



**AUGUST 2020**

**Child Marriage in  
the United States:  
A Synthesis of Evidence on  
the Prevalence & Impact**



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# Child marriage is happening in the U.S. at rates that merit further attention and scrutiny.

## PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE<sup>1</sup> IN THE UNITED STATES

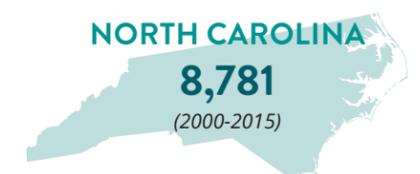
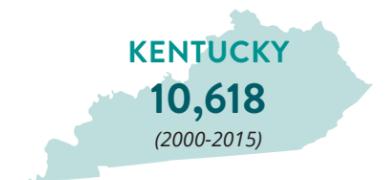
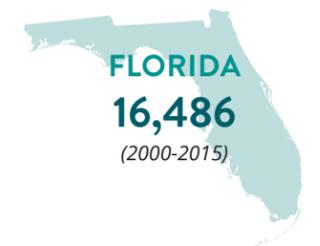
The exact number of marriages that occur each year involving children below the age of 18 in the United States is unknown, but there are ways to estimate the prevalence of child marriage indirectly. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's recurring National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) interviews boys and girls as young as 15 about their marital status, so limited information on marriages among adolescents aged 15-17 has been included in some reports (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009). However, the most recent estimate of the prevalence of child marriage in the United States is based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) (Koski & Heymann, 2018). Like the NSFG, the ACS interviews adolescents of ages 15-17 about their marital status. Using the 2010-2014 waves of data from the ACS, Koski & Heymann found that nationwide, 6.2 of every 1,000 children aged 15-17 had ever been married at the time they were surveyed (Koski & Heymann, 2018).

However, these estimates have several limitations. First, they likely underestimate the full prevalence of child marriage in the United States, both because they do not include children below the age of 15 who are legally allowed to marry in some states and because censoring occurs at the time of the interview. In some cases, children interviewed at younger ages may not have been married when they were interviewed but may still have married before turning 18. Additionally, these estimates, at least as they are currently reported, cannot be compared to the gold standard metric for comparing rates of child marriage between countries: the percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before age 18.

The alternative to estimating rates of child marriage in the United States is to directly count the number of children married below the age of 18. The most comprehensive effort to do so to date was conducted by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) for their Frontline

<sup>1</sup>In this report, child marriage is defined as any marriage or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18. In some of the resources we reviewed in writing this report, however, cutoffs for analyses were set at the age of 19. For that reason, we use the term early marriage to refer to marriages involving a person age 19 or under and child marriage to refer to marriages involving a person age 18 and under.

### Top five states with the highest numbers of child marriages:\*



\*Source: Data for the states of Texas, Florida, Kentucky, and Alabama collected by PBS Frontline as of July 2017, available at: <http://apps.frontline.org/child-marriage-by-the-numbers/>. Methodology for estimating child marriages in the state of North Carolina provided in: Thompson, L. and M. Steinhaus (2020). *Child Marriage in North Carolina: New Evidence and Policy Recommendations*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women.

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This brief was written by Mara Steinhaus and Lyric Thompson of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), with deep appreciation for the considerable contributions by Rachel Clement, formerly of ICRW, Jeanne Smoot, Senior Counsel for Policy and Strategy at the Tahirih Justice Center ([www.tahirih.org/childmarriage](http://www.tahirih.org/childmarriage)), and the ICRW Catalyst Fund for making the research possible.

