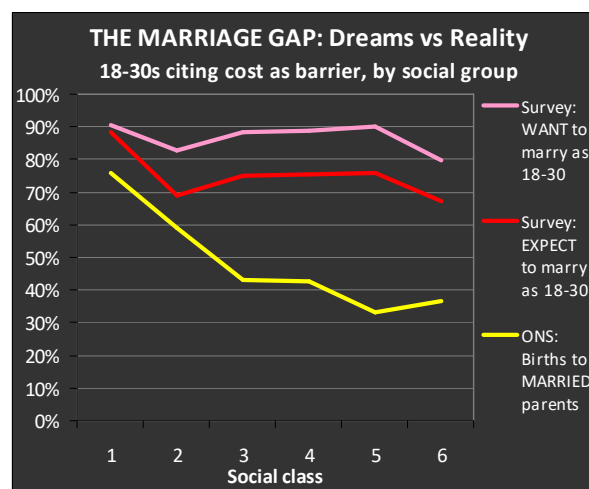
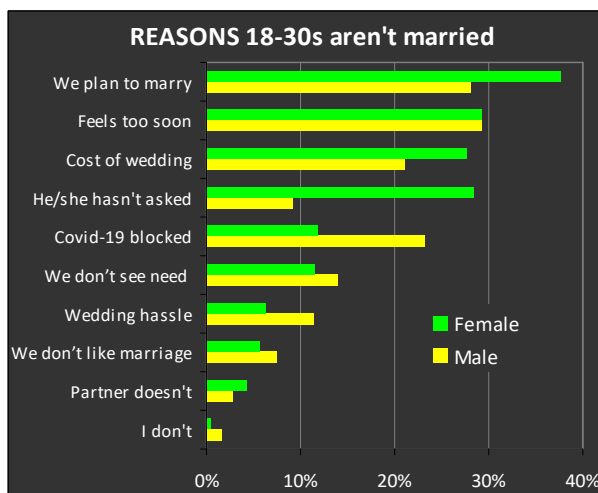




Wedding Costs and the Marriage Gap

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- Almost one in three young unmarried UK adults aged 18-30 say they would be more likely to get married if the typical wedding was '*cheaper, smaller, and didn't have to include a big meal*', according to our survey conducted for Marriage Week.
- In terms of **who wants to get married** among this group, the Marriage Gap between top and bottom social classes is as low as 11%. In terms of **who actually marries**, our previous research has highlighted a far higher Marriage Gap of 39%.
- Comparing these two findings, five out of six of those who want to marry in the top social class will do so by the time they have children, whereas fewer than half in the lowest social class will do so.
- Our survey provides compelling evidence that the cost of the wedding – and not lack of desire to marry – is a serious barrier to marriage for all except the top social classes.



Wedding costs

THE average UK wedding in 2019 apparently costs an eye-watering £31,974 (*Hitched 2019*).

Whether this is genuinely 'representative' of all weddings or simply those couples on the mailing list of a self-interested wedding industry, I'm not convinced the real figure is anywhere like that.

But it doesn't matter what I think. Because the seed has been well and truly planted.

A wedding has to be an instagrammable event to rival the celebs. The wedding itself is what counts. It has to be perfect. It has to represent, on the outside at least, the dream of happily-ever-after.

The result is that wedding costs – including stag and hen dos, the venue, food and drink, special clothes, and a suitably exotic honeymoon – have become a major barrier to marriage. Even Netflix is now producing a reality show called 'Marriage or Mortgage'.

Never mind that celebs are poor role models for marriage – which is after all the point of the wedding – with divorce rates twice as high as the rest of us (*Benson 2020a*).

I sympathise deeply with the predicament couples face. Should you put a deposit on a flat where you can live for years or pay a fortune for a party that lasts a day?

It doesn't have to be that way of course. Stripped of all its frippery, a 'naked' wedding requires two witnesses, costs £100, and takes two trips to the registrar. All else is optional.

Nor was it ever thus. Until the 1970s, everyone married, rich and poor alike. Cost was no barrier.

Anecdotally, most weddings in the 1970s – and even well into the 1980s – were much less drawn out occasions. Stag and hen dos were limited to a night out and never a weekend abroad. Few weddings included the huge expense of a sit down meal.

Survey of 18-30s

Our new survey of 2,000 young unmarried UK adults aged 18-30, commissioned by Marriage Foundation for Marriage Week 10-16 May 2021 and conducted by OnePoll, show the extent to which the cost of a wedding is a significant barrier to marriage.

