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Family Background, School and Early Marriage*

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Longitudinal data from a national probability sample of American women reveal the central influence of family background on timing of marriages during high school ages (ages 14-17). Families appear to influence marriage timing indirectly, *through impact on school as an alternative to marriage. Black girls more often come from families with attributes which lead to early marriage, but they are only about* half *as likely to form early marriages as white girls from similar educational and family backgrounds. High rural and low suburban rates of early marriages for whites are consequences of differing family socioeconomic patterns by size of place.*

In the middle decades of the 20th century, the median age at first marriage for American women declined sharply after a half century of relative stability (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1959). This acceleration in marriage rates included young girls between ages 14 and 18, an age group normally enrolled in high school. Compared to earlier decades, nearly half again as many of the young women in these high school ages were getting married during the mid-1950s—the peak early marriage period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972).

The early marriage trend spawned a substantial body of scholarly reaction. Demographers were quick to point out the facts of the change (Monahan, 1951; Hajnal, 1953). Not far behind came a number of studies focused on the surge of early marriages as a social problem.

First, marriage partner and high school student roles did not mix well; they were mutually exclusive as a matter of public policy in many states. Thus, early marriage meant an end to schooling, often before high school graduation, with attendant serious economic and psychological consequences (Tietze and Lauriet, 1955). Second, early marriages were especially prone to breakup (Jacobsen, 1950; Monahan, 1951). Third, early marriage was often accompanied by early childbearing, which severely restricted the opportunities of young couples for economic advancement (Lowrie, 1965; Moss, 1965; Weeks, 1976).

The perspective employed here views decisions about the timing of marriage as a consequence of individuals' positions in identifiable social settings, groups and institutions (Bartz and Nye, 1970), as an approach to a clearer understanding of early marriages in particular.

For example, girls experiencing premarital pregnancies do share a certain condition but they do not constitute a cohesive or institutionalized social *group*, as does a family or a school. Premarital pregnancy is the one occurrence linked most closely with early marriage in empirical studies (for example, see Zelnick and Kantner, 1978) but it will *not* be included in the perspective taken here. While recognizing the connection, we wish to discover how well early marriage can be understood without it, in purely social-structural terms.

As the following discussion explains more fully, early marriage and teenage pregnancy also are showing signs of divergence in recent cohorts, indicating that the intimate correspondence observed between them for children of the baby boom years may be a social *variable*. Thus, it should not be built into an

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investigation as an assumed part of a paradigm.

It is also useful on this point to distinguish between statistical and logical significance. Early teenage pregnancy is still a very puzzling event, not yet interpretable in terms of predictable, rational behavior. It is not clear that linkage of early marriage to premarital pregnancy by social researchers really amounts to an unambiguous increase in our *understanding* of predictable social patterns. Such clear differentials and patterns as exist in premarital pregnancy itself are due to a large extent to the same *social* influences on marriage timing considered here.

Another important aspect of social settings is involvement in the educational institution. Though school enrollment may in part reflect causally-prior background influences, school is also an institutionalized alternative to marriage. Thus, it may independently influence marriage age as well (Glick and Carter, 1958; Alexander and Campbell, 1964).

Another potential alternative to marriage for women, paid employment, has mushroomed during recent decades into a major available institutionalized role. This trend is reflected in rising female labor-force participation rates among single women (Oppenheimer, 1970; Havens, 1973; Sweet, 1973) and in the emergence of a time gap between leaving the parental home and entering a marriage of one's own (Kobrin, 1976). It is unclear, however, whether jobs constitute an *alternative* to marriage or actually facilitate it, in view of escalating labor-force participation among married women (Davis, 1972). As paying jobs for women have multiplied in our society, work for wives seems to have become a normal, almost routine fact of married life.

A third crucial feature of the social environment is the *family* in which a girl spends her formative childhood and adolescent years, because it provides practical experience, role models, basic values and expectations about married life, work and school (Hammond, 1954; Simpson, 1962; Duncan, 1965; Bumpass and Sweet, 1975). Several specific features of family life are significant in this respect.

The parental family's socioeconomic status is most significant, because families bear great responsibility for equipping adolescents for adult life. Class differences exist in the material resources needed to send children to the best schools, or to school at all, and school involvement is a key alternative to marriage (Jencks, 1972). Parental families also strongly influence school attendance through the attitudes and values which they transmit to children, attitudes which reinforce the disparity of material resources across the socioeconomic spectrum (Rehberg and Westby, 1967; Furstenberg, 1971; Kerkhoff and Huff, 1974). Although recent research suggests the parental "encouragement" factor may not be as closely related to actual school involvement for girls as for boys (Hout and Morgan, 1975), class differences in the impact of parental attitudes about schooling have long been recognized (Notestein, 1931; Coster, 1959; Kohn, 1964; Alexander, 1971).

