



# CHILD MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

## By the Numbers

July 6, 2017 • by Anjali Tsui, Dan Nolan and Chris Amico

SCROLL TO BEGIN

At first, almost no one believed Fraidy Reiss when she said child marriage happens in the United States.

"That's not a problem here," people would say. But the laws in every state allow minors to get married under certain circumstances. As the founder of Unchained At Last, an advocacy group that's working to outlaw marriage before the age of 18, Reiss would hear from teenage girls who were looking to get out of a marriage.

Reiss wanted to know how often minors were getting married, so she went looking for an actual count.

Her group is based in New Jersey, and that's where her search began.

Has child marriage affected you?

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"When I got that spreadsheet from the state health department, I was literally shaking," Reiss said.

The spreadsheet showed nearly 3,500 minors married in New Jersey between 1995 and 2012. Most minors were 16 and 17 years old.

"That number was so much higher than I had thought it would be," she said. "Then, the fact that the children were as young as 13 and the fact that it was mostly girls married to adult men."

After New Jersey, she requested marriage license data from New York. And then more states, until she had numbers from more than 30 states.

Reiss shared that initial dataset with FRONTLINE. We requested data from additional states in an effort to get a fuller picture of how many minors are getting married in the U.S., how old they are and where these marriages are taking place.

Here is what we learned:

Between 2000 and 2015, at least  
**207,468**  
minors were married in the United States

Note: Total includes data from 41 states and three counties. [View full list](#)

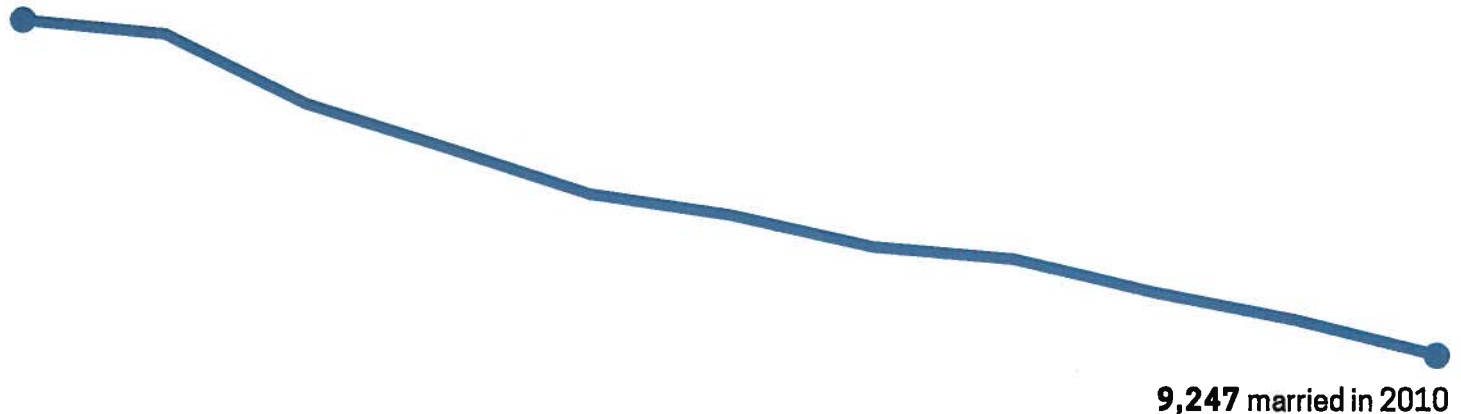
This count is incomplete. While health departments in most states keep track of how old people are when they get married, some states — including [New Mexico](#), [Nevada](#) and [Arizona](#) — only keep records at the county level. We've requested information from the biggest counties in some of those states, but gaps remain. We did not receive data from [California](#), [Georgia](#), [Maine](#), [North Carolina](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Pennsylvania](#) or the [District of Columbia](#).

States made different years' worth of data available. While most provided records for 2000 through 2010, some were able to give us more recent numbers.

It is impossible to know exactly who got married or why, as public records only show the age and gender of each person.

## Fewer Minors Are Getting Married

**23,583** married in 2000

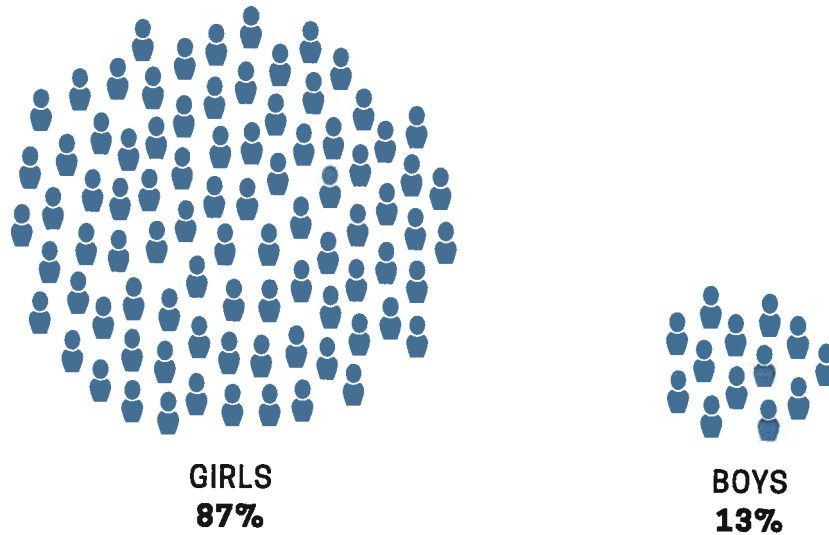


Note: 175,194 total minors, 38 states and two counties, 2000–2010. [View full list](#)

The number of people marrying before the age of 18 fell by about 61 percent between 2000 and 2010 in states where we have records.

Fewer Americans overall are getting married, according to the U.S. Census, and those who do are more likely to wait until their 20s or early 30s. Still, advocates argue that gaps in state laws are failing to protect minors from being forced or coerced into marriages where they may face violence and sexual assault.

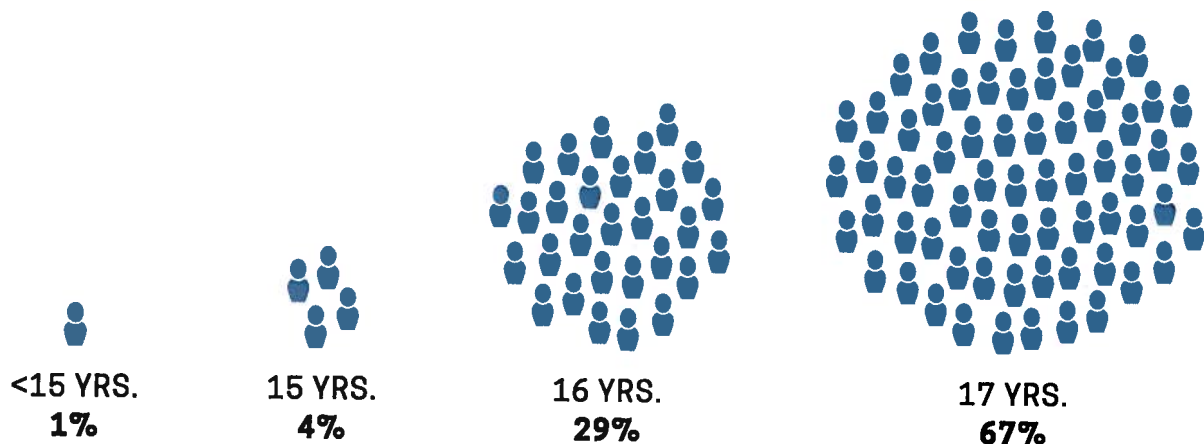
## Most of the Minors Who Married Were Girls



Note: 198,729 total minors, 40 states and one county, from 2000–2015. [View full list](#)

Almost 90 percent of minors who married between 2000 and 2015 were girls. Most of them were 16 or 17 years old.

## How Old Were the Minors Who Married?



Note: 197,617 total minors, 38 states and three counties, from 2000–2015. Due to rounding, numbers don't add up to 100 percent. [View full list](#)

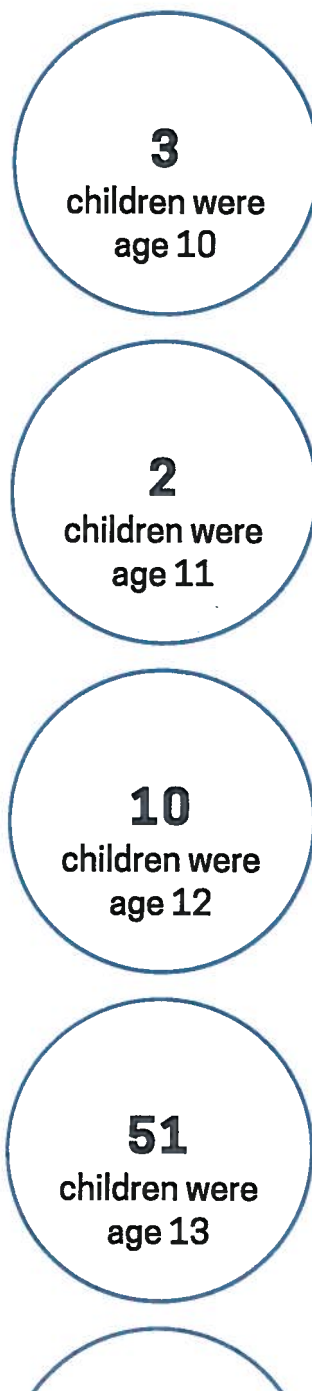
The youngest children to marry were three 10-year-old girls in [Tennessee](#) in 2001, who were married to men ages 24, 25 and 31, according to state data. The youngest groom was an 11-year-old boy, also in

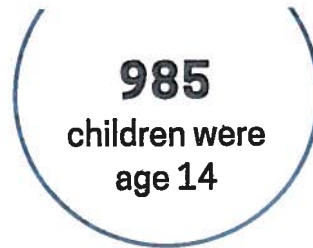
Tennessee, who married a 27-year-old woman in 2006.

Children as young as 12 were granted marriage licenses in Alaska, Louisiana, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Thirteen-year-olds were given the green light to marry in Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

## The Youngest Children To Marry

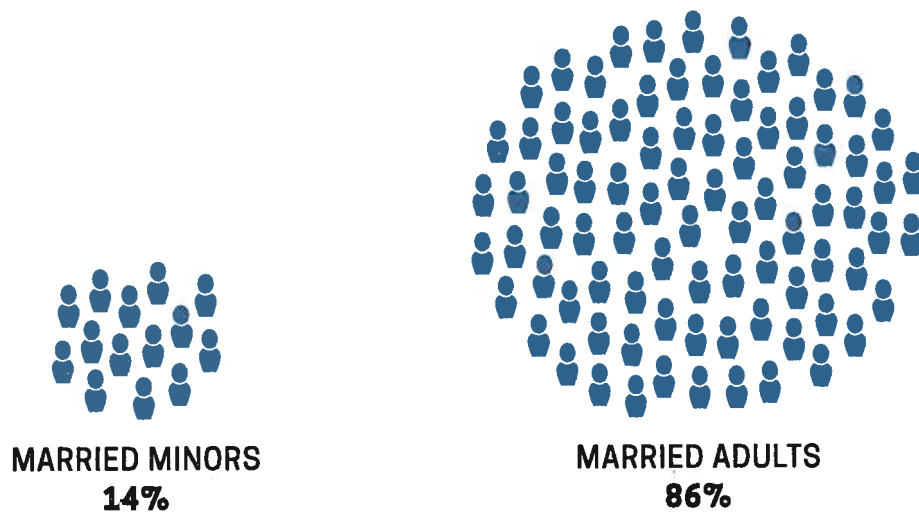




Note: 170,372 total children, 33 states and three counties, 2000–2015. [View full list](#)

Most states set the age of sexual consent between 16 and 18. A person can be charged with sexual abuse or statutory rape for having sex with a minor. Yet, we found numerous examples of children who were given marriage licenses before they could legally consent to sex. These marriages were almost always approved by court clerks and judges.

