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New Research Estimates North Carolina Among Top US States for Child Marriage

Legal loopholes in North Carolina marriage laws permit thousands of adults to marry minors across the state

(30 August 2020)—At least 3,949 marriage license applications involving 4,218 minors were filed from 2000-2019 across 50 of North Carolina’s 100 counties where data was voluntarily provided, according to new analysis from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

The new data confirms that child marriage (involving at least one party under age 18) continues to happen in the state despite changing social norms generally delaying marriage to the mid- to late-20s.

“Prior to this research, there was no publicly available information on the rates at which children in the state were marrying or to whom they were being wed,” said Lyric Thompson, who serves as the policy and advocacy lead for ICRW and spearheaded the study. “Our work reveals not only that children are marrying at rates we didn’t realize, but that our estimate places North Carolina among the top five states in the nation for highest prevalence of child marriage.”

Presuming similar rates of marriage license applications in the remaining 50 counties and extrapolating out by population, researchers estimated that approximately 9,127 marriage license applications involving 9,749 minors were submitted statewide. This number makes North Carolina the state with the fourth highest incidents of child marriage—behind Texas, Florida and Kentucky, per investigative reporting in 2017. Notably, between 2017 and 2018 all three states enacted significant legislative reforms and their child marriage numbers have since plummeted.

An overwhelming majority of the marriage license applications collected in North Carolina—93 percent—were between an adult and a minor.

“I am shocked by the report’s findings and that so many of these marriage license applications are between children and adults with age gaps of 10 years or more,” said NC Department of Administration Secretary Machel Sanders. “As a mother of two girls, I cannot imagine how stymied their education, health and wellbeing – and their future lives would be if stolen away by marriage at age 14. This alarming data is a clarion call for change, and I look forward to working with legislators to eliminate this antiquated law and offer more protections for our children by raising the legal marriage age to 18.”

In North Carolina, an antiquated exception permits minors as young as 14 to legally marry in cases of pregnancy, tying the state with Alaska for the lowest legal age of marriage set by statute in the United States. Although the legal definition of statutory rape criminalizes sexual intercourse with a party age 15 or younger if the age gap between the parties is four years or more, the data shows that this condition was occurring in 57 percent of the marriage licenses reviewed for this demographic.

“North Carolina’s legislative inaction on child marriage has essentially turned us into a sanctuary state for statutory rape,” said Drew Reisinger, Buncombe County Register of Deeds. “In North Carolina, you can’t get a tattoo until you turn 18. Because tattoos are lifelong decisions. Using the same logic, we should raise the age of our marriage laws because marriage is even more consequential than a bad back tat.”

“The strongest and most straightforward way to protect girls from being forced into marriages against their will or trapped in abusive marriages they can’t escape is to make the minimum marriage age the age of majority—18—with no exceptions,” said Jeanne Smoot, Senior Counsel for Policy and Strategy, Tahirih Justice Center. “As states across the country wake up to how current loopholes put girls at risk and snap into action—raising minimum marriage ages, limiting age differences, and striking pregnancy and parental consent exceptions—we urge North Carolina to assert itself as a leader in this fast-growing national movement to protect vulnerable children.”

“As a child marriage survivor, I know how critical passing child marriage reform legislation in North Carolina is for ensuring child predators can no longer hide their offenses behind a marriage license,” said Donna Pollard, [Founder of Survivors’ Corner](#). “This reform is the first step in breaking cycles of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and poverty associated with child marriage. The time for change is now.”

Studies reveal negative impacts of child marriage in the US

A complementary new ICRW report on the prevalence and impact of child marriage across the United States shows that marrying early has universally detrimental effects over a range of outcomes. This includes a correlation with decreased educational attainment and earnings; an increased risk of physical, reproductive, and mental health issues; and greater experiences of violence and likelihood of divorce—particularly for girls.

“The literature shows that remaining unmarried under 18, even in the case of pregnancy, has better outcomes for teen mothers and their children,” said Mara Steinhaus, Senior Research and Learning Specialist at WomenStrong International and one of the authors of the report. “Though more research is needed on the impacts of child marriage in the US, the data we have is consistent with the much larger body of evidence from other countries showing that child marriage is harmful in any context.”

According to [Tahirih Justice Center](#), many survivors of child marriage who have come forward around the country have reported that they were forced to marry their rapists in an attempt to

shield the perpetrators from prosecution for forcible or statutory rape or to cover up case of child abuse, neglect or exploitation.

“Even if the intended spouse is a peer instead of a predator, and the relationship is not abusive, marrying young stacks steep odds against girls’ safety and welfare,” said Smoot. “Legislative reforms are needed to reflect mounting evidence that marriage before age 18 is not in the best interests of an individual child, nor the best interests of a state seeking to uplift all its children.”

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Anchored in the principle of human dignity, ICRW advances gender equity, inclusion and shared prosperity. With offices in Washington, DC; New Delhi, India; Nairobi, Kenya; and Uganda, ICRW works with non-profit, government and private sector partners to conduct research, develop and guide strategy and build capacity to promote evidence-based policies, programs and practices.