

Early Marriage

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AMERICANS are marrying at an earlier age than ever. Marriage age has declined from a median age at first marriage of 26.1 years for grooms in 1890 to 22.7 in 1959. The decrease in median age of brides has been from 22 years in 1890 to 20 years in 1959.

How does Oregon compare to some of the other states that report marriage statistics? The 1959 United States vital statistics show the following comparisons:

Median Age at First Marriage

Location	Bride	Groom
	(White population only)	
United States	20.1	22.7
Oregon	19.5	22.0
California	19.8	22.5
Idaho	18.9	21.5
Kansas	19.5	22.0
Montana	19.6	22.7
Michigan	20.0	22.5
Wisconsin	20.5	23.0

Nationwide 48.5% of brides and 16.1% of grooms married for the first time were 19 years of age or under. In Oregon 58% of brides and 19% of grooms married for the first time were 19 years of age or less.

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What is early marriage?

If you ask teen-agers to define early marriage, you will get a different answer than if you ask their parents. For purposes of this discussion, marriage while students are in high school is considered as "early marriage." There is some evidence that marriages delayed until girls are at least 19 years of age will have greater likelihood of success than those of younger couples.

It is recognized that age itself does not insure the maturity necessary for successful marriage. But, a certain "amount" of age is necessary for physiological maturity, to complete high school, to prepare for a vocation (both boy and girl), to untie parental apron strings, to be willing to accept the responsibilities of parenthood, and to have a means of supporting a family.

Why early marriage?

Many causes

There are many reasons for the decline in age at marriage in this country. Motivation behind each couple is different. Some reasons are within the personality of the individual. Some are "signs of the times"—the culture in which we live. Personality is influenced by conditions within society, so it is difficult to separate those reasons within the individual from outside pressures.

Present-day culture

Many social scientists believe that our present culture pushes young people into early marriage.

A careful evaluation of attitudes of adults gives some awareness of pressures on children to get out of childhood as quickly as possible. From the time a child is small he is urged to grow up. If a ten year old acts like a ten year old, adults become upset. Little boys are ad-

monished to act like men. There is little prestige value in being a child.

The December 31, 1961, Sunday magazine section of the Oregonian featured a community which was providing dances for boys and girls 9 to 12 to "keep them out of trouble." A look at any community and its organizations reflects the pressure on boys and girls to function as men and women at a time when they should be enjoying childhood.

Margaret Mead in an article in the Oregonian (June 4, 1961) said:

"We have refused to let young adolescents work and explore the world unless they are married—we have made marriage the price of freedom for both girls and boys. Instead of letting boys and girls go their separate ways, in late childhood and adolescence, we are forcing them on each other, forcing them to practice, not how to be individuals, but how to be spouses and parents, catapulting them into premature, half-baked adulthood, before they have a chance to grow up as individuals."

Our culture stresses the importance of the sex relationship in marriage and exalts it as the most wonderful experience in life. Small wonder that youth wants to have this experience as a sign of adulthood.

Adults foster a romantic illusion of marriage and love as the solution to all problems. Young people go into marriage with an unrealistic idea of the responsibilities of marriage.

Prosperity, early dating, going steady, changing moral standards, the elimination of almost all supervision from young people, the automobile, the impact of sexual stimulation in the form of advertisements, movies, TV—all of these are factors in causing early marriage. It is estimated that about one third of teen-age marriages are precipitated by pregnancy; 80% of these marriages are performed by clergymen.

Research evidence indicates that a forced marriage is more likely to fail than one in which there is "free choice."

Children are reared using love as a controlling force—"if you love me, you'll do this." This method of control makes girls likely objects of exploitation because they have not learned to cope with this argument when used by a dating partner.

Personal problems

There is no doubt that many youth seek a solution to their personal problems in marriage. Marriage provides a way to belong to someone—a way to gain security. It is also a way to gain recognition. Some girls are so eager for marriage that they use premarital intercourse as a way to force boys into marriage.

Some youth—both boys and girls—use marriage as an escape from their problems at school, at home, or in the community. As one girl said, "I'm tired of having everyone tell me what to do all the time, I want to be my own boss for a change."

Marriage is also used as a solution to the problem of premarital pregnancy.

Should society be concerned?

All available evidence points to the fact that present-day society should be concerned about marriage of youth before high school graduation. Students who marry before graduation from high school virtually condemn themselves to a life of economic handicap in today's society. They are more likely to have their marriage end in the divorce court; they are less likely to have a satisfying marriage if it endures.

Some early marriages will work out—some young people will grow up in marriage. But a few years maturity before marriage will pay added dividends. Marriages contracted after the girl has finished high school and has had one or two years to work through her relationship to adults, will have a greater chance for success than those entered into earlier.

Society's concern is for each individual to develop to his own fullest potential. Early marriage is unfortunate when it interferes with this development. Early marriage is a concern not only for parents, but for the total society. However, once marriage occurs, the social system must assume some responsibility for helping it to succeed or provide a way for its dissolution.

What can be done?

- 1) Provide all young people with an opportunity to meet a fair degree of success in their family life, their schools, and their community.
- 2) Help people learn early in life to face their problems and attempt a solution instead of using escape as a solution.
- 3) Consider the facts of early marriage and develop convictions based upon facts.
- 4) Examine causes and focus on the causes of the problem rather than focusing on the symptom.
- 5) Work with youth in the solution of the problem.
- 6) Help children develop a sense of responsibility to others, a respect for the dignity of human beings.
- 7) Provide an opportunity for the development of a meaningful moral code which can be applied to all aspects of life.
- 8) Present a realistic picture of marriage and family life.
- 9) Provide conditions under which a teen-age marriage can have a fair chance to thrive.
- 10) Provide youth with the kind of education which will prepare them for marriage and parenthood as well as a career.

Teen-age marriage is not just a problem of youth. It is youth's solution to a problem society fosters. Since society fosters the problem, society has a responsibility to help solve it.

Suggested Reading

Periodicals

"Attitudes and Policies Concerning Marriage Among High School Students," Judson Landis, *Marriage and Family Living*, May 1956.

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