## Minors Who Married Other Minors Versus Adults

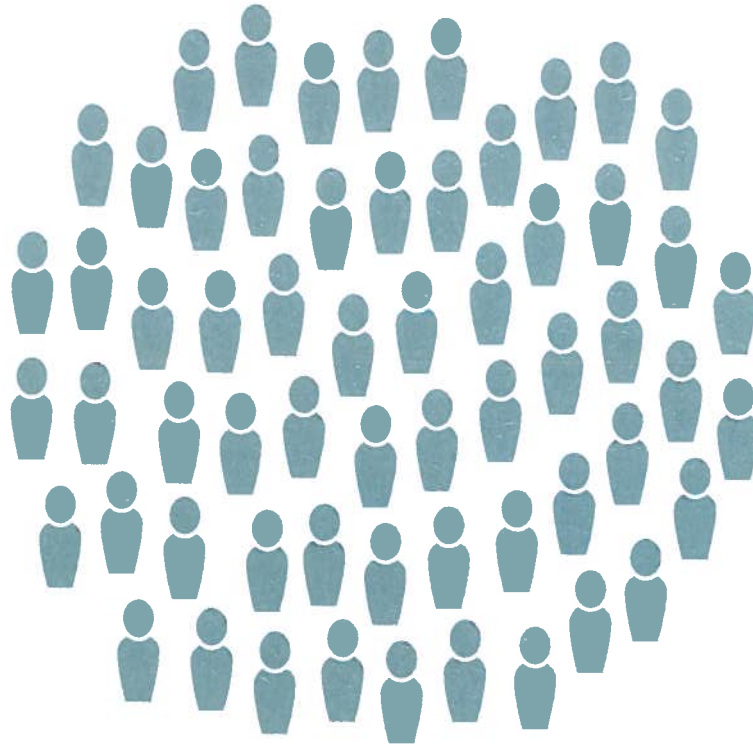


Note: 199,544 children, 39 states and three counties, 2000–2015. [View full list](#)

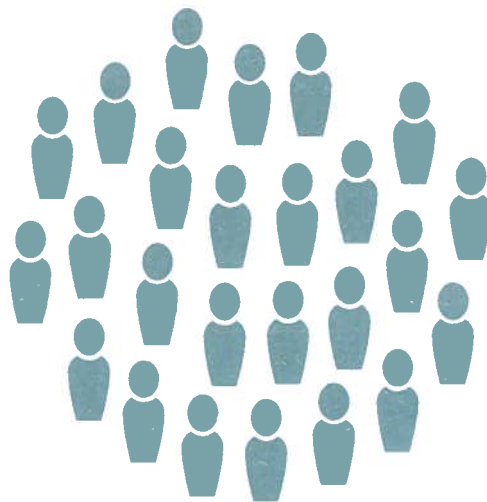
While some minors married other minors, these cases were less common. Most married adults who were 18, 19 or in their early 20s.

## How Old Were the Adults Who Married Minors?

**18-20 YRS. 60%**

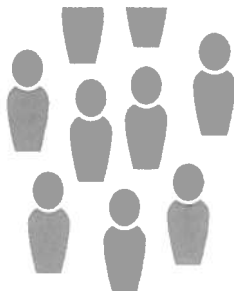


**21-23 YRS. 25%**



**24-26 YRS. 9%**





27-29 YRS. YRS. **3%**



>29 YRS. **3%**



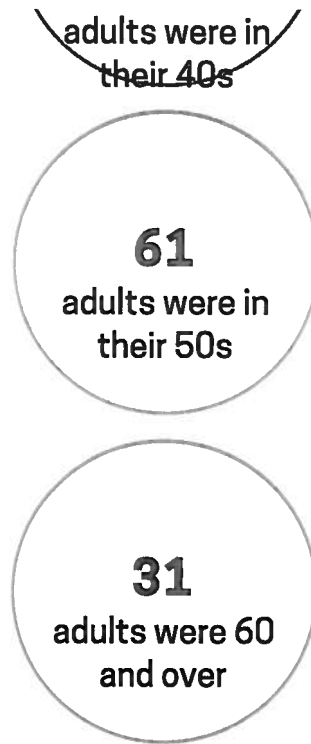
Note: 113,513 adults, 25 states, 2000–2015. [View full list](#)

In rare cases, minors were permitted to marry adults who were decades older.

## The Oldest Adults Who Married Minors







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Note: 113,513 adults, 25 states, 2000–2015. [View full list](#)

In 2010, a 17-year-old girl married a 65-year-old man in [Idaho](#).

