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THE GEOGRAPHIC IMPACT ON WEDDING AND BRIDAL GOWN BUDGETS

by

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The most special day of your life comes with a price tag. There is no other event that Americans spend more money on than their wedding day. When else are potentially hundreds of family and friends gathered, thousands of dollars spent on a dress that's only going to be worn once, and additional money spent documenting the occasion? The average cost in the United States for a wedding in 2011 was \$27,021 (Jaeger). That's quite a lot of money, and of that amount an average of \$2,000 was spent on the wedding gown alone. This research paper is going to attempt to answer the question: *What is the geographical impact across the United States on the amount of money spent on weddings, specifically the wedding gown?* This research will examine different states in the United States and compare their wedding budgets as well as the average amount spent on wedding gowns. It will also compare the difference in budgets between subsequent years and the effect had on budgets by the economy.

New York, New York- the most expensive city in the United States to live in (Ellin) is also, not surprisingly, the most expensive city in the United States to get married in. Couples who were married in 2011 in Manhattan spent, on average, \$65,824 on their wedding nearly \$40,000 above the national average (Jaeger). Rent, food, clothing, transportation, and the cost of living as a whole is more expensive in New York, so it is logical that adding up a pricier venue, gown, etc. would equal a much higher wedding cost. What is really quite eye opening is that the average U.S household income in 2011 was \$51,413 (Davidson). This means that brides in Manhattan spent over \$14,000 more on their wedding day alone than most U.S. households earn in an entire year. It becomes necessary to question what impression this gives other cultures of the American way. For example, the average annual income in India is only \$1,000 and \$3,000 in China (Censky, TNN). It is really quite staggering to see the enormous difference in

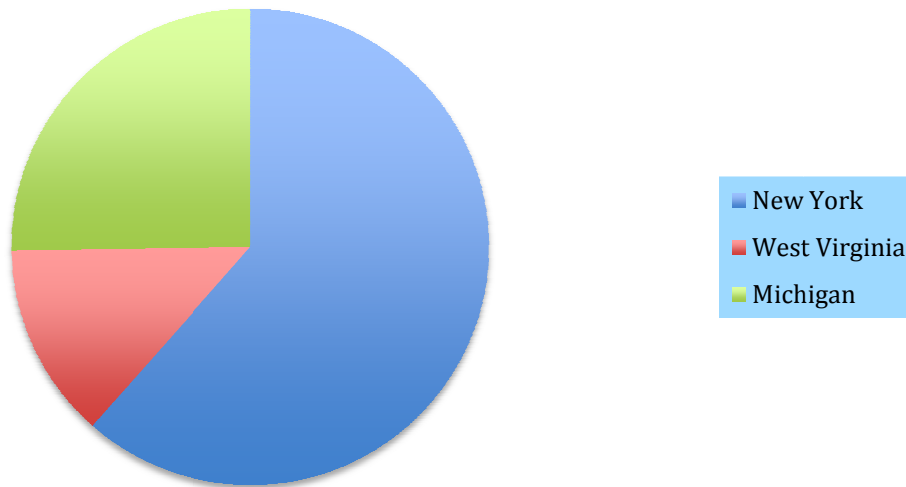
incomes as well as how large an amount of money is spent on the wedding day in the U.S.

“Country roads, take me home”- now for the state with the lowest wedding budget: West Virginia. The average wedding budget for 2011 in West Virginia was \$14,203- more than \$50,000 less than that of New York. West Virginia brides’ budgets stand in stark contrast to New York brides’ budgets (Fraiman). The two states are not geographically on opposite sides of the U.S.: they are actually only separated by Pennsylvania. But in the case of wedding budgets, New York and West Virginia couldn’t be further apart, as Figure 1 demonstrates. The median West Virginia household income in 2011 was \$38,482, as opposed to \$55,246 in New York the same year (Department of Numbers). It is safe to say that there is a direct correlation between income and wedding budgets, which is also logical. The higher the annual household income, the higher the wedding budget; while the lower the annual household income, the lower the wedding budget. One could argue that just because an individual has more money does not necessarily mean that they will spend more on their wedding, but in the U.S. that is apparently the case. Earn more, spend more- at least that’s what wedding statistics demonstrate.