- **Among the entire sample of young adults, whether in a relationship or single, 29% said they were more likely to expect to get married if wedding costs were cheaper.**
- **Among the 941 adults who were in a relationship, 28% of women and 21% of men cited 'wedding cost' as a reason why they were not currently married.**
- **Among the 585 adults who said they were more likely to marry if weddings were cheaper, 87% WANTED to marry at some point. These figures ranged from 91% among the top social class ('higher managers') to 80% among the lowest class ('casual labourers')**
- **Among this same group of 585 adults, 75% EXPECTED to marry, ranging from 88% in the top class to 67% in the lowest class.**

The Marriage Gap

Our previous research has highlighted that the Marriage Gap between the top and bottom social classes has doubled in the past 30 years (*Benson 2021*).

Whereas the proportion of births to parents who are married is 76% in the top income group, it is just 35% in the lowest income group.

In order to provide some sense of how dreams turn into reality, I matched our survey results on the 18-30s who WANT or EXPECT to marry with the ONS data on births within marriage by social group.

This produces the following table (and chart on the front page):

Social class	n=	Survey WANTS to marry	EXPECTS to marry	ONS 2019 MARRIED births
Higher managerial	85	91%	88%	76%
Intermediate	162	83%	69%	59%
Supervisory	129	88%	75%	43%
Skilled	90	89%	76%	43%
Semi-skilled	70	90%	76%	33%
Casual labourers	49	80%	67%	37%
ALL	585	87%	75%	52%
MARRIAGE GAP		11%	21%	39%

The first thing to note is that samples are small in some social classes. However the overall trends are clear.

The Marriage Gap between rich and poor among those who WANT to marry is just 11% (91%-80%), increasing to 21% for those who EXPECT to marry and finally 39% for those who ACTUALLY marry by the time they have children.

Looking at the entire sample of 18-30s deals with the sample problem by bringing in those who did not say their plans to marry are affected by costs.

Social class	n=	Survey WANTS to marry	EXPECTS to marry	ONS 2019 MARRIED births
Higher managerial	200	85%	76%	76%
Intermediate	536	81%	69%	59%
Supervisory	506	77%	65%	43%
Skilled	296	78%	67%	43%
Semi-skilled	246	79%	62%	33%
Casual labourers	202	68%	55%	37%
ALL	1986	79%	66%	52%
MARRIAGE GAP		16%	20%	39%

Although the proportions of those who WANT and EXPECT to marry are 8-9% lower overall, the trend in Marriage Gap remains very similar.

The Marriage Gap between rich and poor among those who WANT to marry is now 16%, increasing to 20% for those who EXPECT to marry and once again 39% for those who ACTUALLY marry by the time they have children.

Conclusion

Using two different questions, our survey finds that cost is a significant barrier to marriage for between one quarter and one third of unmarried young adults aged 18-30.

A significant proportion of young adults in a relationship say cost of wedding is a reason why they are not currently married. Similarly a significant proportion of all unmarried adults, whether in a relationship or single, say they are more likely to marry if weddings were cheaper.

While this is hardly surprising given the inflation in wedding expectations over the past 30 years, what was more surprising – and even encouraging – was that the desire to marry was similarly strong across all social classes.

Whereas the Marriage Gap was as low as 11% between top and bottom social classes in terms of wanting to get married at some point, it had risen to 39% in terms of who actually marries by the time they have children

This is clear evidence that the cost of a wedding – with all the expectations that this brings – is a serious contributor to the Marriage Gap.

Marriage matters a great deal. It is the platform upon which couples express clarity of commitment and from which they receive social affirmation and support (*e.g. Benson 2020b*). The evidence is clear that parents who marry before having children are most likely to stay together, across income groups (*Benson 2015*).

The consequences of marriage go far beyond mere stability. Married families have better social mobility, the self esteem of their children is boosted, and their risk of mental health problems reduced (*Benson & James 2016, 2018; Benson & McKay 2017*).

We have previously highlighted this as a social justice issue affecting the poorest (*Benson 2019*).

The poorest still want to marry and arguably benefit most from the commitment of marriage because of the social and economic stability that it brings. Yet they have been persuaded that

marriage is not essential. The rising cost barrier merely provides the excuse.

However our survey reveals that the problem goes deeper than this. The Marriage Gap now extends to the middle classes.

In the top two social classes, at least three quarters of those who want to marry are likely to do so by the time they have children. In the remaining four social classes, fewer than half of those who want to marry are likely to do so.

It's possible that the drastic reduction in wedding size during lockdown will help lower future expectations about wedding size and costs.

It's also possible that the Law Commission's proposals to allow weddings to be conducted in gardens and pubs will also encourage a reduction in expectations and costs.

Either way, the time is now for a campaign for smaller 'naked' weddings that properly reflect the importance of mutual commitment while removing most of the superficial extravagances that have inflated wedding expectations.

This is a social justice issue.

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