Besides family resources (material and attitudinal), one must consider the family size across which such resources are distributed. Since small and large families show different patterns of parental attention to offspring and expenditures per child on school, health care and other expenses, even within levels of socioeconomic status, family size is also an important and logically distinct consideration (Bossard and Bell, 1956; Elder, 1962; Adams and Meidam, 1968).

Finally, the condition of the marriage of a girl's parents also influences her own marriage plans (Cavan and Beling, 1958; Burchinal, 1959; Tydings *et al.*, 1977). Girls with family problems may be more likely to leave home, form an early marriage of their own, and escape from an uncomfortable situation, even though they see the problems of early marriage.

From their concern with the prevalence of early marriage in the 1940s and 1950s, some researchers built social explanations which center on key features of the family backgrounds of high-school-aged youth. These family circumstances are supposed to influence involvement with other institutionalized social settings (work and/or school) and so affect the timing of marriages both directly and indirectly.

Furthermore, these same family circumstances may account in part for the different marriage patterns seen between blacks and

whites (Voss, 1971) or between rural and urban areas (Sewell and Haller, 1965; Lublin, 1975).

Since the 1950s, however, the incidence of early marriage has subsided; the most recent cohorts to pass through the age range 14 to 17 did so with an unprecedentedly low proportion of their number getting married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). For marriage formation the issue has shifted in consequence because, at the end of our two "early marriage" decades, trends in teenage marriage and teenage childbearing have diverged. "Teenage marriages have declined (since 1966) but teenage childbearing has not decreased commeasureately" (Davis, 1976). In fact, birth rates for girls aged 15 to 17 have actually increased slightly from 1965 to 1975, a period when these same ages have witnessed a sharp drop in marriage formation rates. More precisely, the slight overall increase in mid-teen fertility is the result of a 25 percent drop in legitimate birth rates (from 663.7 to 495.5 per thousand married girls 15 to 17) combined with a nearly 50 percent *increase* in illegitimate birth rates (from 13.1 to 19.5 per thousand unmarried girls in the same ages) (Ventura, 1977). Although marriages were postponed in ever-greater numbers, high-school-aged girls continued to have babies at a nearly unchanged rate, and more of them were simply counted as illegitimate. Marriage and fertility schedules here display a degree of independence by their diverging trends.

As a result, concern with teenage childbearing, particularly illegitimacy, increasingly has become detached from concern with marriage formation as a social process. Furthermore, the declining incidence of marriage among high-school-aged girls may have removed much of any past sense of urgency from efforts to understand social antecedents of early marriage. Thus, the separation of teenage pregnancy from teenage marriage as subjects for study has tended to draw research effort away from the issue of marriage timing.

The question of how age at marriage (particularly a *young* age) is determined, however, is a matter of continuing importance. Despite signs of divergence, early marriage and early childbearing (which undermines efforts to accumulate material resources; see Ewer and Crimmins-Gardner, 1977) are still importantly related. In fact, early marriages interfere with economic success for families, quite apart from the number and timing of children (Coombs and Freedman, 1970). The strong inverse relationship between age at marriage and durability of marriages has also been demonstrated in repeated investigations (Jacobsen, 1950; Monahan, 1953; Burchinal, 1965; Schoen, 1975).

USING NLS DATA TO ANALYZE MARRIAGE TIMING

Because it remains an important issue, sociological attempts to explain the timing of marriages have continued, beyond the "early marriage" decades which first stimulated widespread research (Voss, 1976). The findings discussed here are part of a continuing effort to understand the social circumstances which influence young women to choose early marriage.

In approaching such analysis, a number of limitations faced by past studies were avoided. One difficulty limited early research in particular; specialized and unrepresentative samples. Another liability was the lack of a true time dimension in cross-sectional data, such as that from censuses of most surveys. Thus, Preston and Richards (1975:210) decided:

> The best hope for explanation at present, short of full-scale longitudinal study of individuals and their environments, would seem to be a study of the behavior of persons located in different environments.

