



Testimony in Support of SB 198: Ending Child Marriage  
Presented to Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee  
May 22, 2018

Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan and Distinguished Committee Members:

My name is Nicholas Syrett and I am a historian of gender and sexuality teaching at the University of Kansas where I am the chair of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department. My most recent book was a history of child marriage in the U.S.: *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States*. I write to urge you to support SB 198, with the amendment to end all marriage below the age of eighteen. The bill makes sense for a number of reasons, the most glaring of which is that judges often grant permission to marry to girls who are underage and pregnant, often meaning that the men they will be marrying are their statutory rapists. More than 4,660 minors were married in Ohio between 2000 and 2014, most of them girls to adult men.

The other particularly dangerous thing about Ohio's law (especially by comparison to some other states) as it is currently written is that with judicial consent minors of *any* age may marry if they already have children, and pregnant girls of any age may marry. The statute provides *no minimum marriage age at all*. One hopes, of course, that judges would exercise sound judgment in this regard, but children as young as *ten years old* have been married legally in states like Ohio without any absolute minimum marriageable age in the past two decades.

We know that those who marry below the age of eighteen are far more likely to divorce than those who marry later in life. 70 to 80 percent of marriages below the age of eighteen end in divorce. This trend has been true since social scientists began to track age of marriage and correlate it to divorce rates in the early twentieth century. What this means is that the very thing that granting a marriage license to a minor is supposed to do—make a stable home—it does not actually do.

We also know that girls—the overwhelming majority of minor spouses—who marry below the age of eighteen are far less likely to graduate high school than those who marry later, are more likely to suffer abuse (both mental and physical) by their husbands, and are also more likely to suffer from mental health problems, many as a result of their early marriages. Further, married minors, because they are still children in the eyes of the law, do not have the same legal rights that adults have, meaning that if they desire to leave abusive relationships, they are often unable to initiate divorce proceedings in their own name, check in to a shelter, or leave their homes.

Holding firm on one minimum marriageable age—eighteen—has the consequence of protecting those who are most vulnerable to being forced or coerced into marriage: children. You have

within your power the ability to make Ohio a national leader in child protection, the second state to outlaw marriage below the age of eighteen altogether. Please vote in favor of SB 198, with the amendment to outlaw marriage below eighteen. This would recognize that adults, those above the age of eighteen, are in the best position to decide if they are ready for the rights and responsibilities of marriage.

If you should have any questions about the history of child marriage in the United States that I can answer, feel free to contact me at [syrett@ku.edu](mailto:syrett@ku.edu) or (785) 864-2311.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicholas L. Syrett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Nicholas L. Syrett, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair