Child marriages violating statutory rape laws in many U.S. states

17 February 2022

Comparing data from marriage certificates and statutory rape laws across the U.S., the researchers found that the proportion of child marriages that met the definition of a sex crime varied from 1% to over 50%. In 33 states, some or all statutory rape laws exempted sex between married couples from the definition of crimes. In these states, the proportion of child marriages that would have been crimes, absent these exemptions, varied from less than 1% to over 80%.

"Our study exposes the inconsistency between laws that permit children to marry and laws that criminalize sex with children across the U.S. The research shows that some child marriages are indistinguishable from sex crimes," says senior author Alissa Koski, an Assistant Professor in the Department of in Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Occupational Health at McGill University. "It's unclear why they were certified as marriages rather than prosecuted," she adds.

Marital exemptions to statutory rape laws

"We were surprised by the enormous variation between states' statutory rape laws and how they overlapped with child marriages. We were also alarmed to find some extremely young children were married over the period that we studied. For instance, four 12-year-olds have been legally married in Louisiana since 2000," says lead author Kaya Van Roost, a Ph.D. student under the supervision of Alissa Koski.

The research shows that some states have more restrictive laws while others were more lenient. In Idaho sex before age 18 was prohibited for all unmarried persons until 2010. In these states, many child marriages met the definition of sex crimes. On the flip side, laws in Michigan prohibit sex with someone less than 16 years old, unless the individuals are married. In these states, fewer child marriages met the definition of crimes since most of the marriages involve 16- or 17-year-olds.
"The simultaneous legality of child marriage and marital exemptions to statutory rape laws provide legal loopholes for sexual acts with children that would otherwise be considered crimes," says Alissa Koski.

The findings suggest that marital exemptions to statutory rape should be reexamined and that the minimum legal age for marriage should be raised to avoid inconsistencies with statutory rape laws, say the researchers.


Provided by McGill University

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