Other researchers at least in part have surmounted these difficulties. Perhaps the best study of determinants of marriage age to date is that of Paul Voss (Voss, 1976). Even this longitudinal data is of limited usefulness for analysis of *early* marriages, however, since nearly all of the 5,000+ respondents were high school graduates from a single state.

The National Longitudinal Surveys of labor-market experience, conducted by the Ohio State University, include one set of surveys of about 5,000 young women aged 14 to 24 when the study began in 1968, and thus 18 to 28 after the fifth annual interviews in 1972 (Shea *et al.*, 1969). This longitudinal study resolves the problem of temporal sequence because it includes information for each interview year and retrospective information back to each respondent's age 14, illustrating a sequence of choices about the timing of

marriage and surrounding social circumstances. It covers ages within which the great preponderance of all first marriages occur in our society, and is particularly complete in its coverage of the youngest ages. It resolves the problem of specialized coverage because it deals with a nationally representative probability sample of young women, selected with the sampling frame used to choose respondents for the Current Population Surveys.

From this data base, it is possible to examine all the social influences suggested above—family background (parental SES, marital stability and number of siblings), school involvement, and paid employment—and assess the explanatory insights they offer into the timing of marriages among the NLS respondents.

FAMILIES, SCHOOL AND EARLY MARRIAGE

By 1972, all the NLS respondents had passed beyond the 14 to 17 age range, leaving a record of their high school years behind. During these years, about one in six of the 5,000+ young women got married; these marriages formed before age 18 are here defined as "early marriages."

As a first step in applying the perspective outlined above, variations in the incidence of early marriage are shown in Table 1, for categories of the family background characteristics already singled out.

These figures reveal that the frequency of early marriage increased, in the ratio 1:2:3, for girls from families of high, medium and low socioeconomic status, respectively. Furthermore, within these broad socioeconomic levels, girls who were living with both parents at age 14 were noticeably less likely to go on to marry early than girls living in broken homes at age 14. Finally, there was a tendency (except among the poorest girls) for those from medium-sized families (one to four siblings) to avoid early marriage more than either "only children" or girls from larger families. "Only children" from broken homes were especially likely to marry early at all socioeconomic levels.

Family instability and larger family size both characterize lower socioeconomic levels in particular. Thus, *all three* of these family influences, though demonstrably independent in their impact, point to the same young women as the most likely candidates for early marriage.

However, this direct connection between family background and early marriage is misleading, for these family circumstances exert their influence on the timing of marriages only *indirectly,* through impact on involvement with high school as an alternative to early marriage. Families which have sufficient resources (material and attitudinal) can steer more of their daughters past the reefs of early marriage by keeping them enrolled in high school, at least until graduation.

When early marriages among only those

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF ALL RESPONDENTS MARRIED AT AGES 13 THROUGH 17 (N = 100% OF *EACH CELL* IN TABLE)

	No sibs	1-2 sibs	3-4 sibs	5+ sibs	Total	TOTAL
Low-SES families						
Broken at 14	45%	21%	19%	20%	21%	
	(20)	(91)	(104)	(241)	(456)	18%
						(1514)
Intact at 14	15%	19%	20%	15%	17%	
	(33)	(208)	(263)	(554)	(1058)	
Medium-SES families						
Broken at 14	29%	14%	14%	20%	18%	
	(55)	(149)	(160)	(186)	(550)	12%
						(1959)
Intact at 14	13%	7%	11%	13%	10%	
	(88)	(549)	(437)	(335)	(1409)	
High-SES families						
Broken at 14	20%	7%	6%	17%	10%	
	(20)	(94)	(62)	(35)	(211)	5%
						(1686)
Intact at 14	2%	4%	5%	5%	4%	
	(101)	(774)	(437)	(163)	(1475)	

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES MARRIED AT AGES 13 THROUGH 17 (N = 100% OF *EACH CELL* IN TABLE)

	No sibs	1-2 sibs	3-4 sibs	5+ sibs	Total	TOTAL
Low-SES families						
Broken at 14	–*	12%	2%	8%	7%	
	(8)	(47)	(42)	(104)	(201)	6%
						(794)
Intact at 14	8%	8%	4%	4%	5%	
	(24)	(132)	(151)	(286)	(593)	
Medium-SES families						
Broken at 14	13%	7%	8%	5%	7%	
	(30)	(95)	(91)	(91)	(307)	6%
						(1355)
Intact at 14	5%	5%	6%	5%	5%	
	(74)	(444)	(317)	(213)	(1048)	
High-SES families						
Broken at 14	17%*	4%	4%	13%	6%	
	(12)	(71)	(48)	(23)	(154)	3%
						(1289)
Intact at 14	2%	4%	3%	1%	3%	
	(86)	(583)	(343)	(123)	(1135)	

*Percentage unreliable due to small N.

girls who *finished* high school are examined, therefore, little significant difference remains between broad socioeconomic levels. There is still a slight tendency for girls from broken homes to marry early more often on the whole, particularly if they were also "only children," but these variations are also greatly reduced by focusing on only high school graduates (see Table 2).

