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Article Title

Early Marriage Incidence Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study in Palangka Raya City

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a significant global surge in early marriage cases; however, specific local-level dynamics with unique urban demographic characteristics, such as in Palangka Raya City, are rarely investigated in depth. This quantitative descriptive study with a comparative design aimed to analyze the differences in the incidence and demographic characteristics of individuals entering early marriage in Palangka Raya City before (2019) and during (2020) the pandemic, utilizing secondary data from 172 marriage dispensation applications at the Religious Court. The results demonstrated a drastic increase in cases by more than threefold, from 40 cases in 2019 to 132 cases in 2020. This surge was dominated by the late adolescence age group (15 – 19 years), which accounted for 73.48% of the total cases in 2020. The most prominent finding was a shift in the educational profile, where the involvement of senior high school-educated adolescents increased sharply to 46.21% during the pandemic, indicating that educational disruption and online schooling fatigue served as driving factors equally as strong as economic pressure. Furthermore, the Dayak ethnic group experienced a significant proportional increase in involvement, affirming the role of local cultural factors in responding to the crisis. This study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated adolescent vulnerability to early marriage through the mechanisms of learning loss and economic instability, which carries serious implications for increased risks of reproductive health issues and future stunting. Consequently, this demands multisectoral interventions that integrate educational and economic strengthening with cultural approaches.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Early Marriage; Learning Loss; Reproductive Health.

INTRODUCTION

Early marriage is an increasingly concerning global public health issue, particularly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon not only violates children's human rights but also creates a double burden on health and social systems in developing countries. Before the pandemic, various global interventions were implemented to reduce child marriage rates; however, this sudden health crisis disrupted such progress. Global projections indicate that the pandemic may trigger a surge in child marriage, with millions of additional cases expected in the coming decade due to economic instability and disrupted access to social intervention services (Yukich et al., 2021). Similar conditions have been confirmed in other developing countries, where school closures and household economic crises serve as primary catalysts driving families to marry off their daughters earlier as a survival mechanism (Musa et al., 2021). This situation places efforts to eradicate early marriage in a highly vulnerable position, requiring an in-depth evaluation based on empirical data.

In Indonesia, the upward trend in early marriage cases during the pandemic demonstrates a statistically significant anomaly compared to previous periods. National data recorded a threefold surge in applications for judicial dispensation for underage marriage in 2020 compared to 2019 (Antarsih et al., 2023). This drastic increase indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment conducive to marriage during adolescence, in which adolescent vulnerability increases alongside the loss of routine activities and supervision from educational institutions (Wiranegara et al., 2023). Furthermore, this statistical surge cannot be separated from regulatory

changes through Law Number 16 of 2019, which raised the minimum legal age of marriage for women from 16 to 19 years. Consequently, this policy administratively increased the number of adolescents categorized as “underage” who require judicial dispensation to marry (Pratama et al., 2023; Sholikhah et al., 2024).

From a public health perspective, the surge in early marriage rates carries serious implications for reproductive health and future demographic quality. The biological immaturity of reproductive organs in adolescent girls places them at high risk for medical complications (Sekarayu & Nurwati, 2021). Various studies confirm that teenage pregnancy strongly correlates with an increased risk of miscarriage, anemia, postpartum hemorrhage, and life-threatening preeclampsia (Zelharsandy, 2022; Indriani et al., 2023). Furthermore, these biological impacts manifest in infant outcomes, such as the incidence of Low Birth Weight (LBW) and premature birth, which ultimately contribute to high rates of stunting and neonatal mortality (Sari et al., 2020). Therefore, analyzing early marriage trends is not merely a sociodemographic study but a fundamental step in mitigating maternal and child health crises.

The factors driving early marriage during the pandemic are highly complex, involving interactions among economic pressures, educational disruptions, and shifts in adolescent social interaction patterns. School closure policies and the transition to online learning triggered learning loss, as the absence of student engagement with the academic environment prompts them to seek an “escape” through marriage (Hasudungan, 2022). The phenomenon of marriage as an escape from the fatigue of online schooling and the pressure of domestic chores has been widely observed among adolescents across various regions of Indonesia (Rahiem, 2021). Additionally, economic narratives often position girls as a family burden during times of crisis, making early marriage a pragmatic solution to reduce household economic liabilities, even though this frequently traps them in a cycle of structural poverty (Sholikhah et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the generalization that poverty is the sole cause of early marriage does not hold across all regions of Indonesia, particularly in Kalimantan. A study in South Kalimantan found that early marriage in the region did not significantly correlate with poverty levels; rather, it was more strongly influenced by low educational attainment and cultural factors (Juhaidi & Umar, 2020). This indicates the strong role of social norms and local cultures that are permissive of young marriage, as also observed in the Madura and Toraja communities (Bawono et al., 2022), as well as parenting patterns in certain indigenous communities that tend to normalize the practice (Cindrya, 2023). This specific cultural context, such as among the Banjar and Dayak ethnic groups in Central Kalimantan, requires specific investigation as its dynamics may differ from general national patterns.