And now, to examine the state closest to the average U.S. wedding budget: Michigan. The average wedding budget in Detroit for 2011 was \$27,017- just \$4 less than the national average (Fraiman). The median household income in Michigan for the same year was \$45,981 (Department of Numbers). While the wedding budget in Michigan was nearly double that of West Virginia, it is still almost \$40,000 less than that of Manhattan. However, since Michigan is the example for the average U.S. wedding budget, it can be compared to the average U.S. household income- which was \$50,502 for 2011 (Department of Numbers). This brings about the conclusion that, on average, U.S. couples spend over half of their annual household income on

their wedding.

Figure 1. Comparison of Wedding Budgets by States



Next, for the sake of comparison, the assumption is made that the average wedding lasts for four hours- one for the ceremony and receiving line, two for the reception, and one for transitions and sendoff. \$27,021 divided by 4 is \$6,755. That's nearly \$7,000 per hour- quite a lot of money for only 60 minutes of time. And just exactly who is paying? While traditionally, the father of the bride would pay for the entire wedding, recently it is most common for the bride and groom to split costs with either set of parents, followed by just the bride and groom (30%) and then, consistent with tradition, the father of the bride (17%) (Sound Vision). Putting yourself in a typical engaged American couple's shoes, here is the scenario: You and your fiancé will spend nearly \$30,000 on your wedding day, which will take away more than half of your annual future household income, not even including your honeymoon. Does it seem prudent or wise to begin marriage either in debt or short of money simply because of the wedding day? The

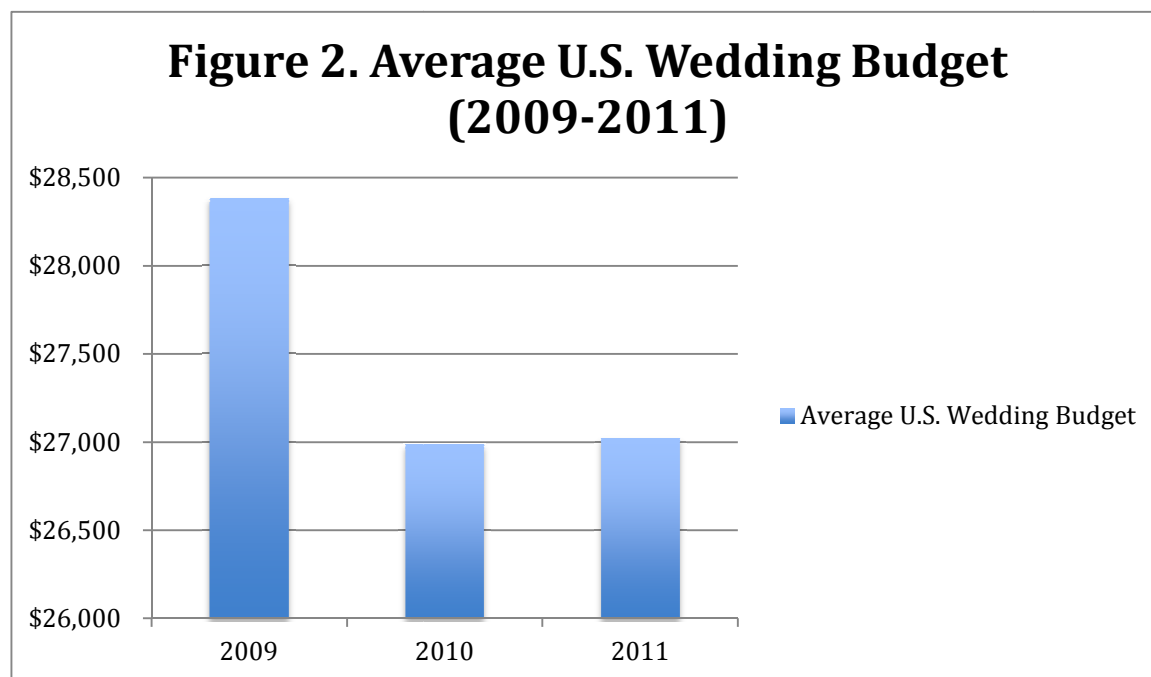
intention is not to take the excitement and joy out of the wedding day. Weddings are wonderful, special occasions full of meaning and happiness celebrating the marriage of two people who are deeply in love. In that sense, it's understandable that most people are willing to pour out their money to make their special day extra special. But is it really worth it to spend tens of thousands of dollars? Money can't buy everything. A more expensive wedding does not necessarily equal a nicer wedding and certainly does not equal a better marriage. This returns us to the topic of the culture of materialism in America, and how Americans tend to be of the mindset that money can buy happiness, no matter how it many times it may prove otherwise.

