



Reducing Stunting in South Lampung Regency through Preventing Early Marriage: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

South Lampung Regency is recognized as one of the 100 priority districts/cities for addressing child stunting, as designated by the Poverty Reduction Acceleration Team. Efforts to prevent and reduce stunting vary across regions, with the South Lampung Regional Government implementing its own strategies. However, the stunting rate in South Lampung Regency has not shown a significant decline to date. This study aims to analyze policies aimed at reducing stunting rates in South Lampung Regency, with a particular focus on the prevention of early marriage. The research is situated within the framework of public legal policy, specifically addressing the reduction of stunting through measures to prevent early marriage in the region. To this end, a policy-oriented approach was adopted. Findings reveal that early marriage is a contributing factor to growth and developmental disorders in children, manifesting as stunting indicated by height or length measurements below standard norms. The correlation between stunting prevalence and the number of marriage dispensations granted in South Lampung Regency underscores this relationship. The South Lampung Regional Government's efforts to combat stunting are encapsulated in the South Lampung Regent Regulation Number 15 of 2023, which focuses on accelerating stunting reduction. This policy highlights the critical need to address early marriage as a key strategy in mitigating stunting and ensuring healthier developmental outcomes for children in the region.



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A. INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a condition characterized by short stature among children, remains a critical nutritional challenge worldwide, particularly in developing and low-income nations. This issue directly aligns with the second goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focuses on eradicating hunger, improving food and nutrition security, and fostering sustainable agriculture. As a global priority, the SDGs aim to significantly reduce stunting rates by 2025, emphasizing the urgency of addressing this widespread issue to ensure healthier futures for children globally (Komarulzaman, 2023). SDGs 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. In Indonesia, stunting remains a critical issue that undermines this goal, affecting millions of children under the age of five. Stunting, caused by chronic malnutrition

during the first 1,000 days of life, results in impaired physical growth and cognitive development, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Addressing stunting is crucial for achieving SDG 2, as it directly relates to ensuring adequate nutrition and sustainable food systems (Sari, 2024). The Indonesian government has implemented several programs, such as increased access to nutritious food, education on breastfeeding, and initiatives to improve maternal health. However, challenges persist, including unequal access to resources, low awareness in rural areas, and inadequate sanitation, which exacerbates malnutrition. Urgent action is needed to intensify these efforts. Prioritizing nutrition-sensitive policies, fostering community engagement, and collaborating with local and international stakeholders can drive progress. Strengthening social safety nets to support vulnerable families and promoting agricultural sustainability to ensure food security are essential (Agustino, 2024).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified stunting as a key focus in its Global Nutrition Targets 2025, describing it as an irreversible growth impediment caused by insufficient nutrition and frequent infections during the first 1,000 days of life. Recognizing the gravity of this issue, Indonesia has integrated stunting reduction into its 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan or *Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional (RPJMN)*. The government aims to lower stunting prevalence from 24.4% in 2021 to 14% by 2024, supported by Presidential Regulation Number 72 of 2021 on the Acceleration of Stunting Reduction. These efforts target vulnerable groups, including adolescents, prospective brides, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under five. Stunting diagnosis is based on the Body Length/Age (PB/U) or Height/Age (TB/U) index, with Z-scores of <-2 SD indicating stunting and <-3 SD indicating severe stunting (Rahmadhita, 2020).

Despite significant policy initiatives, a lack of parental awareness often hampers progress in *stunting* prevention. Many parents mistakenly attribute short stature to hereditary factors, disregarding the severe consequences of stunting, which include delayed brain development, reduced learning capacity, and heightened risks of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity (Mulyaningsih, 2024). Indonesia's high stunting prevalence is driven by four interrelated factors: suboptimal parenting practices, limited access to quality healthcare and education, inadequate nutrition, and poor water and sanitation conditions. Furthermore, early child marriage exacerbates these challenges, highlighting the multifaceted nature of stunting and the need for holistic and sustained interventions to address its root causes effectively (Anggraini, 2020).

