribute to the social functioning of their neighborhoods and communities. In this way, married black men are more socially integrated into their communities than their unmarried peers.

### ***Social Interactions***

Married black men are more likely to have a variety of social relationships that provide emotional support and ethical accountability. Many studies have focused on the kinship model of family organization where an extended network of parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, and non-biologically-related “fictive kin” actively participate in the everyday operations of the nuclear family. Scholars have suggested that these networks help offset the effects of low marriage rates among black Americans, as informal relationships between adult children and parents, uncles and aunts, and siblings may substitute for formal commitments between husbands and wives. Yet, quite to the contrary, a study measuring levels of financial, emotional, and child-care support provided by relatives among households with children in the National Survey of Black Americans finds that reported levels of emotional and child-care support are highest for *married* families.<sup>17</sup> When socioeconomic differences between households are accounted for, married households are also more likely to receive financial support from relatives.

Married black men also have more access to nonfamily support networks, and these resources benefit childless men as well as families with children. In a study of religious participation among African Americans, evidence from multiple surveys shows that married black men attend religious services more frequently than unmarried men, and the difference is largest between married men and never-married and divorced men.<sup>18</sup> Married men report that religion is more important to them, identify more strongly with their religious denomination, and are more likely to seek spiritual comfort and support when facing personal difficulties.

Religious participation is important and beneficial for African American men. Membership in a religious group expands the informal kinship network and the resources available to individuals in times of need. Surveyed men report that religious belief also provides an internal source of strength and an external source of guidance when facing conflicts, difficulties, and ethical choices. In statistical analyses of men's supportiveness in relationships—how affectionate, understanding, and encouraging they are—women are more likely to rate partners who attend church regularly as supportive, and married black men are more likely than unmarried men to report that ethically questionable behavior is wrong.<sup>19</sup>

## ***Social Integration and the “Life Script”***

Social networks that encourage marriage and support married couples also tend to encourage positive behaviors that make marriage more likely. These behaviors include planning for the future, avoiding having children out of wedlock, and learning marketable skills. Author Kay Hymowitz calls this collection of beliefs, norms, and behaviors the “life script,” saying, “Traditional marriage gives young people a map of life that takes them step by step from childhood to adolescence to college or other work training—which might well include postgraduate training—to the workplace, to marriage, and only then to childbearing. . . . At a time when education was becoming crucial to middle-class status, the disadvantaged lost a reliable life script, a way of organizing their early lives that would prize education and culminate in childbearing only after job training and marriage. They lost one of their few institutional supports for planning ahead and taking control of their lives.”<sup>20</sup>

Once marriage and the norm of lifelong fidelity are removed from the life script, the consequences are often severe for black mothers and children. Men also suffer from this loss, due in part to the burdens of responsibility for multiple families. Further, the negative effects on the next generation of black men raised without the benefit of two parents cannot be understated.<sup>21</sup> Somehow forcing young black men into marriage would not ensure that they follow the “life script,” but it becomes much more difficult to follow the script successfully if marriage is no longer a pathway to adulthood.

## **Conclusion: A Path to Change**

Encouraging marriage among African Americans should be important to anyone—including policymakers, community activists, and individuals—who is interested in improving the well-being of African American men. With this goal in mind, researcher Linda Malone-Colon has outlined a plan to address the crisis of low marriage rates among African Americans.<sup>22</sup> By engaging leaders of social institutions in the black community, conducting and disseminating research on the benefits of marriage, implementing programs and policies that support marriage, and addressing the mediating factors of limited economic and social opportunity that discourage black men from marrying, leaders and citizens can and should work together to ensure that future generations of African American men are not denied the benefits that marriage can provide.

## **Endnotes**

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