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Wedded bliss not a priority for U.S. bachelors

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Men won't commit to marriage because they enjoy a sexually active single life in a social climate that doesn't push them to marry, a new report says.

Young men are indeed "commitment phobic," which is bad news for young women who want build a family before they get too old, said researchers Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, who run the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

"The median age of first marriage for men has reached 27, the oldest age in our nation's history," Mr. Popenoe said.

"If this trend of men waiting to marry continues, it is likely to clash with the timing of marriage and childbearing for the many young women who hope to marry and bear children before they begin to face problems associated with declining fertility," he said.

There are several specific reasons for why young men are avoiding marriage, Mr. Popenoe and Mrs. Whitehead said yesterday in their 2002 State of Our Unions report, titled, "Why Men Won't Commit: Exploring Young Men's Attitudes About Sex, Dating and Marriage." The report is based on interviews with 60 single men, 25 to 33, who live in four parts of the country.

Primarily, young men are enjoying a sexually active single life — often with a live-in girlfriend — and "are in no hurry" to marry, the researchers said.

"I'll know when I'm ready," and "Whatever happens, happens," were typical responses by the men.

The researchers also found that young men are often wary of marriage because of worries that they will marry the wrong person, be forced to make too many compromises or take on too many burdens as a husband, or suffer huge losses if the marriage ends in divorce.

An ex-wife will "take you for all you've got" and "men have more to lose financially than women" were common refrains.

What young men aren't worried about is a personal, biological deadline to have children, Mrs. Whitehead said.

"Men see marriage as the final step in a prolonged process of growing up," with children coming along in due time, she said. This isn't true for young women, she said, but young men "don't have much sympathy" for women's fertility problems. "As one man put it, 'That's their issue.'"

Women, meanwhile, have been reminded that their biological clocks are ticking.

In April, Time magazine ran a cover article on how women's fertility declines much earlier — after age 27 — and much faster than most people realize.

A woman's ability to get pregnant drops considerably after age 35, and by age 40 half her eggs are chromosomally abnormal, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 9 million women used infertility services in 1995, the CDC said.

"Advancing age decreases your ability to have children," the American Society for Reproductive Medicine says in a public-service poster, which uses an hourglass-shaped baby bottle with sand to illustrate its point.

Already the median age of first marriage for women has risen to 25, after floating between 22 and 23 for the century between 1890 and 1990, Mrs. Whitehead said.

Traditional social forces, such as the family, religion and the workplace, used to pressure men toward marriage, but that is no longer the case, she said.

With the relaxation of social pressures, coupled with general silence about unmarried couples living together, "men can relax their timetable indefinitely," she said.

This means that it falls to an individual woman to press for marriage, which is why women are more likely to ask for a definition of their relationship or propose marriage to a man, Mrs. Whitehead said.

Mrs. Whitehead, who often laments the dearth of good statistics on marriage, noted yesterday that the new report was only a pilot study on men and said a nationally representative study was needed.

"The federal government," she wrote, "issues thousands of reports on nearly every dimension of American life, from what we eat to how many hours we commute each day, but it provides no annual index or report on the state of marriage."

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