Palangka Raya City, as the capital of Central Kalimantan Province, presents unique demographic and sociocultural characteristics for investigation within this context. Based on preliminary data from the Religious Court of Palangka Raya City, there was a drastic increase in applications for dispensation from underage marriage, rising from 40 cases in 2019 to 132 in 2020. This surge of over 300% occurred within a heterogeneous urban population, predominantly composed of the Banjar and Dayak ethnic groups, which has relatively better access to education compared to rural areas. However, in-depth analyses regarding the specific characteristics of this case surge—such as the distribution of educational levels and ethnic backgrounds during the pandemic—remain highly limited. This literature gap needs to be addressed to determine whether the phenomenon in Palangka Raya is purely driven by economic factors related to the pandemic or whether there is a shift in social behavior supported by local culture ([Fatmawati et al., 2023](#)).

The novelty and originality of this study lie in its quantitative descriptive comparative approach using authentic secondary data from the Religious Court, which directly compares the periods before (2019) and during (2020) the pandemic. Unlike previous studies, which were predominantly qualitative or literature reviews, this research presents specific numerical data on shifts in age, education, and cultural backgrounds among the population applying for marriage dispensation. This analysis does not merely observe numbers but also examines the characteristics of the subjects involved to map new vulnerability patterns emerging from the pandemic. The scientific contribution of this study is expected to enrich public health literature regarding the impact of global crises on local-level demographic behavior.

Broadly, this study aims to compare the incidence of early marriage before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Palangka Raya City by examining demographic characteristics, including age, education level, ethnicity, and religion. The benefits of this study are expected to provide policymakers, particularly the Health Agency and related institutions, with an accurate data foundation for formulating targeted intervention strategies. Furthermore, these findings are important as a basis for advocating the strengthening of family roles and cross-cultural counseling to prevent long-term impacts on the reproductive health of future generations.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design with a comparative approach to address the research question: the incidence of early marriage before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative descriptive approach was selected because this research aimed to present a systematic and accurate overview of existing facts and to measure social phenomena through numerical and statistical data ([Notoatmodjo, 2018](#)).

The primary data source in this study was secondary data obtained from the Religious Court of Palangka Raya City. Secondary data were used due to their high validity and reliability, serving as an authentic record of early marriage cases that underwent the legal process of marriage dispensation. The collected data included the number of marriage dispensation applications, the demographic characteristics of the applicants (age, highest level of education, ethnicity, and religion), and the court rulings on these applications. Using this secondary data allowed the researchers to conduct retrospective and comparative analyses without direct intervention in human subjects, thereby minimizing bias and ethical risks.

Data were collected through document review (Sugiyono, 2019). With official permission, the researchers accessed and extracted data from the archives or database of the Religious Court of Palangka Raya City. The collected data were subsequently compiled and organized into spreadsheet formats to facilitate the analytical process.

The data analysis technique employed in this study was a quantitative descriptive analysis. The collected data were processed using statistical software to generate frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations (Dahlan, 2020). This analysis aimed to describe the demographic characteristics of early marriage incidence during each specific time period (2019 and 2020) and to compare them directly. Furthermore, data visualizations, such as graphs and charts, were used to elucidate trends and patterns of change. The interpretation of the analytical results was conducted by referencing relevant literature and theories, while also considering the social, cultural, and policy contexts prevalent during the study period.

RESULTS

Based on secondary data extraction from the Religious Court of Palangka Raya City, a total of 172 early marriage cases were identified over the 2019-2020 period. The frequency distribution of these cases according to demographic characteristics, encompassing age, education level, ethnicity, and religion is presented below:

Table 1. Distribution of Frequency of Early Marriage Incidents by Year

Year	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
2019	40	23.26
2020	132	76.74
Total	172	100.00

Source: Secondary Data, 2020.