The other point to emerge from consideration of high school graduates as a distinct group is that high school *does* appear to be an *alternative* to early marriage; that is, these two institutionalized arenas of social life show a degree of mutual exclusivity. The 171 early marriages observed among high school graduates amounted to only 5 percent of the respondents in this group, and a substantial portion of them occurred after an early graduation, or involved an interruption of an eventually-completed high school education. Only 1 or 2 percent of all girls finishing high school actually *combined* early marriage with steady enrollment.

Since these early marriages involved girls who did finish high school, they could avoid at least some of the deleterious consequences of "early marriage" as envisioned by early researchers. In particular, they were not handicapped in terms of access to jobs in the way dropouts were, and their early marriages were actually not *quite* so early as those of dropouts, suggesting a greater chance for survival of the marriage itself, and possibly a later start on childbearing as well.

Early marriages among girls finishing high school amounted to only a small share of all early marriages observed. The other 70 percent of all early marriages were confined to the 20 percent of all respondents who left high school without finishing the 12th grade—high school dropouts. These early-marrying dropouts, beginning their adult lives with decisions which put "two strikes against them," are the respondents with which this analysis is most concerned.

Among dropouts, just as among graduates, little or no influence of family backgrounds on the timing of marriages for dropouts, considered separately, can be seen. If anything, well-to-do dropouts were actually more likely to marry early than poorer girls who never finished high school. A small but inconsistent tendency does persist for dropouts from broken homes to marry early more than girls living with both parents at age 14, but the "only child" hypothesis cannot be examined reliably among dropouts, since there were so few of them to be found (see Table 3).

Another point can be made upon comparison of Table 2 and Table 3. In terms of relative frequency, early marriage for *poor* dropouts was six times as common as early marriage for *poor* girls finishing high school. By contrast, dropouts from high-SES families

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE OF DROPOUTS MARRIED AT AGES 13 THROUGH 17 (N = 100% OF *EACH CELL* IN TABLE)

	No sibs	1-2 sibs	3-4 sibs	5+ sibs	Total	TOTAL
Low-SES families						
Broken at 14	73%*	30%	35%	34%	35%	
	(11)	(44)	(55)	(121)	(231)	36%
						(639)
Intact at 14	33%*	39%	48%	31%	37%	
	(9)	(71)	(96)	(232)	(408)	
Medium-SES families						
Broken at 14	57%	34%	29%	42%	38%	
	(21)	(41)	(55)	(77)	(194)	38%
						(419)
Intact at 14	64%*	31%	38%	38%	37%	
	(11)	(59)	(68)	(87)	(225)	
High-SES families						
Broken at 14	50%*	40%*	50%*	43%*	44%	
	(4)	(10)	(4)	(7)	(25)	42%
						(96)
Intact at 14	–*	29%	55%	50%*	41%	
	(0)	(35)	(22)	(14)	(71)	

*Percentage unreliable due to small N.

were almost 15 times as likely to marry as well-off girls who graduated. This fact should put to rest any fears that an analysis focused chiefly on dropouts overstates the tendency for poor girls to marry early. Actually, the incidence of early marriage among poor girls is understated by consideration of dropouts alone, since an even greater share of poor than well-off graduates also married early.

The original dependence of early marriage on family background characteristics is in large part absent for high school graduates and dropouts considered separately. The only possible conclusion from this fact is that what really is influenced most directly by a girl's family life is her enrollment in high school. This deduction is verified in Table 4.

In terms of their family backgrounds, dropouts shared three characteristics—more poor parents, more broken homes, and (less clearly) more siblings than girls who finished high school—all of which account for the patterns observed in Table 1 but missing from Tables 2 and 3.

