

CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

Child marriage is something we think about as happening only in far-off developing nations. However, between the years 2000 and 2010, nearly 250,000 underage girls were married in the US, many of them to adult men. Most states set 18 as the minimum marriage age but every state allows exceptions for younger children to marry with parental consent or judicial approval.

Where does child marriage occur?

Child marriage occurs in every U.S. state. The total number of child marriages in the 38 states that provide marriage license data shows over 167,000 marriages of children 17 years old and younger. The total is nearly 250,000 when including estimates for the states that did not report data.

Idaho had the most married children on a per-capita basis among states that provided data; Texas led in sheer the numbers of children who are married.

How young are children marrying?

There were 12-year-old children who got married in Alaska, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Other states simply had categories for “14 and younger.” The states with the highest marriage rates include Arkansas, Idaho, and Kentucky. There are 27 states with no minimum age set by statute.

Many child marriages involve underage girls and adult men – relationships that violate statutory rape laws but marriage makes the sexual relationship legal. In fact, many child marriages occur to avoid these laws or to protect rapists.

Why are children marrying?

As in many parts of the world, the reasons for child marriages in the US are often cultural or religious; the American families follow conservative Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or other traditions, and judges sometimes feel that they shouldn't intrude on other cultures.

Young girls are often pressured into marriage after they become pregnant. They often feel powerless to object and they are afraid to tell a judge that they do not want to marry.

What problems arise with child marriage?

Girls who get married as children are three times more likely to be beaten by their spouses than women who marry over age 21. Girls who marry young are also 31% more likely to live in poverty.

Girls who are married before age 19 are 50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college than their unmarried peers.

Long-term health is also affected. Women who marry at 18 or younger face a 23% higher risk of heart attack, diabetes, cancer, and stroke than do women who marry between ages 19 and 25. Girls who

marry young are also at increased risk for psychiatric disorders. Additionally, 70% of child marriages end in divorce.

Children who marry are often trapped – they can't get a job, a car, a driver's license, or sign a lease. Domestic abuse shelters can't accept minors and children's shelters often must inform parents of their child's location, so girls attempting to flee abusive relationships have nowhere to go.

What are states doing about it?

In New Hampshire, Girl Scout Cassandra Levesque learned that girls in her state could marry at age 13. She worked with a legislator to propose a bill to change the marriage age to 18, but she faced resistance from several legislators.

"We're asking the Legislature to repeal a law that's been on the books for over a century, that's been working without difficulty, on the basis of a request from a minor doing a Girl Scout project," scoffed State Representative David Bates. The New Hampshire House of Representatives voted to kill the bill, leaving the minimum marriage age at 13.

In New Jersey, lawmakers passed a bill that would make their state the first in the country to ban marriages of people under age 18, but Governor Chris Christie vetoed the legislation.

New York became the first state to raise the marriage age to 18, but 17-year-olds can still marry with court and parental approval.

Why aren't states doing MORE about it?

Many legislators don't want to infringe on cultural norms and traditions. Others worry that if the marriage age is raised, it will increase out-of-wedlock births and even encourage abortion. However, age-of-marriage laws don't infringe on religious rights or help young mothers, who are at increased risk of forced child marriage.