

**THE EFFECT OF YOUNGER MARRIAGE ON MARRIAGE STABILITY:  
EVIDENCE FROM EXOGENOUS CHANGES IN VIETNAM DRAFT PRIORITIZATION**

Martha J. Bailey (corresponding author) and Emily Beam  
Department of Economics, University of Michigan, 611 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109,  
[baileymj@umich.edu](mailto:baileymj@umich.edu).

**ABSTRACT**

The escalation of the Vietnam War and U.S. draft policies left young men two possible (legal) options for avoiding service. One popular (and understudied) strategy for avoiding the draft was getting married. When the announcement of President Johnson's Executive Order 11241 on August 26, 1965 ended the ability to lower one's induction priority through marriage, this change—effective after midnight of the same day—inspired a deluge of “midnight marriages.” Using newly entered Vital Statistics data on marriage and the 1970 and 1980 IPUMS of the U.S. census, this abrupt policy change allows us to estimate the causal impact of earlier marriage on the duration of first marriage and the probability of divorce, the number of children (observed for women only), as well as men and women's education and wages, total household income, poverty status and household status.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The 1960s marked a striking reversal in the trend toward earlier marriage. Although the median age of first marriage fell steadily throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it increased by more than five years among women from 1960 to 2000 (Cherlin 2005). Many believe that marital delay may have had a positive impact on the strength of these unions and the well-being of families. The delay of marriage may facilitate a better “match” or the greater investment in education, which could increase marital stability, raise households' earnings potential and have benefits for children. This intuition is also borne out empirically: later marriages are less likely to result in separation and divorce (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977; Oppenheimer 1988), and women who marry at later ages have substantially lower rates of poverty (Dahl 2005)<sup>1</sup>.

Whether these relationships are causal, however, is a difficult empirical question. Specifically, estimating a *causal* importance of marriage delay itself is complicated by the correlation of marital timing with a host of observable (and probably unobservable) characteristics. For instance, education is associated with both greater marital stability and later marriage (Lefgren and McIntyre 2006). Similarly, health and socio-economic status predict both marital timing and the survival of marriages.

We seek to understand the causal impact of earlier marriage on marriage outcomes and household well-being using a unique set of events and policy changes in the mid-1960s. The context of this investigation is the escalation of the Vietnam War in March 1965, which resulted in a sharp increase in military inductions (VanDeMark 1991:92). This escalation and U.S. Selective Service policies to draft men left young men two possible (legal) options for avoiding service. One popular means was to enroll in college or pursue certain occupations to receive service deferments (Card and Lemieux 2002).<sup>2</sup> Another popular (and understudied) strategy for avoiding the draft was getting married. In fall of 1965, *The New York Times* (NYT) reported that officials had “been concerned by a noticeable increase in the number of marriages among 19-year-olds, some of which are apparently made to escape the draft” (NYT, August 19, 1965). Although educational deferments existed until 1971, the ability to reduce one's induction priority through marriage ended abruptly with Executive Order

---

<sup>1</sup> Dahl (2005) uses state age-of-consent laws to instrument for early teen marriage (defined as marrying before age 16) among women, and he finds women who marry young face a 28 percentage point increase the probability of living in poverty later in life. By 1970, however, only 2.4% of women were married by age 15 (Blank et al. forthcoming), hence it is reasonable to expect that the shocks to marriage timing seen as a result of Vietnam draft policy, which target an older distribution, may have different effects

<sup>2</sup> Committing crime also functioned to reduce the risk of induction among men with lower socio-economic status (Kuziemko 2008).

11241. On August 26, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson announced that the order would eliminate special status for men married after midnight of that day. This change spurred a deluge of “midnight marriages” after the policy was announced (*NYT*, August 27, 1965). We use this sharp policy change, and the sharp changes in the incentives for draft-aged men to marry at younger ages, to estimate the causal impact of earlier marriage on marital stability and the economic well-being of households.

Our analysis exploits this policy-induced shift in the benefits of early marriage to examine its impact on marital stability and the economic well-being of the household. First, we use monthly Vital Statistics data on marriage rates by age and sex to document the marked increase in the proportion of young men marrying in 1965—particularly between March and August. We also show that these period changes in first marriage rates occurred among the cohorts of men at greatest risk for induction (ages 19 to 25). We outline this evidence in the remainder of this extended abstract. Our plan for this paper before the PAA conference is to use the described policy shift together with information from the U.S. Census in 1970 and 1980 (which also contains information on the age *and quarter* of first marriage regardless of current marriage or marital status) to examine the longer-term implications of early marriage for marital stability (duration of first marriage and the probability of divorce), the number of children (observed for women only), and financial well-being of the household (as measured by total household income).

## II. RESEARCH DESIGN

In the early 1960s, U.S. men ages 18 to 26 were eligible for the induction into the U.S. military. The U.S. Selective Service classified all registrants as available for civilian or military service, as deferred or as ineligible for service.<sup>3</sup> For example, men who enrolled in college received a II-S deferment, and men who could prove a “bona fide” relationship with their children received a III-A deferment; they could not be drafted so long as they maintained deferred status. The U.S. Selective Service also classified individuals by priority status. Although all men classified I-A were considered available for military service, local draft boards were instructed to prioritize within the I-A class beginning with (as highest priority) delinquents, volunteers, single men and married men, with the oldest in each category to be selected first.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 1965, two important policy shifts significantly changed the likelihood a man would be drafted.

The first policy change was the significant escalation in the scale of the Vietnam War. President Johnson supplemented the 23,000 military advisers already on the ground by 1965 with the first brigade of combat troops in March and rapidly increased ground force levels throughout 1965 (VanDeMark 1991:92). As shown in figure 1, this resulted in sharp increases in inductions and also altered the incentives for men to marry to take advantage of lower priority induction status. From 1964 to 1965, the number of marriages to 18 to 19 year olds increased by more in absolute and percentage terms than at any other time in the 1960s. Other evidence suggests that this behavior directly reflected fear of the draft. One survey of 1,586 men in Indiana, Michigan, and Washington, D.C. found that one out of every eight husbands said they married early to avoid the draft (Baskir 1978:33).

The second major policy change occurred when President Johnson announced Executive Order 11241 late in the day on August 26, 1965, which ended the priority distinction for men married after that day. After Executive Order 11241 was issued, only men married on or prior to August 26 retained lower priority for induction, as described in table 1. This sharp change in policy spurred an onslaught of “midnight marriages” after its announcement on August 26. The following day, the *NYT* reported that hundreds had flocked from California to Las Vegas and Carson City to be married before the midnight deadline. In those two locations alone, the Justice of

---

<sup>3</sup> The I-A-O classification designated men who had received status as a conscientious objector, and could only be required to report for civilian service. The I-A classification designated men who were available for military service. Men with a I-A-O classification were ranked in the same priority groups described for the I-A classification.

<sup>4</sup> Annual Report of the Director of Selective Service (1965, p.17). Technically, the first four categories included men ages 19-25 only. There were two additional priority categories within the I-A and I-A-O classification after married men: men ages 26, youngest first, and men between age 18 and six months and age 19, oldest first. See table 1.

the Peace conducted 171 marriage ceremonies, and 112 of them occurred between 10 p.m. and midnight (*NYT*, August 27, 1965).

To gain a sense of the overall impact of these policies on marriage decisions, we entered monthly data from the Vital Statistics to plot the annual change in the marriage rate among men ages 18 to 19 by quarter (figure 2). The fact that the plots are all very close to zero from 1960 to 1963 suggests that neither the annual marriage rates within this group nor the seasonal pattern changed very much from 1960 to 1963. The plots also reveal the degree of draft avoidance through earlier marriage as the war escalated in 1964 to 1968. In the years 1964 and 1965, the plotted values lie around 2, which indicates that approximately 2 more men per 1000 ages 18 to 19 chose to marry than in the previous year. Of course, it is possible that these steady increases in the number of young men marrying may reflect factors other than war-induced behavioral changes. This is what makes the marked increase in the proportion of marriages in the third quarter of 1965—the quarter corresponding to Executive Order 11241—particularly striking. Although the increase in marriages is similar in the first two quarters of 1964 and 1965, the number of marriages increased by 5 per 1000 men ages 18 to 19 in the third quarter of 1965 (relative to the same quarter in 1964). The correspondence of this abrupt change in policy to the elimination of special priority status for married men is consistent with draft avoidance hastening marriage for these cohorts.