Poor girls were about twice as likely to drop out as girls from medium-SES homes, who in their turn were about twice as likely to drop out as girls from well-to-do families. For each

TABLE 4. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS DROPPING OUT BY FAMILY BACKGROUND (N = 100% OF *EACH CELL* IN TABLE)

	No sibs	1-2 sibs	3-4 sibs	5+ sibs	Total	TOTAL
Low-SES families						
Broken at 14	60%	48%	54%	52%	52%	
	(20)	(91)	(104)	(241)	(456)	44%
						(1514)
Intact at 14	27%	35%	37%	44%	40%	
	(33)	(208)	(263)	(554)	(1058)	
Medium-SES families						
Broken at 14	40%	28%	36%	44%	37%	
	(55)	(149)	(160)	(186)	(550)	22%
						(1959)
Intact at 14	12%	11%	16%	26%	16%	
	(88)	(549)	(437)	(335)	(1409)	
High-SES families						
Broken at 14	20%	12%	6%	20%	12%	
	(20)	(94)	(62)	(35)	(211)	6%
						(1686)
Intact at 14	0%	5%	5%	9%	5%	
	(101)	(774)	(437)	(163)	(1475)	

TABLE 5. SEQUENCE OF WORK AND MARRIAGE BY FAMILY BACKGROUND, THROUGH AGE 17 FOR ALL NLS RESPONDENTS

	Low-SES Families		Medium-SES Families		High-SES Families	
	Broken at 14	Intact at 14	Broken at 14	Intact at 14	Broken at 14	Intact at 14
Dropouts–(early marriages)	82 (100%)	149 (100%)	74 (100%)	85 (100%)	11* (100%)	29 (100%)
Worked *before* marriage	14 (17%)	24 (16%)	8 (11%)	23 (27%)	2 ––	8 (28%)
Worked *after* marriage	14 (17%)	27 (18%)	16 (22%)	14 (17%)	3 ––	6 (21%)
Never worked through age 17	54 (66%)	98 (66%)	50 (68%)	48 (56%)	6 ––	15 (52%)
Dropouts–(no early marriage)	155 (100%)	274 (100%)	128 (100%)	144 (100%)	15* (100%)	48 (100%)
Worked before age 17	30 (19%)	55 (20%)	22 (17%)	33 (23%)	2 ––	7 (15%)
No work through age 17	125 (81%)	219 (80%)	106 (83%)	111 (77%)	13 ––	41 (85%)
HS Graduates–(early marriages)	15* (100%)	31 (100%)	23 (100%)	57 (100%)	10* (100%)	36 (100%)
Worked *before* marriage	0 ––	5 (16%)	1 (4%)	7 (12%)	1 ––	6 (17%)
Worked *after* marriage	3 ––	9 (29%)	5 (22%)	18 (32%)	1 ––	6 (17%)
No work through age 17	12 ––	17 (55%)	17 (74%)	32 (56%)	8 ––	24 (66%)
HS Graduates–(no early marriage)	204 (100%)	604 (100%)	325 (100%)	1123 (100%)	175 (100%)	1362 (100%)
Work before age 17	26 (13%)	93 (15%)	61 (19%)	232 (21%)	23 (13%)	173 (13%)
No work through age 17	178 (87%)	511 (85%)	264 (81%)	891 (79%)	152 (87%)	1189 (87%)

*Percentage unreliable due to small N.

broad socioeconomic level, girls from broken homes also were twice as likely to drop out as girls who had lived with both parents at age 14. Less consistent but still noticeable (particularly for intact homes) was the increase in chances of dropping out with increasing numbers of siblings.

Beyond this impact on the "intervening variable" of high school attendance, family backgrounds appear to have had only a minor influence on the formation of early marriages. This finding agrees with that of Voss (1977).

PAID EMPLOYMENT AS A NON-INFLUENCE ON EARLY MARRIAGE

A few of the girls who completed high school did marry early, and over half of all dropouts did not form early marriages. Thus, although school enrollment (or its absence) does offer substantial insight into social circumstances related to the timing of marriages, there is certainly room for further explanation of why some girls drop out *and* marry early.

Earlier remarks suggest that perhaps dropouts who stayed single chose a third alternative—paying jobs instead of school or marriage. After all, it is well-known that within marriage, jobs for women do have a powerful impact on the timing of births (Ridley, 1959; Waller, 1971; Hoffman, 1974; Waller, 1977). It seems reasonable to suppose that work before marriage may also delay formation of the marriage itself (Preston and Richards, 1975).

This notion finds no support in the experiences of NLS respondents, however. For both dropouts and girls who finished high school, early jobs and early marriages seem *independent* of one another. That is, the share of girls

(in both groups) *without* work experience through age 17 was almost identical for girls who formed early marriages and for those who did not (see "no work through age 17" in Table 5).