According to Law Number 16 of 2019, which amends Law Number 1 of 1974 on Marriage, marriage is only permitted when both the man and woman have reached the age of 19. Consequently, marriages involving individuals under the age of 19 are classified as early child marriages. This practice often places a significant

burden on young couples who lack sufficient income, thereby compromising the nutritional needs of their children, efforts to prevent and combat stunting have been aimed at addressing these risk factors (Kemenko PMK, 2022). One of the most effective preventive measures is ensuring families are well-prepared and ready before having children, including avoiding early marriages. South Lampung Regency has been identified as one of the 100 priority districts or cities in Indonesia for addressing stunting, as designated by the National Team for the Acceleration of Poverty Reduction. In response, the South Lampung Regency Government has implemented various stunting prevention initiatives at both the district and village levels using a convergent approach to stunting management.

The South Lampung Regency Government is intensifying its efforts to achieve zero stunting by 2024. Several studies have highlighted the factors contributing to stunting in South Lampung. For instance, (Sutarto, 2021) research titled "Analysis of the History of Exclusive Breastfeeding with Stunting in Toddlers Aged 24–59 Months in the Way Urang Health Center Work Area, South Lampung Regency" found a strong correlation between the lack of exclusive breastfeeding and the risk of stunting, with toddlers who were not exclusively breastfed being 8.2 times more likely to experience stunting (Sutarto, 2021). Another study by (Sutarto, 2021), titled "The Relationship between Maternal Education Level and Family Income with the Incidence of Stunting in Toddlers in the Way Urang Health Center Work Area, South Lampung Regency," demonstrated a significant relationship between maternal education, family income, and stunting rates in toddlers (Sutarto, 2021). Additionally, Wardana's study, "Spatial Distribution Patterns of Stunting in South Lampung Regency with a Spatial Autocorrelation Approach," concluded that providing access to clean water is a critical strategy for accelerating stunting reduction in the region (Wardana, 2023).

These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of stunting and the importance of addressing underlying factors such as exclusive breastfeeding, maternal education, family income, and access to clean water. However, research specifically focusing on the South Lampung Regency Government's policies to reduce stunting through the prevention of early child marriage remains unexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing stunting reduction policies in South Lampung Regency, with particular attention to the prevention of early child marriage. The central question is how the South Lampung Regency Government's policies address stunting reduction through the prevention of early child marriages, offering a novel perspective on tackling this pressing public health challenge.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In the qualitative component, the study utilizes

both normative and empirical legal approaches to address the research problem. According to (Soemintoro, 1990), the normative legal approach involves examining principles, norms, doctrines, or legal rules that serve as behavioral benchmarks. This method focuses on analyzing existing policies while emphasizing their practical application in addressing the research issues. Meanwhile, the empirical legal approach aims to gain legal knowledge through direct observation and interaction with the research object (Asas et al., 2022). The normative approach in this study is used to evaluate and analyze laws and regulations related to stunting prevention in South Lampung Regency. Conversely, the empirical approach investigates the implementation of these policies in practice within the same region.

The research gathers two types of data: primary and secondary. Primary data are obtained through direct field interviews with various Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPDs) in South Lampung Regency, particularly those actively involved in stunting prevention initiatives. Secondary data are derived from the analysis of laws and regulations serving as references for implementing stunting reduction policies in the region. Data collection methods include observations, interviews, and document reviews. For data analysis, the study employs qualitative descriptive methods to interpret the findings and incorporates quantitative analysis using the Chi-square test to explore the relationship between stunting incidence and maternal age at delivery. The Chi-square test, a non-parametric statistical method, evaluates the association between two nominal variables, providing a structured framework for examining key factors influencing stunting in the study area. The formula for the Chi Square test is as follows:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i}$$

where χ^2 : Chi-square Distribution

O_i : Observation value (observation) to i

E_i : Expected value to i , (Supranto, 2000)

With the following hypotheses:

H_0 : There is no significant relationship between the incidence of stunting and the mother's age at birth.

