

Marriage with children not the norm, experts find

Fewer than 1 in 4 couples fit profile

By Blaine Harden
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PORTLAND, Ore. — Punctuating a fundamental change in American family life, married couples with children now account for fewer than one in every four households — a share that has been slashed in half since 1960 and is the lowest ever recorded by the census.

As marriage with children becomes an exception rather than the norm, social scientists say it is also becoming the self-selected province of the college-educated and the affluent.

The working class and the poor, meanwhile, increasingly steer away from marriage, while living together and bearing children out of wedlock.

Marriage has declined across all income groups, but it has declined far less among couples who make the most money and have the best education. These couples are also less likely to divorce.

Many demographers peg the rise of a class-based marriage gap to the erosion since 1970 of the broad-based prosperity that followed World War II.

"We seem to be reverting to a much older pattern, when elites marry and a great many others live together and have kids," said Peter Francese, analyst of demographic trends for

Ogilvy & Mather, an advertising firm.

In recent years, the marrying kind have been empowered by college degrees and bankrolled by dual incomes. They are also older and choosier. College-educated men and women are increasingly less likely to "marry down" — that is, to choose mates who have less education and professional standing than they do.

Married couples living with their own children younger than 18 are also helping to drive a well-documented increase in income inequality. Compared with all households, they are twice as likely to be in the top 20 percent of income. Their income has increased 59 percent in the past three decades, com-

pared with 44 percent for all households, according to the census.

As cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births increase among the broader population, social scientists predict that marriage with children will continue its decades-long retreat into relatively high-income exclusivity.

Among its many benefits, marriage raises the earnings of men and motivates them to work more hours. It also reduces by two-thirds the likelihood that a family will live in poverty, researchers have learned.

Arguments that marriage can mean stability do not seem to change the attitudes of poor people, said Pamela Smock, co-author of a recent review of cohabitation and a University of

Michigan sociology professor. She noted that many have parents with troubled marriages.

Victoria Miller and Cameron Roach, who have been living together for 18 months, are two such people, and they say they cannot imagine getting married.

She is 22 and manages a Burger King in Seattle. He is 24 and works part time testing software in the Seattle suburb of Redmond. Together, they earn less than \$20,000 a year and are living with Roach's father. They cannot afford to live anywhere else.

"Marriage ruins life," Roach said. "I saw how much my parents fought. I saw how miserable they made each other."

Miller, who was pressured

by her Mormon parents to marry when she was 17 and pregnant, said her short, failed marriage and her parents' long, failed marriage have convinced her that the institution is often bad for children. Shuttled between her mom and dad, she moved eight times before she was 16.

"With my parents, when their marriage started breaking down, my dad started to have trouble at work and we spent years on government assistance," Miller said.

Her two young sons live with their father.

For most Americans, cohabitation and the percentage of children born outside of marriage will continue to increase, Smock said.