### III. NEXT STEPS

Armed with this abrupt change in incentives to marry at younger ages, we plan to use a pooled sample of the 1970 Form 1 and 1980 Integrated Public Use Samples (IPUMS) of the U.S. Census (Ruggles et al. 2008) to investigate the causal impact of earlier marriage on marriage stability and the economic status of households. There are several advantages of using IPUMS samples in this context. First, they provide large samples and allow us to generate fairly precise predictions of even small effects. Second, they contain both standard demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, nativity, urban/rural status, state of residence and state of birth) as well as important covariates and measures of marriage outcomes (educational attainment, income from wages, labor-force participation of women, poverty status, family size, current marital status, number of times married and number of children ever born for women). Finally, these data allow most individuals to be linked to their class I-A induction priority status, because they contain information on quarter of first marriage, age at first marriage, age as of the Census reference date (April 1) and quarter of birth.<sup>5</sup> These data also contain information on widowhood to allow us to investigate whether men who married earlier are more likely to have died in Vietnam and, thus, to have escaped enumeration in the 1970 and 1980 census years.

Using these data, we intend to estimate the relationship between earlier marriage and measures of marital stability including ever divorce, current marital status, number of times married and number of children ever born (for women only) as well as measures of household economic outcomes including educational attainment, income from wages and total household income, poverty status, and family size. These specifications will include relevant fixed effects, controls for policy variables, and a variety of other demographic and labor market controls when necessary. To explore the heterogeneity in the relationship between earlier marriage and marriage outcomes and household economic status, we will breakdown the instrumented relationship by race, ethnic background and urban/rural status. Finally, we will perform a decomposition analysis to understand how much of the changes in marriage stability and household economic outcomes are due to the delay in the age of first marriage.

---

<sup>5</sup> Information on age as of April 1 of the census year (1970 or 1980) and quarter of birth allow us to determine the year of birth for each individual in the sample. In addition, we can determine the year and quarter of first marriage for every individual in the sample except for individuals born and married in the same quarter. That is, if a man was born in 1945 in quarter 1 and was married at age 20 in quarter 1, we cannot determine if he was married in 1965 or 1966. We omit individuals from the analysis for whom year of marriage cannot be determined in order to reduce measurement error. Use of information on quarter of marriage and quarter of birth additionally limit our analysis to the 1970 and 1980 census years, because this variable is not publicly available in other censuses.