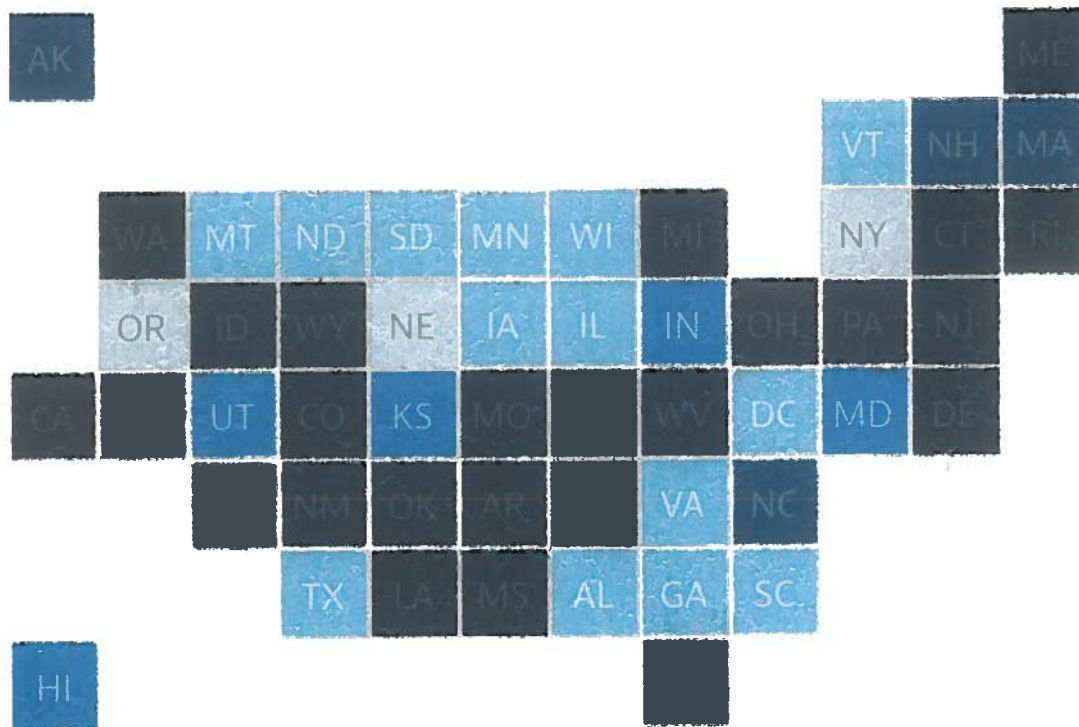
One of the oldest people to marry a child was a 74-year-old in [Alabama](#). His bride was 14. (The state later raised its minimum marriage age to 16).

"A large age difference is an automatic red flag, but a small age difference is not an automatic green flag," said Jeanne Smoot, an attorney with the Tahirih Justice Center, an organization that offers legal services for women and girls fleeing violence, and which has advocated to ban marriage for all minors.

Advocates say it's rare for law enforcement to charge an adult with statutory rape if he or she is married to a minor. In some states, "the same acts that would be statutory rape outside of marriage are made lawful within," Smoot added.

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## How Early Can You Get Married?



### Age floor

none    12-14    15    16    17

Source: [Tahirih Justice Center](#)

People can get married on their own once they reach the age of adulthood, which is 18 in almost every state. But every state allows minors to get married at younger ages in some situations. Minors almost always need a parent's consent, and sometimes, a judge's approval.

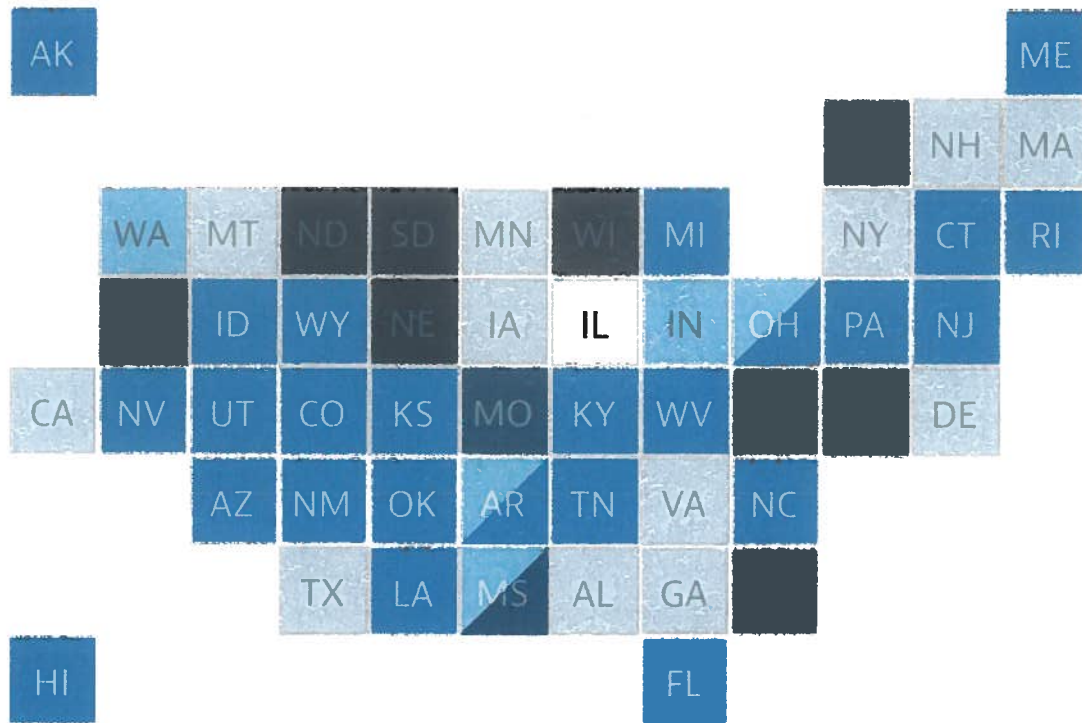
(See the cards below for details on each state's laws and marriage rates)