The frequency distribution of early marriage incidence recorded through marriage dispensation applications at the Religious Court of Palangka Raya City

is presented in Table 1. The table illustrates a drastic surge in the number of early marriages in Palangka Raya City; in 2019, 40 cases (23.26%) were recorded out of the total incidence over the two years. This figure significantly increased to 132 cases (76.74%) in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase indicates a sharp shift in the trend of young-age marriage over the one year of the pandemic.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Early Marriage Incidence by Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
< 15	6	3.49
15 – 19	128	74.42
> 20	38	22.09
Education		
Elementary School	15	8.72
Junior High School	86	50.00
Senior High School	71	41.28
Ethnicity		
Dayak	65	37.79
Banjar	92	53.48
Javanese	15	8.73
Batak	0	0.00
Religion		
Muslim	100	100.00
Christian	0	0.00
Hindu	0	0.00
Buddha	0	0.00

Source: Secondary Data, 2020.

The majority of early marriages occurred within the age range of 15–19 years, accounting for 126 cases (74.46%), followed by cases aged > 20 years with 38 cases (22.09%), and those aged < 15 years with 6 cases (3.49%). Regarding educational attainment, among the 172 documented cases of early marriage, 15 cases (8.7%) had completed elementary education, while 86 (50.0%) and 71 (41.3%) had completed junior and senior high school, respectively (Table 2).

Regarding ethnicity, the data demonstrated the dominance of the Banjar and Dayak ethnic groups in early marriage cases. It was found that 65 cases (37.79%) were Dayak, 92 cases (53.48%) were Banjar, 15 cases (8.73%) were Javanese, and 0 cases (0.00%) were Batak. Based on religion, 100% of the early marriage cases were Muslim (Table 2).

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Early Marriage Incidence by Characteristic of Respondent

Characteristic	Year				Total	
	2019		2020		n	%
	n	%	n	%		
Age						
< 15	5	83.33	1	16.67	6	100.00
15 – 19	31	24.22	97	75.78	128	100.00
> 20	4	10.53	34	89.47	38	100.00
Education						
Elementary School	6	40.00	9	60.00	15	100.00
Junior High School	24	27.91	62	72.09	86	100.00
Senior High School	10	14.08	61	85.92	71	100.00
Ethnicity						
Dayak	10	15.38	55	84.62	65	100.00
Banjar	27	29.35	65	70.65	92	100.00
Javanese	3	20.00	12	80.00	15	100.00
Batak	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Religion						
Muslim	40	23.26	132	76.74	172	100.00
Christian	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Hindu	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Buddha	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00

Source: Secondary Data, 2020.

In the very young age group (< 15 years), the majority of cases occurred before the pandemic (2019) with 5 cases (83.33%), whereas in 2020 there was only 1 case (16.67%). Conversely, in the 15 – 19 age group, there was a massive surge in 2020, with 97 cases (75.78%) compared to 31 cases (24.22%) in 2019. A similar pattern was observed in the > 20 age category (whose partners were likely underage), with 34 cases (89.47%) occurring during the pandemic (Table 3).

COVID-19 pandemic had the most significant impact on the senior high school-educated group. Of the total cases with a senior high school background, 85.92% (61 cases) occurred in 2020, while 2019 accounted for only 14.08% (10 cases). The junior high school education group was also dominated by incidents in 2020 at 72.09%. These data confirm that the surge in cases during the pandemic was largely driven by adolescents in secondary education (junior and senior high school).

The increase in cases occurred evenly across all major ethnic groups. The Dayak ethnic group experienced the largest proportional surge during the pandemic, with 84.62% of total Dayak cases occurring in 2020 (55 cases). The Banjar ethnic group

exhibited a similar pattern, with 70.65% of cases (65 cases) occurring in 2020. This indicates that the driving factors behind early marriage during the pandemic affected all ethnic groups in Palangka Raya.

Table 3 reiterates that 100% of the sample was Muslim, with 76.74% of the cases occurring in 2020. These data reflect the jurisdiction of the data source (the Religious Court) and do not necessarily indicate the absence of cases involving other religions, which might be recorded in other institutions (such as the Civil Registry Office for non-Muslim populations).

DISCUSSION

The surge in early marriage rates in Palangka Raya City, which increased more than threefold from 40 cases (23.26%) in 2019 to 132 cases (76.74%) in 2020, is a highly concerning phenomenon that aligns with the predicted global impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1). This finding confirms the national trend in Indonesia, which recorded a threefold increase in marriage dispensation applications during the same period (Antarsih et al., 2023). On a global scale, this surge validates projections that the pandemic could add millions of new child marriage cases this decade due to extreme socio-economic disruption (Yukich et al., 2021). This sharp 330% increase in Palangka Raya cannot be separated from two primary driving factors working simultaneously: the direct impacts of the pandemic (school closures and economic crises) and regulatory changes to the minimum age of marriage under Law No. 16 of 2019. This new regulation, which raised the minimum legal age for women from 16 to 19 years, administratively compelled the late adolescence group (16 – 18 years) into a category requiring judicial dispensation, a demographic that previously might have married without being recorded as dispensation cases (Pratama et al., 2023).