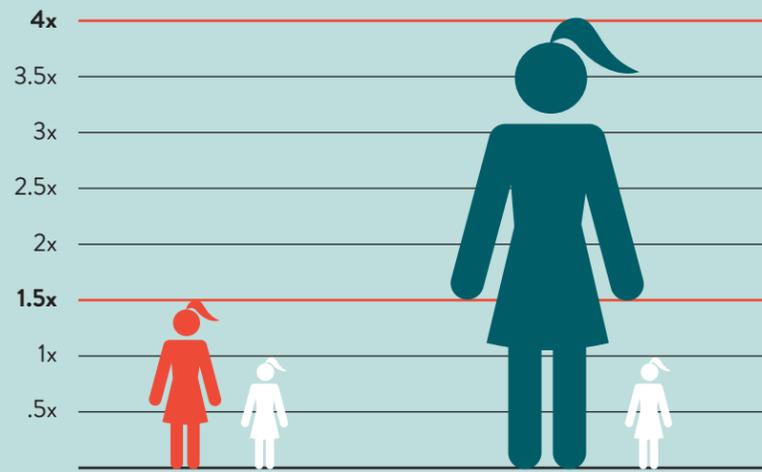
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## BY THE NUMBERS: IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES



Girls who marry before age 19 are **50% MORE LIKELY** than unmarried girls to drop out of high school...

...and **4 TIMES** less likely to complete college.



Women who marry before age 19 are at **23% GREATER RISK** of developing diabetes or cancer or having a heart attack or stroke.

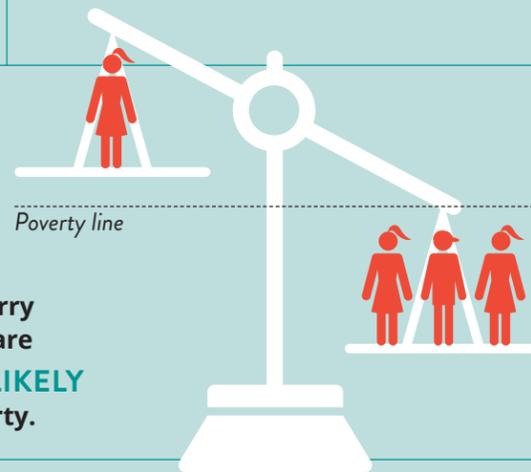


**18 OUT OF 20 WOMEN**

participating in a 2019 study of child marriage reported experiences of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by their husbands during their marriage.



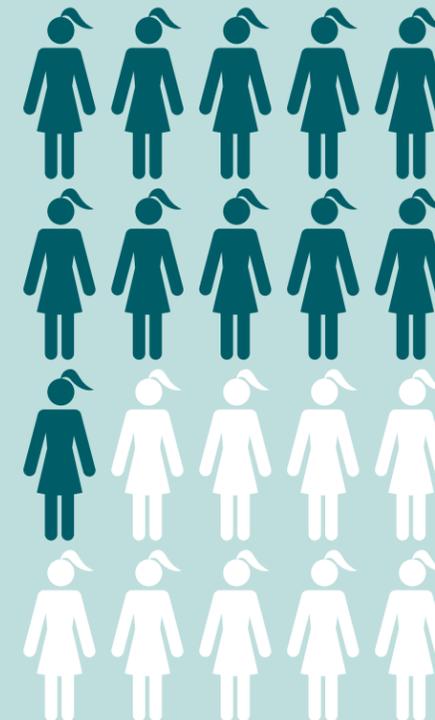
**APPROXIMATELY 4 OUT OF 5** marriages involving girls below the age of 15 end in death, divorce, or separation.



Those who marry before age 16 are **31% MORE LIKELY** to live in poverty.

**11 OUT OF 20 WOMEN**

reported financial abuse by their spouse.



Teenage mothers who marry either before or within two years of the birth of their first child are significantly more likely to have a **SECOND BIRTH WITHIN THAT TWO-YEAR INTERVAL.**

documentary series on child marriage in America, which found that at least 207,459 children below the age of 18, most of them girls, were married in the United States between 2000 and 2015 (Tsui, Nolan, & Amico, 2017). However, the reporters were unable to obtain data from six states and the District of Columbia and only obtained data from certain counties in three additional states, meaning that this total also underestimates the true prevalence of child marriage in the United States (Tsui et al., 2017).

Despite the limitations of the data available on child marriage in the U.S. today, what is certain is that child marriage is happening in the U.S. at rates that merit further attention and scrutiny.

## IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

The research on age at marriage in the United States shows that marrying early has universally detrimental effects over a range of outcomes, including educational attainment; earnings; physical, reproductive, and mental health; experiences of violence; and likelihood of divorce, particularly for girls.

### Educational Attainment

Early marriage significantly disrupts future educational attainment for girls in the U.S. Girls in the U.S. who marry before age 19 are 50 percent more likely than unmarried girls to drop out of high school and four times less likely to complete college (Dahl, 2010). Furthermore, this educational disruption cannot be solely attributed to the impacts of teen pregnancy. Rather, teen mothers who marry before giving birth are less likely to ever return to school than teen mothers who do not marry, particularly if they then cohabit with their husband instead of continuing to live with family (McLaughlin, Grady, Billy, Landale, & Winges, 1986). This finding is consistent with a recent qualitative study showing that girls often forfeit agency over schooling decisions to their husbands after marriage, who then prevent them from returning to school (Wahi, Zaleski, Lampe, Bevan, & Koski, 2019). Participants in that study reported, "I tried to go back to school several times and he would punish me," and, "Because of this marriage I was completely restricted on things I could become educated on... I was primarily used as a stay at home wife... the marriage impacted my dreams tremendously as I was forced to walk away from them" (Wahi et al., 2019).

## Earnings and Poverty

Early marriage also magnifies the negative effect of completing less formal education on women's future earnings and likelihood of living in poverty. Whereas women in the U.S. who complete fewer than 12 years of schooling are 11 percent more likely to live at or below the poverty line as adults, those who marry before age 16 are 31 percent more likely to live in poverty (Dahl, 2010). Relatedly, women who delay marriage achieve significant gains in future wages (about a 1.8 percent increase for every year of delay), more than four times larger than the effect for men (Wang & Wang, 2017).

## Health

Early marriage has negative effects on multiple domains of women's health, including their likelihood of closely spaced childbearing, long-term physical health, and mental health. Teenage mothers who marry either before or within two years of the birth of their first child are significantly more likely to have a second birth within that two-year interval (Kalmuss & Namerow, 1994). Closely spaced births are associated with negative health outcomes for both the mother and child (Conde-Agudelo, Rosas-Bermúdez, & Kafury-Goeta, 2007; Molitoris, Barclay, & Kolk, 2019). In addition to these short-term reproductive health outcomes, early marriage also has long-term effects on women's physical health. Women (but not men) who marry before age 19 are at 23 percent greater risk of developing diabetes or cancer or having a heart attack or stroke (Dupre & Meadows, 2007). Finally, early marriage affects women's mental health, increasing their risk of developing nearly all of the over 20 psychiatric disorders studied (Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011). Women who married before age 18 had a 43 percent increased risk of developing major depressive disorder, the most prevalent disorder, and were almost three times as likely to develop antisocial personality disorder in their lifetime (Le Strat et al., 2011).



**43% INCREASED RISK**  
for women who married before age 18  
of developing major depressive disorder,  
the most prevalent disorder.

## Violence

While the impact of early marriage on the likelihood of experiencing domestic violence has not yet been demonstrated through analysis of nationally representative data, there is strong qualitative evidence showing that physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse and reproductive coercion is common within child marriages. Eighteen out of 20 women participating in a 2019 study of child marriage in the U.S. reported experiences of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by their husbands during their marriage. Eleven reported financial abuse by their spouse, including being forced to surrender their earnings or having restricted access to the financial resources of their household (Wahi et al., 2019). Furthermore, most participants experienced reproductive coercion by their spouses; fewer than half reported that they could have used birth control if they had wanted to (Wahi et al., 2019).

## Divorce

Research dating back decades in the U.S. conclusively shows that marrying early is one of the strongest predictors of marital disruption (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Heaton, 1991; Moore & Waite, 1981; Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985; Thornton & Rodgers, 1987). The probability of marital disruption is highest for the youngest married; controlling for marriage duration, approximately four out of five marriages involving girls below the age of 15 end in death, divorce, or separation (Heaton, 2002). Though there is differing evidence on the exact age at which it levels off, the probability of marriage disruption declines steadily as the age of the bride increases through at least the early 20s (Heaton, 2002) and possibly up to the late 20s (Lehrer, 2008).

