

Health and marriage: The times they are a changin'

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The health of people who never marry is improving, narrowing the gap with their wedded counterparts, according to new research that suggests the practice of encouraging marriage to promote health may be misguided.

Hui Liu, assistant professor of sociology at Michigan State University and lead researcher on the project, said sociologists since the 1970s have emphasized that marriage benefits health more so for men than for women.

"Married people are still healthier than unmarried people," Liu said, "but the gap between the married and never-married is closing, especially for men."

The findings of Liu and fellow researcher Debra Umberson of the University of Texas at Austin will appear in the September issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. The article is called "The Times They Are a Changin': Marital Status and Health Differentials from 1972 to 2003."

The researchers analyzed National Health Interview Survey data from that period and found that while the self-reported health of married people is still better than that of the never-married, the gap has closed considerably.

The trend is due almost exclusively to a marked improvement in the self-

reported health of never-married men. Liu said that may be partly because never-married men have greater access to social resources and support that historically were found in a spouse.

Further, the research shows that the health status of the never-married has improved for all race and gender groups examined: men, women, blacks and whites. (The health of married women also improved, while the health of married men remained stable.)

"Politicians and scholars continue to debate the value of marriage for Americans," the researchers write in the study, "with some going so far as to establish social programs and policies to encourage marriage among those social groups less inclined to marry, particularly the poor and minorities."

But the research findings "highlight the complexity of this issue" and suggest that "encouraging marriage in order to promote health may be misguided."

In contrast, the self-reported health for the widowed, divorced and separated worsened from 1972 to 2003 relative to their married peers. This held true for both men and women, although the widening gaps between the married and the previously married groups are more pronounced for women than for men.

Source: Michigan State University

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