In Oregon and Nebraska, minors have to be at least 17 years old to get married. Other states draw a line at 14, 15 or 16.

In New Hampshire, a law that has been on the books since 1907 allows girls as young as 13 and boys as young as 14 to marry. In Massachusetts, girls can legally marry at 12, while boys can at 14. Both states require a judge's approval and at least one parent's consent.

In 26 states, there's no minimum marriage age, according to the Tahirih Justice Center. Children in those states can get married at any age if certain conditions are met.

## Judicial Approval Laws



#### Age where judicial approval is needed

none <15 <16 <17 <18

special

circumstances

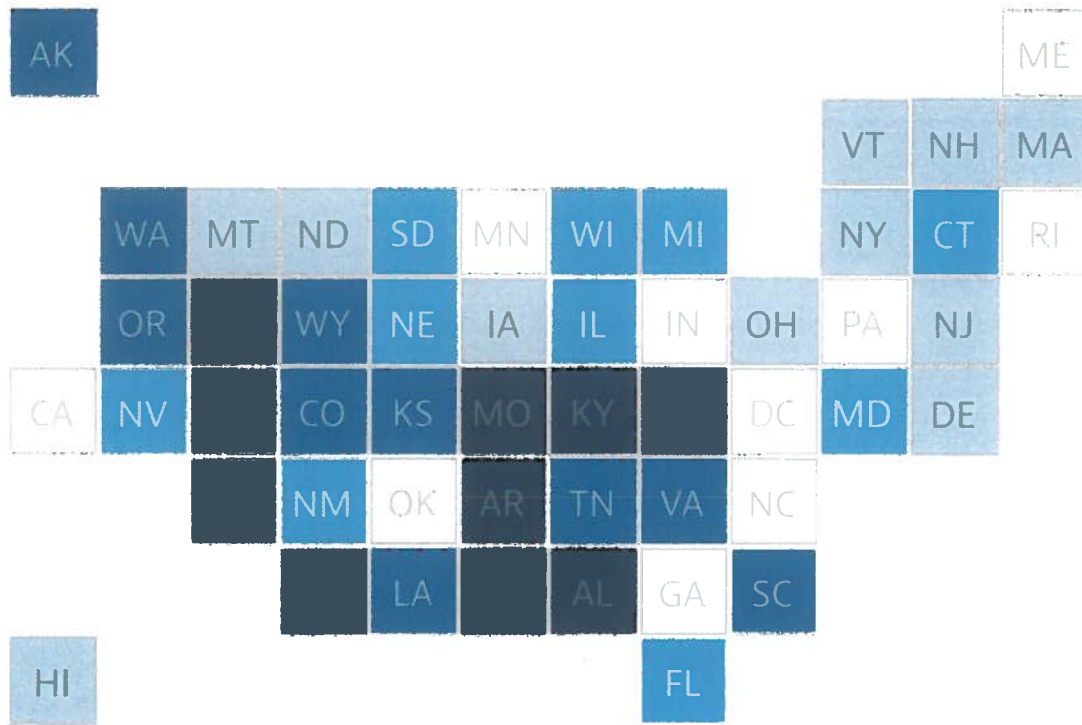
ages differ with gender  
(male upper left / female lower right)

Source: [Tahirih Justice Center](#)

Ten states require all minors to petition a judge for a marriage license, according to a forthcoming Tahirih report. In most states, only children under 16 have to make their case before a judge.