H_1 : There is a significant relationship between the incidence of stunting and the mother's age at birth.

If primary data cannot be obtained, the analysis will rely on a qualitative examination of survey results combined with a quantitative analysis of available secondary data. The chosen method for data analysis is correlation analysis, which

evaluates the relationships between variables. This method quantifies these relationships using correlation coefficients. The primary objectives of correlation analysis are threefold: to determine whether a relationship exists between variables, to assess the significance of such a relationship, and to measure the strength and closeness of the relationship. According to Robert F. Walpole in his book *Introduction to Statistics*, 1996, the correlation coefficient, a measure of the linear relationship between two variables x and y is estimated by the correlation coefficient, for example r , namely:

$$r = \frac{n \sum_{i=1}^n x_i y_i - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n x_i \right) \left(\sum_{i=1}^n y_i \right)}{\sqrt{\left[n \sum_{i=1}^n x_i^2 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n x_i \right)^2 \right] \left[n \sum_{i=1}^n y_i^2 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n y_i \right)^2 \right]}}$$

The r value is between -1 to $+1$ or $-1 < r < 1$. The closer to 1 , the greater the relationship between the two variables. The variables tested for their closeness were the number of marriage dispensations in South Lampung Regency and the prevalence rate of stunting in South Lampung Regency.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The term "policy" originates from the English term "public policy," which refers to public policy or wisdom, and its roots can be traced back to the Latin word *politia* meaning government and the Ancient Greek word *polis* signifying state. In Indonesian, it aligns with the term "politics," which is a branch of social science. Policy, as a concept, represents the operationalization of decisions influenced by the surrounding environment or real-world factors in which they are implemented. According to (Abdoellah, 2016), policy encapsulates government action, whether in a narrow or broad sense. James E. Anderson defines policy as deliberate actions or steps taken by an actor to address specific issues, while Thomas R. Dye sees public policy as the sum of government decisions regarding actions taken or omitted. Essentially, public policy consists of actions or inactions determined and implemented by the government to achieve specific goals for the benefit of society. William N. Dunn emphasizes that policy stems from identifying and formulating policy problems, followed by implementation and monitoring to evaluate the outcomes. Evaluation results serve as the basis for assessing policy performance and forecasting its future impact. Public policy development typically involves several stages: formulation, implementation, evaluation, and revision, as articulated by (Maulana, 2019). These stages ensure that policies are continuously refined to address public issues effectively.

Public policy inherently connects to public problems, emerging as responses to societal challenges such as poverty, unemployment, hunger, or conflict. This connection is grounded in the social contract, wherein individuals transfer certain rights to the state to manage and resolve these issues in exchange for welfare, justice, security, and order. The definition and perception of public problems often depend on how policymakers frame and address them. As A. Jones asserts, the initial definition of a social problem shapes the terms of debate, leading to potential differences in policy approaches. Consequently, understanding the theory and process of policy formulation is essential for addressing public issues and achieving effective governance outcomes.

Policy formulation involves the process of developing alternative strategies to address issues that have entered the public agenda. This activity can be initiated based on direct or indirect needs, beginning with observation, research, and assessment. Effective policy formulation requires consideration of various aspects, including public interest, benefits, and community needs. The process must adhere to clear, precise methodologies, align with societal needs, and be grounded in academic studies and established scientific principles. Several theories underline the dynamics of policy formulation. Institutional Theory emphasizes the government's central role, defining public policy as actions determined by governmental authority. Process Theory views public policy as a political sequence, encompassing problem identification, agenda setting, policy proposal development, legitimization, implementation, and evaluation. Group Theory highlights the importance of group interactions in achieving policy balance. Elite Theory critiques policymaking as serving elite political interests. Rational Theory advocates for decisions based on efficiency and maximum societal benefits. In contrast, Incrementalist Theory argues against the comprehensive processes proposed by Rational Theory, emphasizing continuity with past policies due to practical constraints such as time and resources. Public Choice Theory stresses the necessity of aligning policies with public preferences, involving communities through interest groups. System Theory conceptualizes policy as the output of systemic interactions among inputs, processes, and outputs. Finally, Democracy Theory supports the involvement of all democratic stakeholders in decision-making, aligning with Good Governance principles to reflect the voices of constituents (Purnamaningsih, 2022).

The issue of stunting, a significant nutritional problem, particularly in impoverished and developing nations, exemplifies the need for robust policy formulation. Stunting is associated with increased risks of illness, mortality, delayed motor development, and impaired mental growth (Mitra, 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stunting as a growth disorder caused by chronic nutritional deficiencies, recurrent infections, and insufficient psychosocial stimulation (Ruswati, 2021). It represents a failure of growth due to

long-term nutritional inadequacies from pregnancy through the first two years of life, compounded by insufficient compensatory growth. Identified using the Height-for-Age (H/A) index, stunting is diagnosed when a child's H/A z-score falls below -2 standard deviations from the WHO child growth standards. The first 24 months, termed the golden period, are critical for determining lifelong quality of health and development. Damage incurred during this sensitive period is often irreversible, underscoring the importance of adequate nutrition and care during early childhood (Mitra, 2015).

Globally, the prevalence of stunting among children was alarmingly high in 2010, affecting 171 million children, with 167 million cases occurring in developing countries. Between 1990 and 2010, the prevalence of stunting in children showed a notable decline, from 39.7% (95% CI: 38.1–41.4%) to 26.7% (95% CI: 24.8–28.7%). More recently, WHO data from 2020 indicates that 22%, or approximately 149.2 million toddlers worldwide, experienced stunting—a decline from previous years. In Indonesia, stunting remains a critical issue despite progress, as evidenced by the 2019 Indonesian Toddler Nutrition Status Survey (SSGBI), which recorded a prevalence rate of 27.7%. Although lower than in previous years, this rate still surpasses the WHO benchmark of 20%, underlining the urgency of addressing stunting as a significant public health concern (Ruswati, 2021).

Nutritional problems span the life cycle, beginning in pregnancy and extending through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and into old age. Malnutrition at any stage can perpetuate poor nutritional status across subsequent generations, known as the intergenerational impact. This issue often originates with Intrauterine Growth Retardation (IUGR), a condition linked to maternal malnutrition during pre-pregnancy and pregnancy, which also increases the likelihood of Low Birth Weight (LBW). Approximately half of IUGR cases are tied to poor maternal nutrition, particularly inadequate pre-pregnancy weight and insufficient weight gain during pregnancy. Without intervention, IUGR and LBW persist across generations, leading to an ongoing cycle of stunted growth. Maternal nutrition and health are thus critical determinants in breaking this cycle and reducing stunting prevalence (Mitra, 2015).

Stunting and broader nutritional challenges are influenced by several interconnected factors, including socio-economic status and early marriage. Socio-economic disparities play a pivotal role, with education and knowledge, particularly among mothers, being significant determinants. Low maternal education often results in limited understanding of nutrition and health, making it challenging to ensure proper nutrition for toddlers. Conversely, well-educated mothers are more likely to access information and adopt practices that promote better nutritional outcomes (Tebi, 2021). Early marriage also contributes to stunting, as young brides face health risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth before they are physically and mentally prepared. Early pregnancies

often lead to higher fertility rates and prolonged exposure to pregnancy-related health risks, ultimately impairing child growth and development. Legal measures, such as setting a minimum marriage age of 19 years in Indonesia, aim to address these risks by promoting physical and psychological readiness for marriage and parenting, thereby reducing stunting rates (Afifah, 2022).

The reduction of stunting in toddlers is a priority program outlined in Indonesia's 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN), with a national target of reducing stunting prevalence to 14% by 2024 (Amin, 2024). Stunting prevention requires addressing various direct and indirect causes through cross-sectoral collaboration among all levels of government, the private sector, businesses, and the community. To facilitate this effort, the Stunting Reduction Acceleration Team (TP2S) was established at both the central and regional levels. Additionally, the National Team for the Acceleration of Stunting Prevention (TP2AK) was formed to support the implementation of the National Strategy for the Acceleration of Stunting Prevention under the coordination of the Deputy for Human Development Policy Support within the Secretariat of the Vice President of Indonesia. TP2AK is responsible for ensuring the synchronization of national, regional, and community programs using a multi-sectoral approach and program convergence guided by the Five Pillars of Stunting Prevention.

Image 1. Five Pillars of National Stunting Prevention

PILAR 1	PILAR 2	PILAR 3	PILAR 4	PILAR 5
Komitmen dan Visi Kepemimpinan Nasional dan Daerah	Kampanye Nasional dan Komunikasi Perubahan Perilaku	Konvergensi Program Pusat, Daerah, dan Desa	Ketahanan Pangan dan Gizi	Pemantauan dan Evaluasi

Source: Stunting.go.id

The Five Pillars of Stunting Prevention serve as the foundation for integrated and continuous policies and actions across government institutions. Efforts to accelerate stunting prevention focus on priority groups, including pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and children aged 0-23 months—known as the 1,000 HPK households—representing the most critical period for child growth and development. In Indonesia, the most significant growth disruptions occur during this phase. Consequently, this group is the primary target of the National Strategy for Accelerating Stunting Prevention. Additionally, children aged 24-59 months, women of childbearing age, and adolescent girls are also

critical target categories for these interventions (Sekretariat Wakil Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2024).

To support these efforts, the government has enacted several regulations, including Presidential Regulation Number 72 of 2021 on the Acceleration of Stunting Reduction, the Regulation of the Minister of National Development Planning/Head of the National Development Planning Agency Number Kep. 42/M.PPN/HK/04/2020 on the Expansion of Focus Locations for Integrated Stunting Reduction Interventions, and the Regulation of the Head of the National Population and Family Planning Agency Number 12 of 2021 on the National Action Plan for Accelerating Stunting Reduction. Various regional regulations have also been issued to further strengthen the prevention and management of stunting at the local level.

Marriage, as defined by the Indonesian Ministry of National Education, is the establishment of a family unit between members of the opposite sex through a bond or agreement in accordance with legal and religious provisions. Soediman Kartohadiprodo describes marriage as an eternal bond between a man and a woman. Legal adjustments in Indonesia, particularly through Law Number 16 of 2019 amending Law Number 1 of 1974, raised the minimum marriageable age for women from 16 to 19 years. However, underage marriage can still proceed with court dispensation requested by parents. Early marriage carries both positive and negative implications for individuals involved. On the positive side, early marriage can help individuals avoid premarital sexual activities, fulfill sexual needs within a legitimate framework, reduce parental burdens for economically disadvantaged families, and align with cultural or religious beliefs that favor young marriages.

Despite these potential benefits, the negative impacts of early marriage are significant and multifaceted. Educational disruptions often result in children dropping out of school, limiting their access to knowledge and future opportunities. Economically, couples married young frequently face poverty due to insufficient income or unemployment. Early marriages can also foster domestic violence, driven by unstable psychological conditions and immature emotional regulation. For young mothers, early pregnancies often lead to psychological trauma, lack of socialization, and diminished self-confidence. The health implications for mothers and children are severe, including malnutrition, anemia, and risks of premature or low-birth-weight infants. Children born to young mothers are more likely to experience developmental delays, behavioral issues, and perpetuate the cycle of early parenting. From a reproductive health perspective, pregnancies under the age of 17 significantly increase the risk of complications, including maternal mortality and conditions such as obstetric fistula.

The persistence of early marriage is driven by a range of factors. Economic hardship often compels families to marry off their children to alleviate financial burdens. Parental influence and coercion also play a role, with parents seeking to

protect their children from promiscuity or consolidate familial ties through arranged marriages. Premarital pregnancies push young couples into early unions to legitimize their child's status, despite their lack of physical and mental readiness. In some cases, early marriage is seen as a deliberate means to formalize relationships and align with religious or cultural norms. Furthermore, certain traditions perpetuate the practice of early marriage, often rooted in beliefs that lack a modern understanding of its consequences. For instance, cultural customs in some section regard refusal of a marriage proposal as an insult, compelling parents to agree to underage unions.

Marriage dispensation refers to a marriage involving individuals or couples seeking to wed below the legally stipulated age limit, as defined by the Marriage Law (Arif & Zamzami, 2022). Underage or child marriage occurs when at least one partner is under the age specified by legislation. According to the Marriage Law, marriage is permitted when both parties are at least 19 years old; however, if either party is younger, the marriage may proceed through a court dispensation or equivalent legal institution (Judiasih et al., 2020). Thus, applications for marriage dispensation inherently involve underage or early marriages. Data from the Kalianda Religious Court in South Lampung Regency reveals a decline in marriage dispensation applications, with 132 cases in 2021, 127 in 2022, and 100 in 2023. Despite this, early marriage remains a concern due to its implications for issues like stunting. Efforts to address stunting are evident in South Lampung Regency's robust policy framework, including the Lampung Governor Regulation and the South Lampung Regent Regulation No. 15 of 2023 on Stunting Reduction. The superior program focuses on achieving nutritional self-sufficiency to tackle stunting effectively.

Interviews with stakeholders further highlight ongoing challenges and efforts. The South Lampung Regency Health Office and the Stunting Acceleration Team (TP2S) acknowledged persistent stunting cases from 2021 to 2023, despite implementing programs such as the Nutrition Self-Sufficiency Movement at village and regency levels. These efforts contributed to reducing stunting prevalence to 3.6% in 2021. The Population and Family Planning Control Office (PPKB) has also been proactive in identifying at-risk families, including adolescents, prospective couples, and pregnant or breastfeeding mothers. Initiatives like the GENRE (Planned Generation) program, led by the wife of the South Lampung Regent, aim to enhance awareness and prevention of stunting across communities. In addition, data from the KUA of Natar District indicates that while marriages involving individuals under 19 require a court-issued marriage dispensation, the KUA itself lacks the authority to permit such unions. Meanwhile, health data from Sukadamai Village and Rulung Mulya Village Posyandu revealed eight stunted children, with three cases linked to mothers married before 19 years old. These findings underscore the broader public health implications of underage marriages,

particularly their correlation with stunted growth in children. Collectively, these insights highlight the multifaceted challenges surrounding early marriage and stunting, as well as the ongoing initiatives aimed at addressing these critical issues.

The Influence of Early Marriage on Stunting Prevalence Rates in South Lampung Regency

Between 2021 and 2023, a total of 359 applications for marriage dispensation were recorded, reflecting a significant concern in the region. In South Lampung Regency, the average number of marriage dispensation applications per sub-district ranged from 0 to 19 during this period. This distribution highlights varying levels of demand across sub-districts, potentially indicating disparities in social or cultural factors influencing early marriage. The average figures for each sub-district are illustrated in the accompanying image, providing a visual representation of the trend. This data underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the underlying causes and ensure better regulation of marriage dispensation practices can be seen in the following image:

