

The end of middle America? Working class white families are unraveling before our eyes

By Kay Hymowitz

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Foreclosures, plant closings, off-shored jobs, underwater mortgages, miserable rates of unemployment, stagnating incomes: Is there any end to the woes of the struggling American middle? Apparently not, because now comes news of a trend guaranteeing trouble ahead for the more than half of the nation that make up the moderately educated and moderately earning middle" even if the economy improves.

That seismic shift, outlined in a new report from the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values, is towards more divorce, more out of wedlock births and, ipso facto, fewer kids with a hopeful future.

Family breakdown, to put it simply, has hit white middle America big time.

Researchers have known for a while now that there is a significant "marriage gap" between affluent couples and low-income, largely minority, ones. The children of well-to-do college educated couples are considerably more likely to be growing up in a home with both their mother and father present than the children of the poor who are more often than not living without their fathers. It surprises most people to hear it, but rates of divorce among college-educated women have actually been declining since 1980.

The proportion of degreed women having children outside of marriage, always very low, remains at a very modest 6%, while among those without a high school degree the rate stands at a much, much higher 54%.

In the past, middle America, the report means by that the "moderately educated," those with at least a high school but less than a college degree resembled the more highly educated in their sexual and marital habits.

No more. In 1982, 13% of the births to those in the economic middle were out-of-wedlock. Today, that number is 44%; that's a startling increase in such a short period of time. The middle folks are more likely to divorce than both the educated and high school dropouts. Only 58% of the 14-year-old daughters of moderately educated mothers are living with both parents. Not only is that down significantly from 1982 when the number was 74%; it is appreciably closer to the 52% of the daughters of the least educated than it is to the 81% of the girls of the college educated.

The middle Americans in the study are choosing to cohabit rather than to marry; the proportion living together is up 29 percentage points in just 20 years. This increase also well surpasses the numbers for both the most and least educated women.

That is not just surprising; it is deeply threatening to the nation as we know it.

This is, after all, mom and apple pie America; the moderately educated are "the silent majority," "values voters," people who dedicate themselves to the hard work, thrift and delayed gratification that will provide their children a chance to achieve the American Dream. An economy shifting away from manufacturing and a nasty recession has made that dream recede; family breakdown promises to erase it entirely.

Children growing up in single parent homes are at greater risk of a host of social ills, including educational failure and emotional problems. They are also more likely to become single parents themselves.

Making this scenario even more likely are the increasingly permissive attitudes of the moderately educated middle. Americans at all education levels remain fans of marriage; more than three-quarters of them describe it as a very important life goal.

But in other respects it's the highly educated who wind up sounding traditional. Seventy-six percent of the teenaged children of highly educated parents say they would be embarrassed if they got "or got someone" pregnant. Only 61% of the kids of moderately educated parents said the same. Though premarital sex has become a widely accepted fact of American life, the few who disapprove of it are now about as likely to be from the brie and chardonnay crowd as the Budweiser and Doritos group.

On the subject of divorce, too, it's the college educated who are trending more socially conservative. Close to half of both groups believe it ought to be harder to get a divorce. But while the highly educated group has grown substantially more anti-divorce, the moderately educated have not. One more example of the twilight of middle American traditionalism: In 1995, 62% of 25-to-44-year-old moderately educated women reported having three or more sexual partners; by 2008 the number was 70%. Among college grads, on the other hand, the percentages have gone down in the same period, from 59% to 57%.

The title of the National Marriage Project report, "When Marriage Disappears," is an echo of an influential 1996 book by then-University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson, with clear implications for the moderately educated middle. In that work, Wilson argued that the loss of manufacturing jobs was helping to create a dearth of "marriageable men," mainly among minorities. Not only were there few men with a steady job earning decent wages in the poor, black neighborhoods of the nation's cities; their joblessness coincided with more criminal and anti-social behavior. As women looked over the pool of available husbands, they often chose to have children on their own, that is, outside of marriage.

Wilson's thesis helped to explain the ballooning rates of single-parent families among blacks; today, 72% of black children are born to unmarried mothers.

Though the numbers are lower for middle American children, the trends, unfortunately, now look similar. But Wilson's theory tells us only part of the story. It underplays just

how much marital breakdown is itself a cause of downward mobility. Manufacturing jobs may have disappeared, but knowledge economy jobs have grown in number and complexity. Those jobs require higher education, which in turn requires good primary and secondary schools, which for their part depend on families who support their children's stability and learning. As families unravel, so do the chances of children thriving in school and, ultimately, in a complex economy.

Not so long ago, the moderately educated were the imagined heroes of the American Dream. With marriage disappearing, that dream is ending.

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