



TO: Chair Victory, Vice Chair VanderWall, Vice Chair Chang, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee

FROM: Marci Hamilton, Esq. & Kathryn Robb, Esq.

RE: SBs 1114–1123

DATE: November 29, 2022

Dear Honorable Members of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee,

Thank you for allowing us, Professor Marci Hamilton of CHILD USA and Kathryn Robb of CHILD USA Advocacy, to submit testimony regarding Senate Bills 1114–1123. Marci Hamilton is the Founder & CEO of CHILD USA, an interdisciplinary think tank dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect at the University of Pennsylvania, where she is a Professor in the Fels Institute of Government and a Senior Resident Fellow in the Program for Research on Religion. Kathryn Robb is the Executive Director of CHILD USA Advocacy, a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization dedicated to protecting children’s civil liberties and keeping children safe from abuse and neglect.

We urge you to vote “YES” on SBs 1114-1123.

This legislation, if passed, would place Michigan in the top five states in the nation for protecting children from the trauma of child marriage. Currently, **nearly every state in the United States permits child marriage in some form**. While many states set a marriage age floor at 18, their laws still include an array of exceptions that “can in effect drop the true minimum marriage age much lower.” These loopholes—most commonly including parental consent, judicial approval, the lack of official proof of age requirements, and pregnancy exceptions—endanger children.

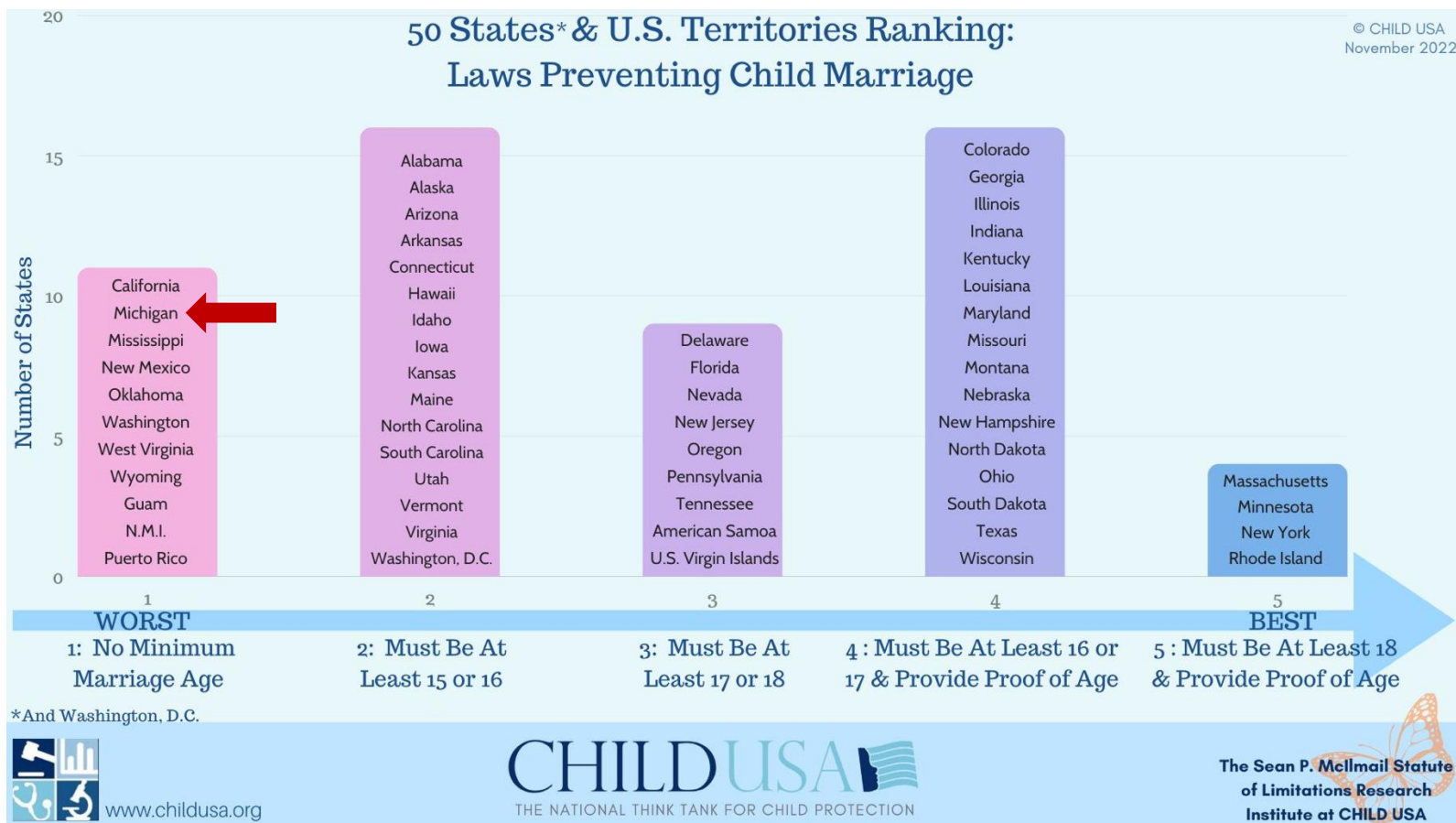
Child Marriage is Pervasive in the U.S. with Devastating Domestic Consequences

The above-mentioned legal loopholes may seem trivial on paper, but they result in tragic, life-altering consequences for children in the United States.

- Between 2000 and 2018, almost 300,000 adolescent minors were legally married in the U.S.—this is an average of 45 child marriages per day.
- An estimated 30,000–60,000 marriages occurred “at an age or spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.”
- The majority of U.S. states permit marriage as a defense to statutory rape.



- Between 70% and 80% of marriages involving a child in the United States end in divorce, and child marriage followed by divorce doubles the likelihood that child mothers will descend into poverty.
- Girls in the United States who marry before the age of 19 are also 50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college.
- Victims of child marriage in the United States are acutely vulnerable to higher rates of psychiatric disorders as well as physical, emotional, or verbal abuse.



Michigan does not escape these consequences. As evidenced in the graph above, Michigan has some of the weakest child marriage laws in the nation. Unfortunately, these laws have permitted abusers to harm children. Ann was a 14-year-old child living in Vestaburg, Michigan when, under pressure from her parents and boyfriend, she was legally married to an 18-year-old man. Ann was immediately taken out of school, moved away from her family and friends, and subjected to threats by her new husband. She has spent the past 15 years of her life enduring fear and sadness on a daily basis.



To protect children and secure their futures, the practice of child marriage must be prohibited under the law. In the absence of a federal prohibition against child marriage, it falls to each state to establish marriage laws that close these loopholes and effectively ban child marriage.

Ultimately, state and federal laws that (1) ban marriage for persons under the age of eighteen, without exception, and (2) require all marriage applicants to furnish official proof of their age, will most effectively thwart child marriage nationally and truly protect children. We commend you for moving towards this goal and taking up the charge on behalf of Michigan's children.

For more information about child marriage reform, visit <https://childusa.org/child-marriage/> or email info@childusa.org. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance on this or any other child protection issues.

Sincerely,



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