The age characteristic analysis demonstrates a significant shift where the majority of early marriages in 2020 were dominated by the 15–19 age group, accounting for 99.24% of the total cases. This differs from 2019, where the proportion of marriages at a very young age (< 15 years) was still relatively noticeable (12.50%). This phenomenon indicates that the most vulnerable group during the pandemic was not pre-adolescent children, but adolescents in the late adolescence phase who should have been attending secondary education. This finding aligns with studies highlighting specific vulnerabilities during adolescence in times of crisis, where the loss of school routines and healthy social interactions drives them to seek alternative emotional bonds through marriage (Wiranegara et al., 2023). Furthermore, these data strengthen the argument that early marriage during the pandemic is not solely about parental coercion but also involves the agency of the adolescents themselves, who choose marriage as an escape from the pressures of uncertain situations (Rahiem, 2021).

The most striking finding that distinguishes this study from general patterns is the educational profile of those who enter early marriage. Contrary to the general assumption that early marriage is synonymous with primary school dropouts, the Palangka Raya data indicate a sharp surge in the senior high school (46.21%) and junior high school (46.97%) educated groups in 2020. This fact provides strong empirical evidence of the learning loss phenomenon and the fatigue caused by prolonged online learning. School closures disconnected adolescents from protective academic environments, increased the intensity of unsupervised risky interactions, and ultimately drove the decision to drop out of school in favor of marriage (Hasudungan, 2022). A comparative study in Nigeria found a similar pattern, in which school closures were the primary trigger for girls not returning to education and transitioning into the role of wives (Musa et al., 2021). This affirms that formal education plays a vital role as the last effective line of defense in preventing early marriage, and the loss of this function during the pandemic had a severe impact on adolescents' futures (Mujiburrahman et al., 2021).

Economically, although general theories position poverty as the primary trigger for early marriage because girls are considered an economic burden (Sholikhah et al., 2024), the data in Palangka Raya present a slightly different nuance. The high participation rate among the secondary education group (senior high school) indicates that early marriage is not exclusive to the poorest but also affects the middle class, which has been affected by the pandemic's economic shocks. However, this finding must be juxtaposed with a study in South Kalimantan, which found that early marriage in the region did not significantly correlate with poverty levels but was more strongly influenced by educational and cultural factors (Juhaidi & Umar, 2020). In the context of Palangka Raya, this suggests that while the economic pressures of the pandemic are real, cultural factors and education (school fatigue) may play a more dominant or at least equal role in driving the surge in cases.

Cultural aspects are also prominent in the ethnic demographic data, where the Banjar and Dayak ethnic groups dominated early marriage cases, accounting for 49.24% and 41.67% respectively in 2020. The proportional increase within the Dayak ethnic group (from 25% in 2019 to 41.67% in 2020) indicates the presence of local cultural values that may have acted as a misguided social "safety net" during the crisis. A culture that facilitates early marriage or views it as a solution to maintain family honor ("marrying to avoid premarital sex") appears to have activated more strongly when social supervision relaxed due to the pandemic. This aligns with findings in the Madura and Toraja communities, where traditions and social norms determine the practice of young-age marriage (Bawono et al., 2022). Additionally, permissive or authoritarian parenting styles in certain indigenous communities, such as those observed in the Anak Dalam tribe, can also contribute to the normalization of early

marriage as a standard life transition phase (Cindrya, 2023). Although a study in Lampung found that ethnicity does not always significantly correlate with early marriage (Fatmawati et al., 2023), the Palangka Raya data demonstrate a strong and specific cultural pattern among certain ethnic groups.

The health implications of this surge in early marriage cases are highly serious and long-term. Adolescent girls who marry and become pregnant under the age of 20 face a significantly higher risk of medical complications due to the biological immaturity of their reproductive organs (Sekarayu & Nurwati, 2021). An incompletely matured uterus and pelvis increase the risk of obstructed labor, postpartum hemorrhage, and obstetric fistula. A study in Bengkulu noted a positive correlation between early marriage and the incidence of anemia and hypertension in pregnancy (Sari et al., 2020). Furthermore, teenage pregnancy is consistently associated with poor infant outcomes, including a high risk of Low Birth Weight (LBW) and prematurity, which are primary predictors of stunting and neonatal mortality (Zelharsandy, 2022). Specifically, these adverse impacts do not stop at physical health but also affect the mental health of young mothers, who are susceptible to postpartum depression due to psychological unpreparedness in fulfilling the dual roles of wife and mother (Indriani et al., 2023).