If anything, girls who married early were *more* likely also to work during the high school years than were girls who did not. To further undermine this work-as-marriage-substitute notion, it is interesting to add that, of the girls who did form early marriages, more went to work *after* marriage (but still by 17 or before) than *before* marriage.

The fact of the matter is that girls obtain paying jobs in increasing numbers with increasing age, chiefly in the years after completing high school. Work during the high school years (ages 14 through 17) is a bare trickle of activity compared to later labor-force involvement. In fact, dropouts are *less* likely overall to work before first marriage (now looking beyond just the high school ages for a moment) than girls who complete high school, despite their head start in the job market. The advantage of a high school diploma appears to erase such a head start almost immediately.

Early marriages at different ages happen to cut across this age schedule of labor-force participation rates at different points, but the two activities exhibit no mutual exclusiveness, no causal ordering; in short, no significant dependence on each other at all. Employment for these young girls emerges as a fairly rare "add-on" activity which can as easily complement an early marriage as serve as an alternative to one.

The dropouts who do not form early marriages thus remain something of a puzzle. They appear to remain at home with parents even after leaving school; perhaps they are caught up in premarital pregnancies and rely on parents rather than the father of the child for support (again accenting the distinction between reproduction and marriage).

The central issue in this analysis, however, is understanding of the social circumstances of dropouts who *do* marry early. In pursuing this question, some further points about the early-marrying dropouts in the NLS sample can be considered.

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AS AN ASPECT OF OTHER MARRIAGE PATTERNS

The foregoing portrait of NLS respondents, focused on their experiences with familial and educational institutions, is quite useful in understanding the relation of other features of social life to the timing of marriages. Two further marriage patterns have already been mentioned; as the first rows of figures in Table 6 illustrate, early marriages appear to be more frequent in less densely populated

TABLE 6. INCIDENCE OF EARLY MARRIAGE BY RACE AND SIZE OF PLACE FOR DROPOUTS (WITH STANDARDIZATIONS FOR FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS BY RACE)

	Rural at 14	Towns at 14	Suburbs* at 14	Cities* at 14	Total
White Respondents	890	1155	885	702	3632
Actual Early Marriages	87 (9.7%)	109 (9.4%)	57 (5.8%)	42 (6.0%)	295 (8.1%)
Black Respondents	414	276	300	467	1457
Actual Early Marriages	31 (7.5%)	38 (13.8%)	22 (7.3%)	31 (6.6%)	122 (8.4%)
Expected Early Marriages					
For blacks with white parental socioeconomic status distribution	26 (6.3%)	26 (9.6%)	15 (4.9%)	25 (5.4%)	92 (6.3%)
Plus white shares of broken homes	19 (4.7%)	15 (5.6%)	10 (3.3%)	21 (4.5%)	65 (4.5%)
Plus white family size distributions	16 (3.8%)	14 (5.2%)	10 (3.3%)	18 (3.9%)	58 (4.0%)
Plus white rates of dropping out of high school	19 (4.7%)	15 (5.6%)	8 (2.8%)	14 (2.9%)	56 (3.8%)

*Size of place categories are: rural = farm and other rural; towns = places with less than 25,000 inhabitants; suburbs = suburbs of major cities and smaller cities with 25,000 to 100,000 inhabitants; cities = major central cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

areas and, at least in the aggregate, a slightly greater share of black girls marry early than do whites.

Starting from this surface view, it is very revealing to consider how differing family backgrounds and school experiences affect the observed levels of early marriage for dropouts in each of these race-community-size groups. A standardization procedure illustrates hypothetical changes in early marriages for black girls in each size-of-place category, when white girls' family constellations are substituted.

Since two-thirds of all black respondents came from families in the bottom one-third of the socioeconomic spectrum, a standardization which redistributes them according to white socioeconomic backgrounds (but preserves the actual incidence of early marriages *within* broad socioeconomic levels) reduces the expected number of early marriages in all sizes of community. Blacks are poorer everywhere, and poor families produce more early-marrying dropouts. Different degrees of reduction in expected marriages for each community size category, shown in the first step of the standardization, also reveal that part of the variation in early marriage for black girls in the different sized communities is due to the differing socioeconomic distributions of the black population in each category.

A larger share of black families from each socioeconomic level also had broken up by respondents' age 14. Thus, standardization based on white patterns of family stability means inflating levels of black family stability, again reducing expected early marriages since these occur more often in the context of broken homes.