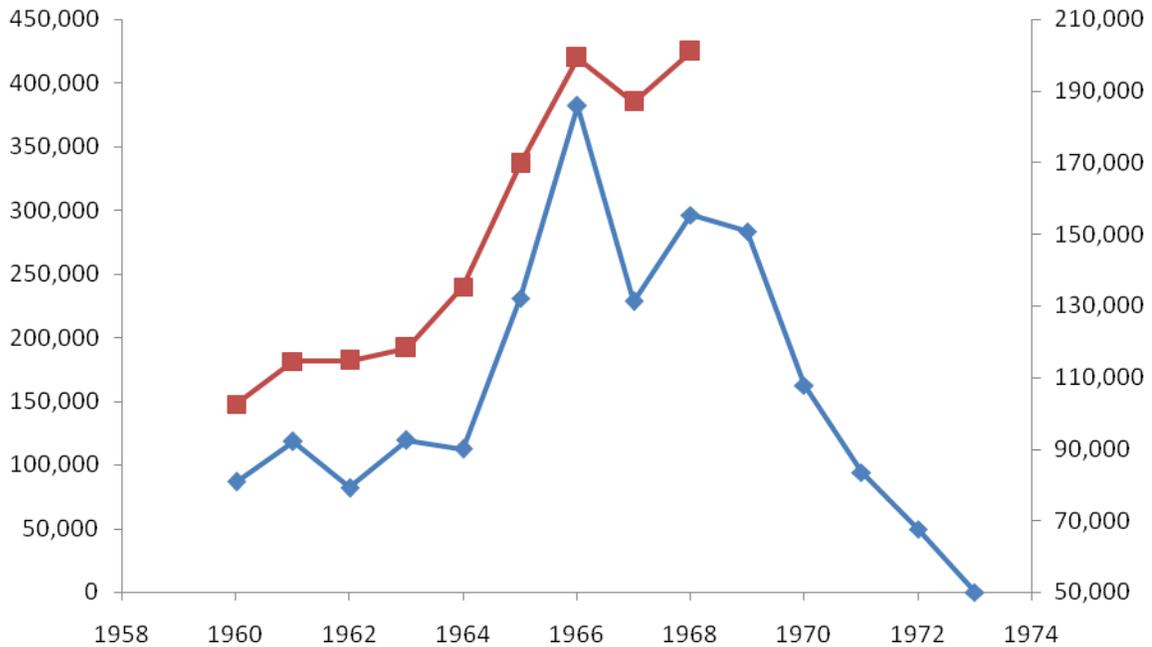
#### IV. REFERENCES

- Baskir, L. M. (1978). *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Becker, G. (1981). *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Blank, R.M., Kerwin K.C., & Sallee, J.M. (Forthcoming). A Cautionary Tale About the Use of Administrative Data: Evidence from Age of Marriage Laws. *American Economic Journal: Applied Econometrics*.
- Card, D. & Lemieux, T. (2001). Going to College to Avoid the Draft: The Unintended Legacy of the Vietnam War. *American Economic Review*, 91(2), 97-102.
- Card, D. & Lemieux, T. (2002). Did Draft Avoidance Raise College Attendance During the Vietnam War? *Center for Labor Economics Working Paper*.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. (2005). American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century. *The Future of Children*, 15(2), 33-55.
- Dahl, G. (2005). Early Teen Marriage and Future Poverty. *NBER Working Paper No. W11328*
- Kuziemko, I. (2008) Dodging Up to College or Dodging Down to Jail: Behavioral Responses to the Vietnam Draft by Race and Class. Mimeo Princeton University.
- Ruggles, Steven, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander. (2008). *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series* [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor].
- Selective Service System. (1966). *Annual Report of the Director of Selective Service for the Fiscal Year 1965*.
- Selective Service System. (1967). *Annual Report of the Director of Selective Service for the Fiscal Year 1966*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Selective Service System. (2004). Effects of Marriage and Fatherhood on Draft Eligibility. Retrieved April 30, 2008. <http://www.sss.gov/FactSheets/FSeffects.pdf>.
- United Press International. (1965, August 28). 171 Beat the Draft in Las Vegas; Wedding March Is on the Double. *The New York Times*, 8.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (2007). Marital Status of the Population 15 Years Old and Over, by Sex and Race: 1950 to Present. Table MS-1. Retrieved April 30, 2008. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>
- VanDeMark, B. (1991). *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. Oxford University Press.

