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# What Do Low-Income Single Mothers Say about Marriage?

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## Abstract

Current theories of marriage under-predict the extent of non-marriage, have not been adequately tested, or do not apply well to women with low-

socioeconomic status. Furthermore, scholarly research on marriage attitudes among low-SES women suffers from a lack of up-to-date qualitative work. This study draws on qualitative interviews with 292 low-income single<sup>1</sup> mothers in three U.S. cities. Inductive analysis reveals five primary motivations for non-marriage among low-income single mothers. Most mothers agree that potential marriage partners must earn significantly more than the minimum wage, but also emphasize the importance of stability of employment, source of earnings, and the effort men expend to find and keep their jobs. Mothers place equal or greater emphasis on non-monetary factors such as how marriage may diminish or enhance respectability, how it may limit their control over household decisions, their mistrust of men, and their fear of domestic violence. Affordability, respectability, and control have greater salience for African American mothers, while trust and domestic violence have greater salience for whites. The author discusses these findings in relation to existing theories of marriage and in light of welfare reform.

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