Black girls are more likely to come from large families than whites, *within* categories of family socioeconomic status and stability. The differences are most marked among the poor in central cities and in the middle class in towns and rural areas. Thus, the shifting of black family size distributions to match those of whites has its strongest impact in these categories, and expected marriages drop again in the third step of the standardization.

At this point, black girls have been redistributed hypothetically so that their family backgrounds match those of whites on the whole. In the process, family background emerges as a clear "suppressor variable" (Rosenberg, 1968). Initially there was little difference in incidence of early marriage for blacks and whites. Taking family backgrounds into account reveals that this is the result of *two* underlying circumstances: (1) more black girls come from families with attributes which often lead to dropping out and early marriage (many siblings, single parents and marital disruption, and lack of education, money and jobs); but (2) black girls are much less likely to form early marriages than white girls with corresponding family histories.

In urban areas the dropout rate for black respondents is most in excess of the rate for whites, for specific family constellations. This means that a further refinement of the standardization (equating black with white dropout rates) predicts still lower totals of expected early marriages for black girls in cities.

By this time in the analysis, it is quite plain that something apart from family background and educational involvement (as these are measured here) is at work among the NLS respondents. *Why* should black dropouts in a community of given size, and with given family backgrounds, be only about *half* as likely to form early marriages as white dropouts similarly situated?

One tentative but quite plausible answer is that a greater prevalence of early marriages (here found among whites) is due to a relative lack of obstacles, and that fewer marriages (here involving blacks) mean more such obstacles (Davis, 1958).

Specifically, obstacles to early marriage for young black dropouts include astronomically high unemployment rates for their potential husbands, more restricted access to housing than for whites equivalently situated (Rubinowitz, 1973) and perhaps less potential for parental aid in establishing a new household (socioeconomic indicators often do not consider levels of accumulated wealth, so that equal levels of SES are not always as equal as they appear).

Beyond obstacles to early marriage imposed by these socioeconomic constraints, black girls face different community and family norms and social controls related to pregnancy (Pratt, 1965). Premarital conception among whites seems more often to lead to early marriage, but among blacks to "illegitimate" births. The matter of abortion

TABLE 7. INCIDENCE OF EARLY MARRIAGE BY SIZE OF PLACE FOR WHITE DROPOUTS (WITH STANDARDIZATIONS FOR FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS BY SIZE OF PLACE)

	Rural at 14	Towns at 14	Suburbs at 14	Cities at 14	Total
White Respondents	890	1155	885	702	3632
Actual Early Marriages	87 (9.7%)	109 (9.4%)	57 (5.8%)	42 (6.0%)	295 (8.1%)
Expected Early Marriages (Standard = Rural)					
With parental socioeconomic status distribution standard	(87)	160 (13.9%)	98 (11.1%)	61 (8.7%)	406 (11.2%)
Plus shares of broken homes standard	(87)	156 (13.5%)	95 (10.7%)	55 (7.8%)	393 (10.8%)
Plus family size distributions standard	(87)	154 (13.3%)	99 (11.2%)	57 (8.1%)	397 (10.9%)
Plus dropout rates standard	(87)	109 (9.5%)	63 (7.1%)	53 (7.6%)	312 (8.6%)
Expected Early Marriages (Standard = Suburbs and Small Cities)					
With parental socioeconomic status distribution standard	47 (5.3%)	95 (8.2%)	(57)	39 (5.6%)	238 (6.6%)
Plus shares of broken homes standard	51 (5.8%)	94 (8.2%)	(57)	38 (5.4%)	240 (6.6%)
Plus family size distributions standard	45 (5.0%)	92 (7.9%)	(57)	36 (5.1%)	230 (6.3%)
Plus dropout rates standard	56 (6.3%)	93 (8.1%)	(57)	41 (5.8%)	247 (6.8%)

further complicates this difference.

Black families also share greater emphasis on kinship in daily life than do whites. Thus, Glick found many times more black than white children live with relatives other than parents, even at very young ages (Glick, 1975). Given a certain level of instability in black marriages (itself perhaps partially due to the availability of other personal bonds based on kinship) the children *could* have been found living with their mothers alone instead—their residence with other relatives indicates an active, functioning kinship system.

This greater prominence of kinship for black girls may also explain why they tend to marry later. White girls from smaller, less active kin groups, may be *propelled* by the scarcity of other personal ties toward marriage at their earliest convenience with greater momentum than blacks. In this view (which also may shed light on why Americans in general marry so early), not only obstacles to early marriage but the cultural forces creating the *momentum* toward marriage in the first place (Davis and Blake, 1956) are seen as variables which may help explain the lower propensity of black girls to marry early.

