

Is the Marriage Advantage in Birth Outcomes a Race-Specific Phenomenon?

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Extended Abstract

Much recent attention has been devoted to understanding inequalities in child well-being, both in the scholarly literature and in the popular press. Marriage is one of the primary drivers of inequality in children, and as a result, marriage and marriage promotion programs have taken center stage in political and public discourse. At issue is whether these ‘marriage effects’ can be attributed to a protective effect of marriage or simply reflect selection into marriage. This study examines these issues in the case of adverse birth outcomes. Unmarried women report higher rates of preterm birth and low birth weight, and recent studies have shown this ‘marriage advantage’ is attributable both to selection and protection processes. We expand this literature by examining if these patterns hold for all race-ethnic groups. Past studies have examined only blacks and whites or did not conduct subgroup analyses by race. We also know little about how these associations may have changed over the past several decades, as substantial compositional changes have taken hold across the population and are starkly different across racial-ethnic group membership. Understanding how the marriage—birth outcome association varies by race and time has important and distinct implications, not only for policy and prevention efforts, but also for how we think about and conceptualize inequalities in child well-being more broadly.

To that end, this study uses birth certificate data (all births in North Carolina from 1990-2011) to contrast the marriage advantage across four racial-ethnic groups: White, Black, native-born Hispanic, and foreign-born Hispanic. Results from logistic regression models demonstrate surprising similarity in the magnitude of the marriage advantage—both across racial-ethnic groups and over time. This provides preliminary support for marriage protection. We then perform race-specific direct standardizations (comparing 1990 and 2011) to examine the role of compositional changes, across marital status, age, education, and smoking over this time period.

These results provide evidence of substantial compositional changes across the board, as expected. We then conduct a multivariate decomposition to isolate the proportion of the marriage advantage in preterm birth, low birth weight, and small for gestational age that is attributable to compositional changes (E) in marriage, age, education, and smoking behavior versus the proportion attributable to behavioral responses (C) to marriage, age, education, and smoking behavior. Evidence of a marriage protection hypothesis would emerge if two pieces of evidence are observed: if C is greater than E, and if, among the subcomponents of C, differential returns to the risk of marriage are greater than differential returns to age, education, or prenatal smoking. On the other hand, a selection hypothesis would be supported if C is less than E. Observing which subcomponents of C are greater in magnitude pinpoints where compositional change has made the greatest impact on the change in PTB risk. These multivariate decomposition results vary by race-ethnicity: the marriage protection hypothesis is most supported for whites and foreign-born Hispanics, whereas a marriage selection hypothesis is most supported for blacks and native-born Hispanics. Important nuances for each group are noted. Implications for future research and policy are then discussed.