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Child marriage is rare in the U.S., though this varies by state

BY DAVID MCCLENDON ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/DMCCLENDON/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/dmccleendon/)) AND ALEKSANDRA SANDSTROM ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/ASANDSTROM/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/asandstrom/))

(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/01/child-marriage-is-rare-in-the-u-s-though-this-varies-by-state/ft_16-11-01_childmarriage_age/) About 57,800 minors in the U.S. ages 15 to 17 were married as of 2014. That might sound like a lot of people (and it is), but it's also just five of every 1,000 in that age group, a Pew Research Center analysis of 2014 data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey finds.

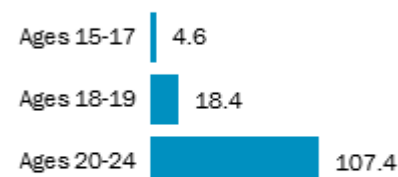
By contrast, 18 of every 1,000 of those ages 18 to 19 were married, and among those ages 20 to 24, the number rose to 107 out of every 1,000.

The rate of child marriage varies widely by state. It is most common in West Virginia and Texas, where about seven of every 1,000 15- to 17-year-olds were married in 2014. Several other states in the South and the West, including Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Nevada and California, also have above-average rates of child marriage.

Marriage among 15- to 17-year-olds is less common in the Northeast and the Midwest. In Maine and Rhode Island, for example, only two of every 1,000 in this age group were married that year – less than half the national average. The same was true in Alaska.

Nearly five of every 1,000 15- to 17-year-olds in the United States are married

Number of people married per thousand, by age group

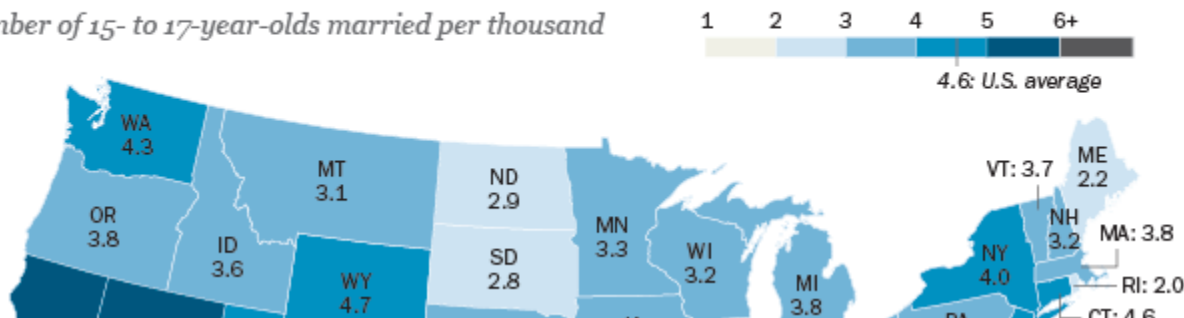


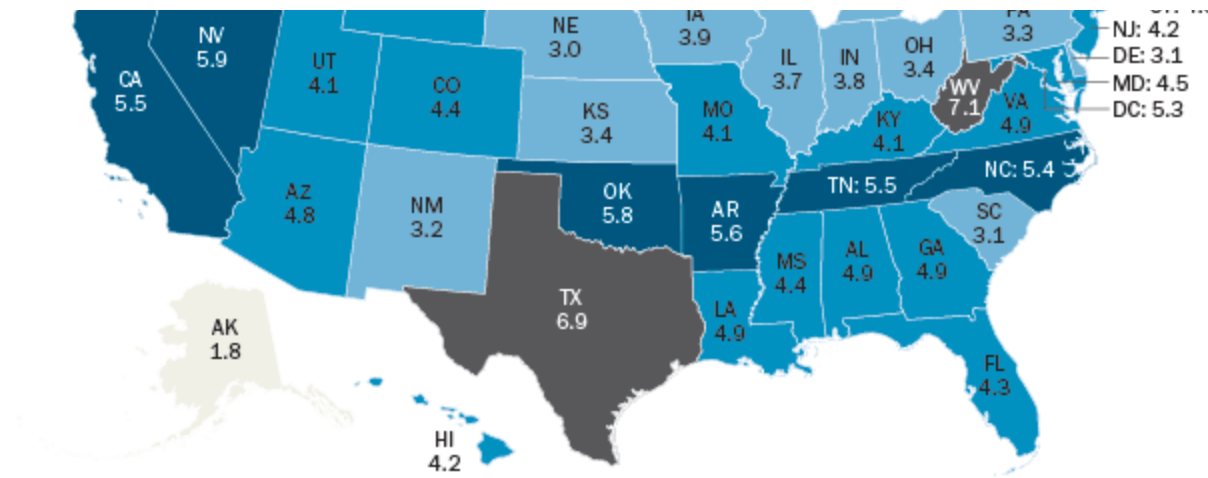
Notes: Marriage rates for 2014 are five-year estimates that include data collected from 2010-2014. Respondents who are separated, divorced, or widowed are not counted as "married" but are included in the total population of 15-17 year olds. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data (2014 five-year estimates).