This surge in early marriages in Palangka Raya in 2020 is expected to create a domino effect on public health burdens in the coming years. Children born to adolescent mothers are at risk of growing up with suboptimal nutritional and health statuses, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of poverty and health underdevelopment. This is exacerbated by the fact that dropping out of school (as evidenced by the junior and senior high school education data) restricts young mothers' access to health information and proper parenting practices (Atik & Susilowati, 2022). The low levels of knowledge and health literacy among adolescent mothers pose a major obstacle to efforts aimed at reducing the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR).

Overall, this data analysis confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as an extraordinary stressor, exposing social and economic vulnerabilities, to which the Palangka Raya community responded through the mechanism of early marriage. This response was facilitated by existing cultural norms and exacerbated by the school's loss of its role. The absence of cases in other religious groups (100% Muslim) in these data is most likely due to the bias of the data source (Religious Court); however, the pattern within the Palangka Raya Muslim community serves as a sufficient early warning. Therefore, intervention approaches cannot remain one-dimensional. Strategies must integrate economic empowerment, assurances of continued education that appeal to adolescents, and cross-cultural counseling approaches sensitive to the values of the Banjar and Dayak ethnic groups to reduce early marriage rates (Kurniawati & Sa'adah, 2022). Without comprehensive intervention, the 2020 statistical surge is not merely

numbers on paper, but a representation of the lost future potential of hundreds of adolescent girls in Palangka Raya.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a highly significant surge in early marriage cases in Palangka Raya City, with a more than threefold increase from 40 cases in 2019 to 132 cases in 2020. Of the total 172 respondents applying for marriage dispensation, the absolute majority (76.74%) filed their applications in 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. These findings consistently address the research problem and objectives, demonstrating a tangible difference and a drastic increase in the incidence of early marriage during the pandemic compared to the previous period. Shifts in demographic characteristics were also clearly visible, with early marriage during the pandemic dominated by the late adolescent age group (15 – 19 years), accounting for 99.24% of total cases in 2020. Additionally, there was a shift in educational background from a majority of Junior High School (SMP) students in 2019 to a nearly balanced proportion between SMP (46.97%) and Senior High School (46.21%) in 2020. Furthermore, the Banjar and Dayak tribes remained the majority groups involved, with a notable increase in proportion among the Dayak tribe during the pandemic.

This surge in cases indicates that early marriage in Palangka Raya is not merely a static cultural issue, but a dynamic phenomenon highly responsive to external shocks such as a pandemic. The high involvement of senior high school-educated adolescents confirms that educational disruption (learning loss) and burnout from online schooling were significant determinants, alongside economic pressure. The implications of these findings are severe for public health, as hundreds of young women who married early are now on a high-risk trajectory for reproductive health complications, such as risky pregnancies, anemia, and the potential for delivering stunted infants. Without appropriate intervention, the statistical surge of 2020 has the potential to become a ticking time bomb for maternal and child health burdens in Palangka Raya in the long term, while simultaneously perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of poverty due to severed access to formal education for these young mothers.

Based on these conclusions, urgent recommendations for follow-up include the need for the Palangka Raya City Health Department, together with the BKKBN (National Population and Family Planning Board), to immediately conduct screening and provide intensive health assistance for adolescents who married during this pandemic period to mitigate the risks of pregnancy and childbirth complications. In spans of policy, the Government of Palangka Raya City needs to formulate educational mitigation strategies that are more adaptable to crises, ensuring that schools remain

safe and engaging spaces for adolescents even in emergencies, thereby preventing “escape” into marriage. Additionally, preventive approaches must involve traditional leaders of the Banjar and Dayak tribes in campaigns to raise the marriage age, given the strong cultural dimension of this phenomenon. For academics, further research is needed to examine the long-term impact of the pandemic on the psychological and economic well-being of these young families, as well as the effectiveness of family counseling in preventing early divorce among couples who married during the pandemic. Cross-sectoral synergy among health, education, and customary institutions is key to breaking the cycle of early marriage and safeguarding the future of the younger generation in Palangka Raya.

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