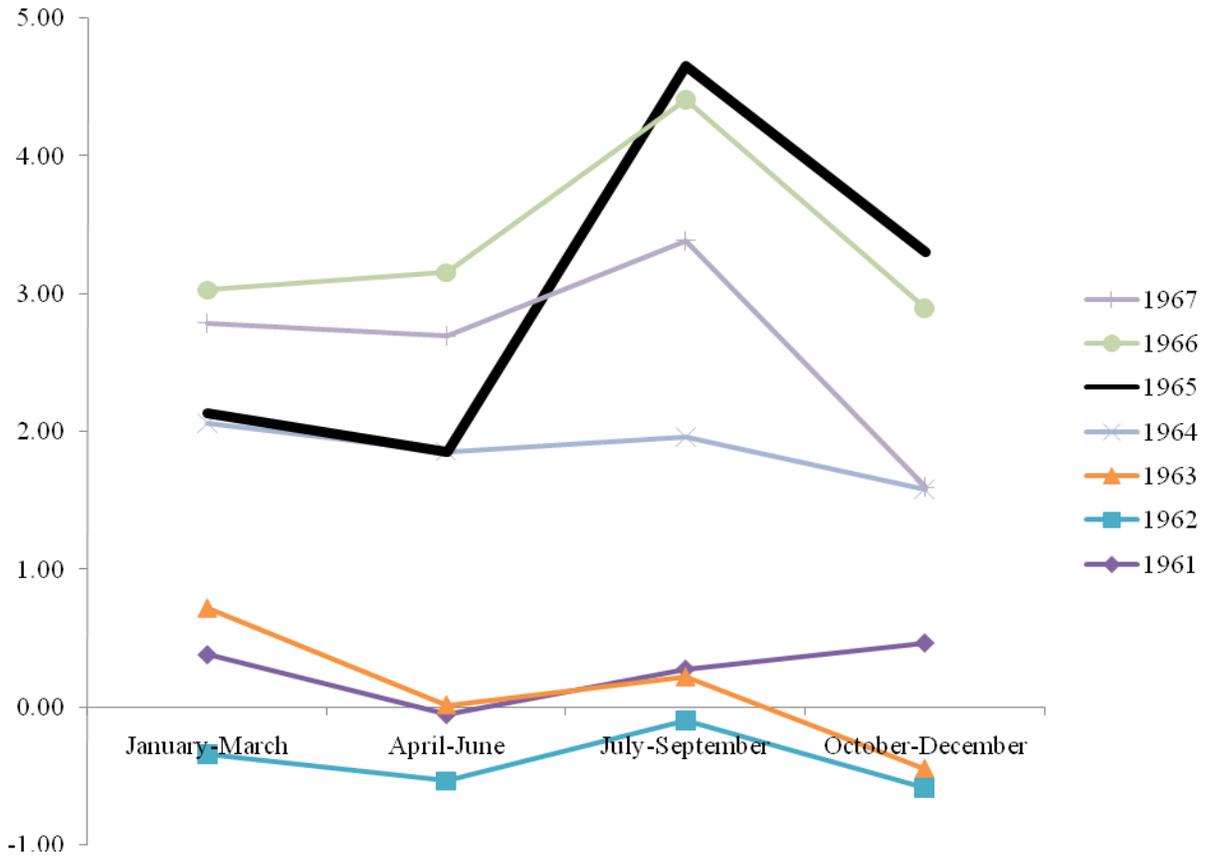
**Table 1. Selective Service Registrants by Selected Classification Status as of June 30, 1965**

<i>Total Registrants</i>		30,676,000
Within current age of liability		17,356,000
<u>Total Available for Military Service</u>		1,977,000
I-A and I-A-O		
	Examined and qualified	164,000
	Not examined	356,000
	Not available for induction or examination	351,000
	Induction or examination postponed	5,000
	Married, age 19-26	555,000
	26 years and older with liability extended	69,000
	Under 19 years	465,000
<u>Total Deferred</u>		5,505,000
<i>Selected Deferments</i>		
II-S	College student	1,656,000
III-A	Fatherhood or hardship	3,085,000
<i>Source: Annual Report of the Director of Selective Service, 1965</i>		

**Figure 1. Annual Inductions and Marriages to 18 to 19 Year-Old Men**



**Figure 2.**  
**Percent increase in Marriages by Quarter over the Previous Year, 1961 to 1967**



Notes: Each line plots the annual increase in the marriage rate of 18 to 19 year old men by quarter. Source: Authors' computations using the Vital Statistics information on marriage by age and sex.