Image 2. Average Number of Marriage Dispensation Applications from 2021 to 2023

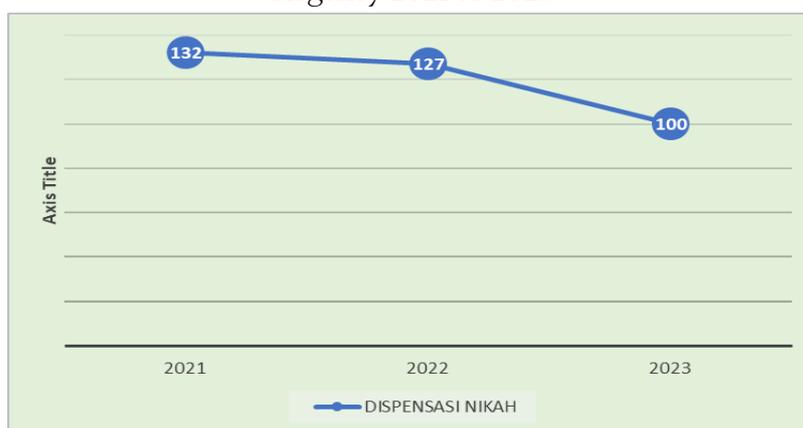


Source: authors' research

From 2021 to 2023, the highest average number of marriage dispensation applications was recorded in Sidomulyo District, with 19 applications, followed by Tanjung Bintang District with 16, and Kalianda District with 15. Notably, residents of Bakauheni District did not submit any marriage dispensation applications during this period. Other districts exhibited varying average numbers: Penengahan and Palas recorded 11 applications each, while Katibung, Natar, Jatiagung, and Way Sulan reported 3, 1, 2, and 2 applications, respectively. Meanwhile, Sragi and Ketapang each had an average of 8 applications, Candipuro had 14, Merbau Mataram reported 4, Rajabasa recorded 3, and Tanjung Sari registered 5 applications. Lastly, Way Panji District had an average of 2 marriage dispensation

applications. These figures highlight significant regional disparities in marriage dispensation applications, reflecting varying social or cultural dynamics across districts.

Image 3. Number of Marriage Dispensation Applications in South Lampung Regency 2021 to 2023



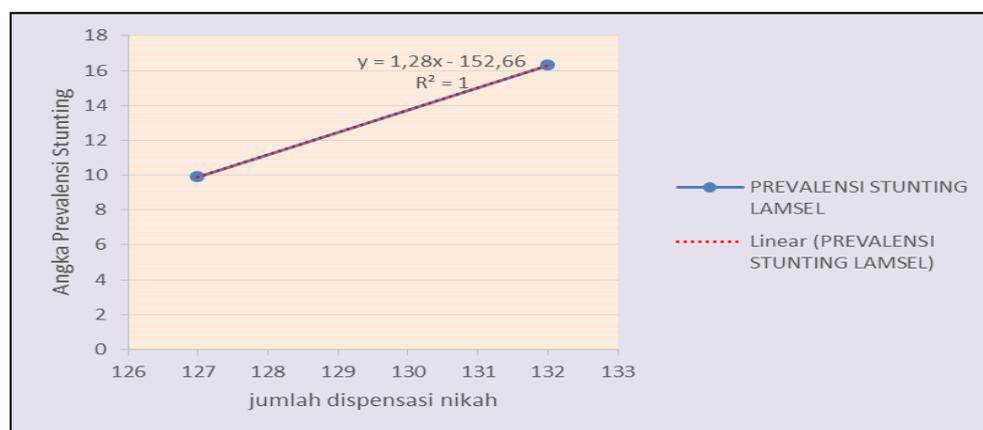
Source: authors' research

Between 2021 and 2023, the number of marriage dispensation applications in South Lampung Regency experienced a noticeable decline, with 132 applications recorded in 2021, 127 in 2022, and 100 in 2023. This trend, as illustrated in the accompanying data, reflects a reduction in the prevalence of such applications over the three-year period. Several factors contribute to the approval of underage marriage dispensations by judges. These include pregnancy of the prospective bride, a close relationship between the prospective couple, their physical maturity, and economic considerations (Prabawati, 2019). Specifically, in the Kalianda Religious Court, reasons for dispensation applications include concerns about slander, pregnancies outside of marriage, as well as economic, social, and moral factors (Ribhan et al., 2020). Based on interviews conducted at the Kalianda Religious Court, the primary reason for applying for a marriage dispensation in South Lampung Regency was due to pregnancy. Despite these circumstances, early marriage remains a contentious issue due to its substantial negative impacts, including adverse effects on the couple, the child, the mother's health during a young pregnancy, and the overall well-being of children born to young mothers (Fadilah, 2021). In relation to the impact on the child who is born, the child can experience stunting. Surveys prove that there is a correlation between early marriage and the prevalence rate of stunting as can be seen in the following Figure.