Laws in nine states allow minors to marry before the age of 16 with a judge's approval if the bride is pregnant. When a pregnancy is involved, parental consent is not always necessary.

## Child Marriage Rates, 2010



#### Rate per 10,000 marriages

2-14      17-23      26-37      38-84

data not  
available

Source: Unchained at Last, FRONTLINE

We calculated the rate of child marriage in the U.S. for 2010 — the most recent year for which we have data for the greatest number of states. The numbers show that marriages involving minors occurred most often in states like Idaho, Kentucky and West Virginia, which have large rural populations.

Minors are most likely to get married in places that are rural and poor, according to Nicholas Syrett, who combed through historical marriage records while researching his book, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States*.

"Almost all the evidence indicates that girls in cities don't get married young, that girls from middle class or wealthy families, don't get married young," Syrett said. "This is a rural phenomenon and it is a phenomenon of poverty."

Explore our database to learn how many children married in each state. Click on the cards to see the laws that allowed them to marry.

*Anjali Tsui is the Abrams Journalism Fellow for the FRONTLINE/Columbia Journalism School fellowship program.*

## Child Marriage: State by State

Select state

**SORT:**

**ALPHABETICAL** A-Z Z-A

**MARRIAGE RATE** LOWEST HIGHEST

**TOTAL MARRIAGES** LOWEST HIGHEST

### Alabama

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**8,657**



CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**43** per 10,000 married

### Alaska

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**756**



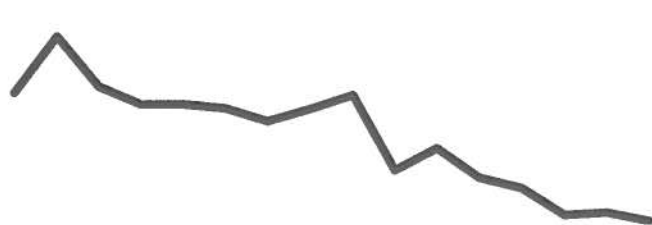
CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**25** per 10,000 married

### Arizona (Maricopa County)

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2015)

**4,767**



CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**58** per 10,000 married

### Arkansas

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**7,512**



CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**46** per 10,000 married

### California

### Colorado

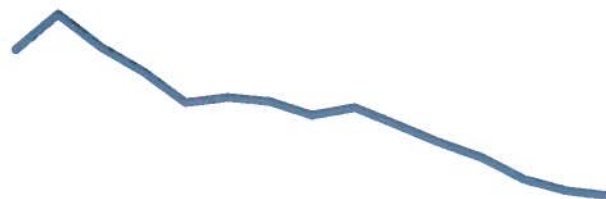
## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED

Not available

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE

Not available

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**4,813**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**37** per 10,000 married

## Connecticut

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**1,211**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**17** per 10,000 married

## Delaware

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2011)

**204**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**2** per 10,000 married

## District of Columbia

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED

Not available

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE

Not available

## Florida

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2015)

**16,486**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**22** per 10,000 married

## Georgia

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED

Not available

## Hawaii

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**721**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE

Not available

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**7** per 10,000 married

## Idaho

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**4,752**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**84** per 10,000 married

## Illinois

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2013)

**7,005**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**21** per 10,000 married

## Indiana

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**3,108**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE

Not available

## Iowa

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**1,260**

## CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**11** per 10,000 married

## Kansas

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**2,916**

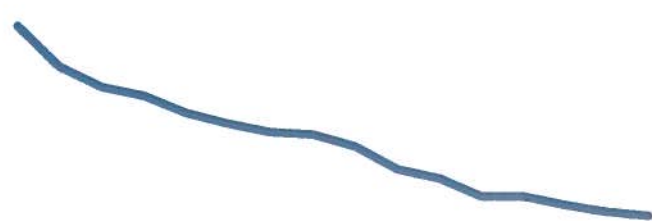
## Kentucky

## TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2015)

**10,618**



CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**37** per 10,000 married

CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**73** per 10,000 married**Louisiana**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2010)

**4,532**

CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**27** per 10,000 married**Maine**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED

Not available

CHILD MARRIAGE RATE

Not available

**Maryland**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**3,134**

CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**23** per 10,000 married**Massachusetts**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2013)

**1,063**

CHILD MARRIAGE RATE (2010)

**7** per 10,000 married**Michigan**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2014)

**Minnesota**

TOTAL CHILDREN MARRIED (2000-2003)