

# Dear Administration For Children and Families,

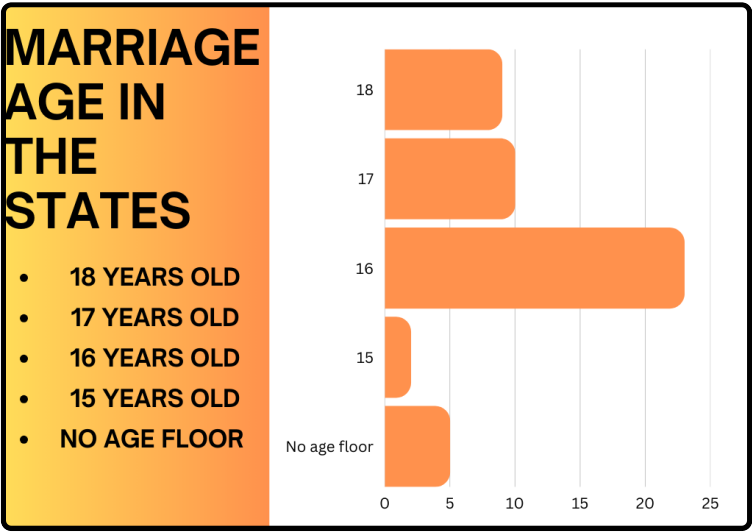
When most Americans think about child marriage, we often scoff. Most of us have never really given much thought to the laws about child marriage, because it feels so distant. To us, child marriage is a brutal, archaic concept, something that happens in other countries, not here, not in our home.

And yet, it is here. Child marriage is very well and active in the United States, and most Americans do not know the reality of the situation we are in. Most do not even know the laws regarding child marriage in their own state. And why would they? It is not talked about. It's not in the media or in general conversation. Nothing can possibly change if no one knows about the issue at hand.

## What is Child Marriage, and how is it relevant in the U.S?

Child marriage is defined as marriage where one or both parties involved is under the age of 18. From 2000-2018, about 300,000 children were married in the U.S, according to the nonprofit organization [Unchained At Last](#). Unchained is dictated to ending forced and child marriage in the United States.

Child marriage was legal in every state until 2018, when Delaware and New Jersey banned marriage under 18 without exceptions. Since then, seven states have followed suit. The other 41 states have various age floors, shown below. Five states have no age floor, allowing any age under 18 to marry with a parent's permission.



Graph Credit: Ada Rye

## Why is it bad?

- The United Nations classifies [all child marriage as forced marriage](#).

Forced marriage is where one or both parties involved do not express consent to the marriage. Globally, forced marriage is categorized as a modern slavery. The U.S. State Department specifically identified child marriage as child abuse, but yet the U.S does not seem to be doing anything about it, despite promising to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

- **Children have difficulties leaving marriages.**

Minors have limited rights before turning 18. Without help, they cannot file for divorce or request a protective order, and often it is difficult for them to find someone willing to help them. Domestic violence shelters usually won't accept minors without an adult accompanying them. Youth shelters are likely to report the child's presence to their parents, and the shelter's goal is reunification, which will put the child right back in their situation.

- **It ruins the child's life.**

Of the nearly 300,000 child marriages from 2000-2018, about 86% were girls, according to Unchained At Last. Marrying as a minor can wreck a child's life, damaging their health, education opportunities, and can detrimentally effect their economic status and opportunities. They are also at a higher risk for [domestic violence](#).

- **Marriage typically undermines sex offense laws meant to protect children.**



Photo Credit: Unchained At Last

About 60,000 marriages had an age difference that outside of marriage would be considered a sex crime. But the legal marriage allows the offender to freely rape their spouse as they please.

***“Child marriage brings no benefit, other than to child rapists. A mature 17-year-old who is in love and wants to marry can wait a matter of months to marry without suffering any harm. A teen couple that gets pregnant can easily co-parent outside of marriage until they are both 18 (establishing paternity is a simple process in most states). A child who is in an abusive home deserves resources and options that do not involve entering a contractual sexual relationship.” -Unchained At Last***

**What can be done?**

In 2015, the UN established [17 Sustainable Development goals](#). Goal 5.3 is to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation” (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goals5>). The United States, along with 193 other countries, promised to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

As mentioned before, only 9 states have completely banned child marriage. 10 states have previous bills that failed to pass, and 20 states have introduced weak bills that only limit marriage under 18. Five states have taken no recent action at all. Currently, only five states have pending bills to eliminate child marriage. If the bills pass, that will mean that 14 states have illegalized marriage under the age of eighteen, less than 30% of all the states.

With less than seven years to go before the U.S. promised to illegalize all child marriage, these numbers do not look promising. After 8 years since the promise was made, and this is all that we have to show for it. Progress is slow going within the states, and it’s becoming harder and harder to believe that things will really change, especially because it seems like the national legislation will never step in. Unfortunately, it’s unlikely that all the states will eliminate child marriage without a push from the national government.

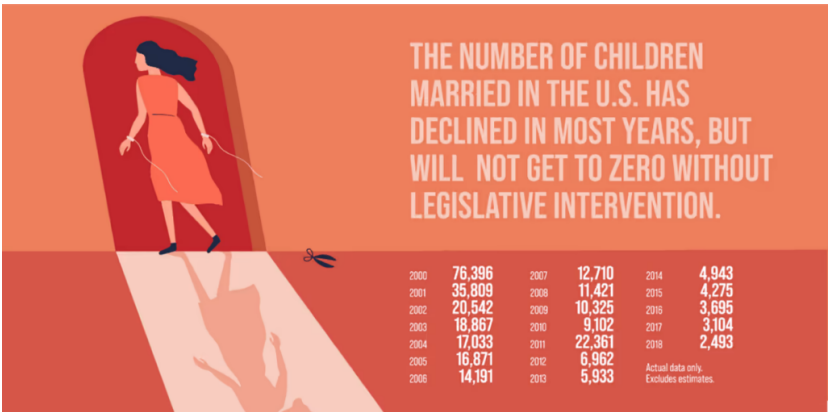


Photo Credit: Unchained At Last

This is why I have written this letter. The states need help, help from someone to push national legislative action. They need guidance to advance the progress towards ending child marriage. For too long, the national government has relied on the states to take the steps necessary to protect these children. Yet only a small number of states have. Despite clearly labeling child marriage as child abuse, the U.S. has done very little to protect these children from said abuse.

This department, the Department for Children and Families, is dedicated to [“promote the economic and social well-being of children, families, and communities.”](#) These children are hurting, and they need help. Someone has to step in to put an end to child marriage, and it has to start at the top. Unchained at Last has done fantastic work, studying child marriage in the U.S. and working to reveal the truth of child marriage to the public. For many years, this survivor-led nonprofit has supported women and those effected by forced marriages. This

work is important, but it can only go so far. Action has to start somewhere, and it has to start now.

For the children.

Signed,

Ada Rye

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