### NO EXCEPTION: EVIDENCE SHOWS CHILD MARRIAGE HARMS GIRLS AT HOME AND ABROAD

The research that has been done to estimate the prevalence and impact of child marriage in the U.S. to date shows that without legal protections, significant numbers of children (mostly girls) continue to marry in the U.S. each year, preventing them from completing their education; lowering their future earnings; causing physical, reproductive, and mental health problems; exposing them to multiple forms of violence; and increasing their likelihood of divorce.

These findings are not surprising. Where this evidence overlaps with the much richer body of evidence from countries where child marriage has classically been studied, the findings are consistent. Just like in the U.S., child marriage in other contexts has been shown to interrupt education, increase girls' likelihood of living in poverty, increase the likelihood of early and frequent childbearing, harm mental health, increase girls' likelihood of experiencing domestic violence and divorce, and reduce girls' agency and decision-making power over their education and reproduction (Banyan Global & International Center for Research on Women, 2015; International Center for Research on Women, 2006; IPPF, 2006; Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife, 2011).

A unique contribution of the research conducted in the U.S. is the evidence generated on the negative impacts of child marriage on long-term physical health. While we are unaware of research conducted on the impact of child marriage on women's long-term physical health in other countries where child marriage has classically been studied, we anticipate that the findings would be consistent, as long-term physical health is likely impacted by similar stressors such as lack of agency, experiences of violence, and poor mental health across contexts.

What follows, then, is that the U.S. is not unique—there is no evidence to support the claim that child marriage in the U.S. is protective for girls or that it results in better outcomes for these new families. Instead, the evidence shows that remaining unmarried, even in the case of pregnancy, has better outcomes for teen mothers and their children.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Child marriage, wherever it occurs, should be addressed in ways which do not undermine other rights or leave behind those adolescents who have already been married. ICRW's global research has shown the following five strategies to be effective in the delay or prevention of child marriage:

1. Empower girls with information, skills and support networks;
2. Provide economic support and incentives to girls and their families;
3. Educate and rally parents and community members;
4. Enhance girls' access to a high-quality education; and
5. Encourage supportive laws and policies to end child marriage and meet the needs of married children.

The U.S. should be no exception: Policies at the state or federal level should endeavor to make 18 the minimum age of marriage, with no exceptions, and to meet the needs of married adolescents who are at higher risk of violence and a number of deleterious health, education and economic impacts once married.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

There are two major gaps in the research on the impacts of child marriage in the U.S. to date. First, we were unable to locate any research that studied the impacts of age of marriage on outcomes for same-sex couples. While the proportion of same-sex couples that marry when one or both partners is below age 18 is probably quite small, there should be sufficient data at this point to begin looking at overall trends in age of marriage and related outcomes. Second, the research on the impacts of child marriage has typically focused on girls, as girls make up the majority of children married below the age of 18 in the U.S. and globally. However, the research that has included men and boys in the U.S. has shown smaller or nonsignificant effects on future earnings or physical health, indicating that outcomes for boys cannot be inferred to be the same as outcomes for girls and are therefore worthy of further study.

Perhaps the most important aim of future research, however, should be the exploration of causes of and mechanisms to prevent child marriage in the U.S. Except for a small body of work on the influence of religiosity on the likelihood of early marriage in the U.S. (Uecker, 2014), research on this topic to date has been largely relegated to descriptive reports of the demographics of who marries early in the U.S. (Koski & Heymann, 2018; Uecker & Stokes, 2008). These reports fail to capture the underlying gender norms, social processes, and desire to control girls' sexuality that are the fundamental drivers of child marriage identified in the global literature. While legislative mechanisms have a role to play in the prevention of child marriage, more fundamental improvements in girls' agency and well-being will be achieved through deeper work to identify and counteract harmful gender norms that persist in the U.S. today.

**While legislative mechanisms have a role to play in the prevention of child marriage, more fundamental improvements in girls' agency and well-being will be achieved through deeper work to identify and counteract harmful gender norms that persist in the U.S. today.**

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