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Child marriage is more common in the southern United States

Number of 15- to 17-year-olds married per thousand





Note: Marriage rates for 2014 are five-year estimates that include data collected from 2010-2014. Respondents who are separated, divorced, or widowed are not counted as "married" but are included in the total population of 15- to 17-year-olds. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data (2014 five-year estimates)

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(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/01/child-marriage-is-rare-in-the-u-s-though-this-varies-by-state/ft_16-10-14_childmarriageus/) Although child marriage is not very common in the U.S., it is legal in almost every state. Nearly every state technically prohibits people younger than 18 from marrying, but each of these jurisdictions has exceptions to these laws. In at least 36 states, for example, minors can marry with judicial consent. And in 34 states, 16- and 17-year-olds can marry with their parents' permission. Two states, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, allow 12- and 13-year-old girls respectively and 14-year-old boys to marry with parental and judicial permission. (Data on marriages among those under the age of 15 are not available from the American Community Survey.)

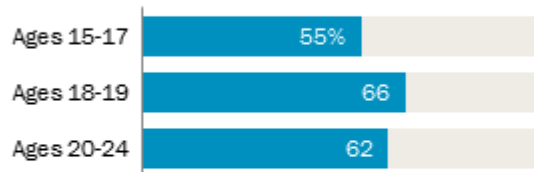
A handful of states allow minors to marry if one partner is pregnant or has recently given birth. For example, in Florida, judges may issue licenses (http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0700-0799/0741/0741.html) without an age minimum if one of the parties to the marriage is pregnant.

(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/01/child-marriage-is-rare-in-the-u-s-though-this-varies-by-state/ft_16-11-01_childmarriage_gender/) Of the 57,800 Americans ages 15 to 17 who were married in 2014, an estimated 31,644 were girls and 26,156 were boys, with 55% being female and 45% male. (Texas has the highest child marriage rate for girls: Nine out of every 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17 in that state were married.) Gender differences are even wider at older ages: Among married young adults ages 18 and 19, 66% were female; among those married and ages 20 to 24, 62% were female.

The American Community Survey (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>) is one of the largest and highest quality surveys available, which makes it ideal for examining rare events such as child marriage. However, estimates of child marriage are subject to accurate reporting by survey respondents. To the extent that some people may be less willing to say that they (or a household

More girls than boys are married at young ages

% female among married



Notes: Marriage rates for 2014 are five-year estimates that include data collected from 2010-2014. Respondents who are separated, divorced or widowed are not counted as "married" but are included in the total population of each age group. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data (2014 five-year estimates).

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member who is ages 15 to 17) are married, this analysis could underestimate the prevalence of child marriage in the population.



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2 Comments



Anonymous • 8 months ago (#comment-672540)

How much impact is there from cultural factors. That is are immigrants, such as from Central America, or from certain Middle Eastern countries a large portion of these. Do the rates vary by ethnic, religion, and other factors? Is teen pregnancy involved in a high percentage?

The low numbers in Alaska and Maine, while high in Texas, California and Nevada suggest to me that Hispanic culture might be a factor.

Numbers without cultural detail are almost meaningless. It's like the numbers showing a decline in the percentage of women who make up IT workers – in this case no distinction is made between immigrants brought in for jobs, where Indian and Asian cultures have lower percentages of women in these fields than Americans, and these immigrant communities and visa workers make up perhaps 1/2 of all workers in IT. In this example it's hard to gauge without detail whether progress is being made or not among American born IT workers. I see the same problem here.



David McClendon • 8 months ago (#comment-672551)

Thanks for your interest! The US Census does not publish national or state estimates of marital status by age group for different race-ethnic or country-of-origin groups. The American Community Survey collects this data (available at usa.ipums.org/usa (<https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>)), but there are too few married 15-17 year-olds in the sample to be able to draw reliable conclusions from this data source.