Using the white population as a basis for standardization also raises another significant question. In quite a different context, it has been shown that the peculiarities of a group chosen as a *standard* have significant implications for such a statistical procedure (Spiegelman and Marks, 1966).

In Table 6, for example, the first step of the standardization showed that expected marriages for black girls given white patterns of parental socioeconomic status dropped about *twice* as much for suburban respondents as for those from rural backgrounds. For rural areas, the white SES distribution shifted a plurality of black girls from low to *medium* socioeconomic status, while for suburbs, the white SES distribution shifted a plurality of black girls from low to *high* socioeconomic status, more drastically influencing the level of expected marriages.

What other patterns of marriage timing are found within the group chosen here as a standard? A revealing answer is obtained by further standardizing the family backgrounds and school activities of all white respondents, using size of place categories as a base (see Table 7).

Hypothetical levels of early marriage for whites rose highest when girls from rural backgrounds were used as a standard, at least

when only socioeconomic status was controlled. This shows that the higher incidence of early marriage for rural girls is in large part due to their families' lower than average socioeconomic positions. (By the same token, giving rural girls a suburban socioeconomic pattern, as in the second set of standardizations in Table 7, cut their early marriage rate in half, a consequence not greatly altered by succeeding steps in the analysis.) As each new feature of the explanatory model developed earlier was added to this standardization, however, the inflation of early marriages expected in nonrural areas faded away. The particularly sharp declines consequent to giving everyone rural dropout rates leaves little net change. This last consequence is a result of the *combination* of a shift to the lower rural socioeconomic levels, and the fact that, among the poor respondents in particular, urban, suburban and town dropout rates exceeded the rural dropout rate.

On the other hand, using respondents who lived in suburbs and small towns at age 14 as a standard yielded the lowest expected levels of early marriage in all categories, levels which also varied considerably less than the unstandardized figures. This result is observed at once in the first step of this second standardization, and successive steps introduce only minor changes in the pattern. This means that the low rate of early marriage enjoyed by girls from these sorts of communities is almost wholly due to the pleasant socioeconomic coloring of such preferred residential settings. If other areas had the same distribution of families by SES, all four size-of-place categories would have similar rates of early marriage. In fact, this socioeconomic advantage of suburbia *conceals* the fact that when controlling for specific family constellations, the suburbs have a higher rate of dropouts than do any other area. The increase in expected marriages for all other categories, using suburban dropout rates (see last row in Table 6) is a reflection of the higher SES-stability-size-1 specific dropout rates characteristic of suburban respondents on the whole.

When all such statistical manipulations are completed, a few basic conclusions stand out clearly in the light of the NLS respondents' experiences. The overwhelmingly dominant feature of social life for American girls between ages 14 and 17 is enrollment in high school. For the vast majority of all girls, involvement with school and residence with parents precludes other major institutionalized roles, especially marriage. A special minority of young girls, however, drop out of high school and form a population to which most marriages at these ages are confined.

The girls who drop out are more likely to come from poor families, to have several siblings, and to have experienced some form of disorganization of their parental family. This means that the dropout population includes more than its share of black girls (since their families more often fit this description) even though black girls are actually *less* likely to drop out than white girls from equivalent family backgrounds.

Among these dropouts, and among high school graduates as a group too, family circumstances by themselves seem to exert little or no further influence on the timing of early marriages. Neither do paying jobs account for early marriages or their absence. Family circumstances, in other words, exert their influence on marriage timing *indirectly* through impact on school attendance, at least during the high school years.

The black girls who do drop out, however, are only about *half* as likely to actually go ahead and form a marriage during these ages as are white girls from equivalent family backgrounds. This shows clearly that some significant social features (in this case the social consequences of being black) besides family background and school experiences are essential in understanding patterns of early marriage, even within the subpopulation of dropouts.

On the other hand, an explanatory perspective centered on parental-family circumstances seems adequate to account for much of the variation in incidence of early marriage attributed to other social factors, such as size of community. In fact, the sharply different incidence of early marriage among dropouts for black and white respondents also only emerges clearly when the confusing effects of black-white differences in family composition are sorted out. In two rather different ways, then, the present focus on family background proves to be a fruitful and empirically sound tool for understanding the social influences which shape decisions about early marriage in our society.

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