

Marriage paves best path to American health, wealth and happiness

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A book on sociological matters has garnered widespread attention for its startling conclusion: Marriage is the best path to financial success and personal happiness.



“Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families and Save Civilization” was released on Feb. 13 and has already been featured in The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal, The Free Press and Catholic News Agency. The American Enterprise Institute and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich have cited the book, published by Broadside Books.

Its author, sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, is the National Marriage Project director at the University of Virginia. He says cultural influencers on both the left and the right have mistakenly devalued the benefits of marriage.

“More money, more meaning and less loneliness translate into more happiness for more people,” Mr. Wilcox said. “There are plenty of liberals and members of the online right who argue that the path to prosperity runs away from marriage, but the data point in the opposite direction.”

In its 320 pages, his book cites a raft of original and external studies with federal statistics showing that marriage provides more financial stability than its alternatives, helps prevent suicide by ensuring human connection and alleviates loneliness.

Marriage and birthrates among poor and working-class Americans have flatlined in recent decades. Meanwhile, rates of suicide, violent crime, drug addiction, mental illness and divorce have surged among men in rural and urban areas.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported this month that 19.6% of adults who lived alone in 2021 and “never or rarely” received social and emotional support said they had feelings of depression, compared with 11.6% of those living with others.

According to the book’s analysis of Census Bureau data, the number of singles ages 18-55 jumped from 19 million in 1970 to 71 million in 2020.

Mr. Wilcox notes in his preface that some conservative social media groups have joined “a growing list of liberal journalists, professors, and other professionals celebrating singleness, childlessness, and divorce.”

In a telephone interview, he pointed to the “far right” examples of anti-feminist social media influencer Pearl Davis and Men Going Their Own Way, a men’s rights internet group that promotes separating the sexes and accuses feminism of corrupting society.

“They think that marriage is a death sentence for men, that women are playing them for their money,” said Mr. Wilcox, who has written policy papers supporting laws limiting youth access to social media and promoting marriage education in public schools in Utah, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas and Florida.

He said his research contradicts the hypocritical claims from elite opinion makers and popular culture that single, childless and divorced adults are happier and wealthier than others.

A Bloomberg News headline that trended on social media as Mr. Wilcox was finishing the book declared: “Women Who Stay Single and Don’t Have Kids Are Getting Richer.”

The Bloomberg article cited federal data showing that single women were doing well financially, but his book emphasized that it included no comparison with married women.

“Get Married” cites Census Bureau data from 2020 showing that married mothers ages 18-55 had a median annual family income of \$108,000, compared with \$41,000 for single peers without children. Mothers in their 50s had accumulated \$322,000 in median assets, compared with \$100,000 for childless single women.

“There’s a huge financial advantage to marriage that has only grown since 1970,” Mr. Wilcox said. “Some living expenses have increased, creating a benefit to two people earning together, regardless of whether they have children.”

In a New York Times article, University of San Francisco law professor Lara Bazelon said divorce is “liberating, pointing the way toward a different life that leaves everyone better off, including the children.”

Mr. Wilcox said Ms. Bazelon was gaslighting. His book cites federal education statistics and national surveys showing that the children of divorced parents are “almost twice as likely to be suspended or expelled from school,” 75% more likely to use drugs and “about half as likely” to finish college.

His book notes that the rates of married adults with children are highest among the wealthiest and most educated residents of “gentrified urban neighborhoods and gilded suburbs,” regardless of their politics and public support for a single lifestyle.

A 2010 study in the Journal of Marriage and Family found that suicide rates were 33% lower for married people and 48% lower for married people with children than for single adults living alone. Mr. Wilcox said social connections and norms protect people, especially men, from suicide.

“Married men are much less likely than other men to commit suicide,” he said. “Women who are mothers are also less likely to commit suicide than their peers.”

“Get Married” argues that there is no emotional substitute for marriage.

In a 2021 survey that YouGov conducted for the nonprofit Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute, 60% of married mothers ages 18-55 described their lives as meaningful “most” or “all of the time,” compared with 36% of childless, unmarried peers.

In 2022, 75% of married mothers told YouGov’s American Family Survey that they were “completely” or “somewhat” satisfied with their lives, compared with 54% of single women without children.

Although women and men prosper from marriage, Mr. Wilcox said, men “benefit a bit more.”

“I think young men need a mission, and there’s no mission like being a husband and father,” he said. “Married men bond emotionally with their wives and are less likely than others to engage in risky physical behavior.”

As rising living costs turn marriage into a luxury for the wealthy and the well-educated, the book urges young men to rethink their notions of happiness.

Mr. Wilcox, married for 28 years, has five adopted children and four biological children and says his life is fuller because of it.

“When it comes to marriage, I benefit from the wisdom and friendship of my wife,” he said. “Life is often busy and stressful, but from doctor’s trips to basketball games, I’m never lonely or bored.”