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Why single men may not be having the most fun

By **W. Bradford Wilcox** February 13

Each week, [In Theory](#) takes on a big idea in the news and explores it from a range of perspectives. This week we're talking about singlehood in America. Need a primer? [Catch up here.](#)

Bradford Wilcox is the [director](#) of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and a senior fellow of the [Institute for Family Studies](#). He is the coauthor of "[Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos.](#)"

In movies headlined by [overgrown boy actors](#) such as Owen Wilson, Seth Rogen and Vince Vaughn, the 20-something single guy's life sure looks like a lot of fun. In one [iconic scene](#) from "[Wedding Crashers](#)," Will Ferrell's character's response to hearing of a friend's impending marriage is hysterical laughter. "What an idiot, oh what a loser! Good, good, more [women] for me and you!" After kissing an impossibly beautiful hookup goodbye, the Ferrell character proclaims: "I'm just living the dream."

Oh, the life of the young single man. Pop culture's depiction of young men's single years as impossibly fun, footloose and fancy-free has a certain purchase in our culture. It's one reason why plenty of young men look at marriage as a "ball and chain," but that mind-set can have a number of downsides.

[**Other perspectives:** *Why being single in your 30s is better than in your 20s*]

Disregard for marriage isn't unique to movies. More sophisticated reflections also tend to minimize the challenges associated with being young and single. In his book "Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone," sociologist Eric Klinenberg stresses that American single men (and women) tend to do just fine. Compared with marrieds, for instance, he notes, "single people are more likely to spend time with friends and neighbors, go to restaurants and attend art classes and lectures." Nothing to worry about here, folks.

Of course, many men *are* flourishing in a world where more opportunities exist for them to fly solo, as the median age for first marriage has risen for men from 23 in 1970 to 29 today, and where about half of the adult population is unmarried. This demographic reality means that many single men are "living the dream" — whether it's the puerile dream portrayed in films or the economic success of guys such as Mark, an investment banker mentioned in *Going Solo* who has parlayed his singledom into international travel and a rich professional rolodex.

In *Going Solo*, Mark says, "Staying single through his thirties allowed him to experience things that his friends who married and had children could only dream about: Living in different countries. Taking adventurous vacations. Dating lots of women and figuring out what kind of partner he wants . . . spending so much time and effort building a professional network early in his career."

But for all the Marks out there, there are also men like 26-year-old Anthony, who is floundering in small-town southern Ohio. As David and Amber Lapp reported in First Things, Anthony is unmarried, in and out of relationships, and often struggling with drinking and intermittent employment. By their account, "Anthony has thought about suicide in his lowest moments. 'I just felt so alone.'"

But Anthony is not the only young man in America struggling while going it alone. In [a report I co-wrote](#) with Kay Hymowitz, Kelleen Kaye and Jason Carroll on the benefits and costs of delayed marriage, we found that young men in their 20s were more likely to have difficulty with depression and excessive drinking if they were single, compared with their peers who were married. Forty-eight percent of single men ages 24 to 29 reported they were frequently drunk, compared with just 28 percent of their married peers.

[The dangers of celebrating single motherhood]

They were also markedly less likely to report that they were “highly satisfied” with their lives, with just 35 percent reporting such satisfaction compared with 52 percent of their married peers. Indeed, [research](#) comparing siblings and twins with one another suggests that those in cohabiting relationships and especially those in married relationships are more likely to be thriving socially and psychologically than their single siblings, even after controlling for a range of social, economic and genetic factors.

In our desire to understand and normalize the increasing prevalence of single living, we shouldn't minimize the difficulties that many young men face without the meaning, direction and support offered by marriage. Many young single men would benefit from the kind of community life [extolled by Eve Tushnet](#).

Nor should we discourage 20-something men who are in love and seem to have the basis for a strong marriage from tying the knot. After all, the divorce risk associated with marrying younger [drops off](#) markedly by the time young adults hit their mid-20s, and the [odds](#) of forging a happy marriage are actually the best for those who marry then.

In the real world, the evidence shows that single men aren't necessarily having the most fun — despite the footloose and fancy-free lifestyle depicted onscreen.

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