With the knowledge of how much money goes into having a wedding, it is important to take into consideration the economy and the impact that it has on how much is spent on the wedding. In a survey conducted by theknot.com on 2011 weddings, only 29% of brides said that the economy affected their wedding budget- a 2% decrease from the previous year (Fraiman). This correlates with an increase not only in wedding budgets overall, but also in the amount of money spent on each guest- which increased to \$196 in 2011. For the 29% of brides who did say that the economy played a factor in planning their wedding budget, the place where they were most likely to trim costs was the amount of guests they invited, as opposed to their dress, the venue, or the food, etc. These results indicate a culture of "quality, not quantity" in today's American brides.

Following this overview of the geographical differences and highs and lows of wedding budgets in the United States and the role that the economy plays, it is now time to examine more specifically the amount spent on the wedding gown. Every girl dreams of her wedding gown- what she will wear when she walks down the aisle on the most important day of her life. Even

though it will most likely only be worn once in a lifetime, it's still the most important dress a girl will ever put on. It's the topic of conversation for years before and after the event. Weddings are seldom brought up without mention of what the bride wore. So naturally, it is safe to assume that if people spend large amounts of money on their wedding day, a significant portion of that is spent on the wedding dress. Theknot.com surveyed nearly 18,000 U.S. couples that were married in 2011, and found that the average amount spent on a wedding dress was \$1,121. In a range from an average of \$745 spent in North and South Dakota to \$2,403 in Manhattan, not surprisingly, it appears that most brides are willing to spend an average of a thousand dollars or more on their special dress (Fraiman). One of the factors for this is the current popularity of wedding television shows such as *Say Yes To The Dress* or *Whose Wedding Is It Anyway*. Shows such as these typically feature brides who are determined to get what they want- especially when it comes to their wedding gown. Their families are usually persuaded to spend more than their original budget so that "Daddy's little girl" can look just the way she wants on her wedding day. Whether or not it's apparent, television and the media are major influences, and wedding gown expenses are no exception. If what television shows is that it is acceptable and even normal to spend more than originally planned on the wedding dress, then Americans will eventually find themselves falling into that same mindset. Another factor contributing to higher wedding gown budgets is the growing trend to wear more than one dress. With celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Chelsea Clinton, Alicia Keys, and Carrie Underwood as well as Princess Kate Middleton opting for a quick change from one designer gown to another (and sometimes another), more and more well-to-do American brides are choosing to say yes to the dresses. While it is still more culturally acceptable and common in Asian culture for brides to wear more than one dress, the U.S. statistics are on the rise: one high-end consulting company in New York

estimated that 70% of its brides wear more than one gown on their wedding day (Boncompagni). The main reasons for brides choosing to wear more than just one gown are either that they just can't choose between two that they love or that the more bulky, formal gowns with trains worn during the ceremony simply aren't going to cut it on the dance floor- the second gown, for the reception, is typically lighter, more form-fitting, and oftentimes shorter. The decision on how many different dresses to wear comes down to the bride's personal preference and what she can afford- even though the trend of multiple gowns may be on the rise, it's still simply not practical for most brides to spend enough money for two special gowns- as demonstrated by the lower budget of North and South Dakota brides.



And finally, this research led to two conclusions. The first is that, as is the case with most things in the U.S., the term “bigger is better” is true when it comes to weddings. As shown in Figure 2, following a small decrease from 2009, the comparisons between 2010 and 2011 demonstrate that wedding budgets as well as the amount spent on the bridal gown are growing.

This trend is likely to remain, as prices of venues and gowns continue to rise and celebrities continue to have more and more lavish weddings. The second conclusion that this research led to is that there is a difference in wedding budgets depending on geographical location in the United States. When adjusted for cost of living, New Yorkers spend an average of 119% their annual household income on their wedding. At the other end of the spectrum, West Virginians spent on average only 38% of their annual household incomes on their wedding. These statistics perhaps show even more clearly the great divide in the U.S. between different states' wedding budgets. The original hypothesis that wedding budgets would differ across the U.S. was proven true to an exponential extent. So, while U.S. wedding budgets as a whole are increasing each year, geographical location decides what the budget is to begin with and how much it will increase. In closing, the conservative roots of Americans in the importance of marriage are the ultimate driving force behind the growth of larger-scale weddings, and as long as those roots stay the same then, to a varying extent depending on location in the U.S., wedding budgets will continue to grow.

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