Image 4. Correlation between Prevalence of Stunting and Marriage Dispensation

Source: Authors' Research

The image above reveals a notable pattern indicating a correlation between the number of marriage dispensations and the prevalence rate of stunting, as both figures show a declining trend. This observation suggests a potential relationship between the two variables, warranting further analysis. To quantify this relationship, the regression coefficient and its corresponding linear equation were determined using the graph. Here, the number of marriage dispensations serves as the independent variable (X), or the influencing factor, while the prevalence rate of stunting is treated as the dependent variable (Y), representing the outcome influenced by changes in X. The linear relationship between the two variables can be seen in the following picture:

Image 5. Correlation Between the Number of Marriage Dispensations and the Prevalence of Stunting in South Lampung Regency

Source: Authors' Research

The data illustrated above demonstrates a perfect correlation, with a determination and correlation coefficient of 1, between the number of marriage dispensations and the prevalence rate of stunting. This indicates a highly significant relationship, suggesting that an increase in marriage dispensations directly correlates with a rise in stunting prevalence in South Lampung Regency. Conversely, a reduction in the number of marriage dispensations corresponds to a decrease in stunting prevalence. This strong association underscores the critical impact of marriage dispensations on public health outcomes in the region.

Programs and Regulations of the South Lampung Regency Government in Reducing Stunting Rates

The Indonesian government's commitment to addressing child marriage is embodied in the National Strategy for the Prevention of Child Marriage (Stranas PPA) 2020–2024, a comprehensive cross-sectoral policy framework. Through this strategy, the government aims to reduce child marriage rates by implementing five core strategies. First, it seeks to optimize children's capacity by increasing awareness and fostering attitudes aligned with comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, as outlined in Law Number 36 of 2009 concerning Health, while also encouraging active child participation in prevention efforts. Second, the strategy focuses on creating a supportive environment by promoting changes in societal values, norms, and perspectives surrounding child marriage, alongside strengthening parental roles in child protection. Third, it aims to enhance accessibility and broaden services by providing robust support systems before and after child marriages occur. Fourth, the strategy emphasizes the strengthening of regulations and institutions, including bolstering the capacities of law enforcement officers, religious affairs officials, counselors, and educators, as well as improving the development and enforcement of relevant legal frameworks. Lastly, it underscores the importance of strengthening stakeholder coordination, fostering cross-sectoral, midwifery, and regional collaboration, and enhancing data and information systems through effective supervision, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms.

Notably, this national strategy builds on a significant milestone achieved in 2019, when Indonesia amended Law Number 1 of 1974 on Marriage, raising the minimum marriage age to 19 years for both genders. However, this legal adjustment alone is insufficient to address the complex social, economic, and cultural factors underpinning child marriage. Moreover, the risk of unregistered child marriages conducted in secrecy remains a pressing challenge, necessitating continued efforts by the government and civil society to ensure the effective implementation of preventive measures. Two years after the minimum age for marriage was raised, the government continues to observe cases of child marriage, often resulting from

pregnancy. Early pregnancy poses serious risks, including the likelihood of stunting or low birth weight in newborns. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive public education on the dangers of early marriage and enhanced parenting practices for toddlers. Furthermore, cross-sectoral and cross-program partnerships must be strengthened to combat stunting effectively (Kurniawati et al., 2024).

Efforts to reduce stunting must involve coordinated actions across central, provincial, and district governments. The acceleration of stunting prevention has been identified as a national priority, as outlined in Indonesia's 2020–2024 RPJMN, which targets a 14% reduction in stunting prevalence by 2024. To achieve this, the government has established the Stunting Reduction Acceleration Team (TP2S) at all administrative levels, including provincial, district, and municipal levels. This framework empowers district governments to play pivotal roles in formulating supportive policies, promoting awareness, and fostering inter-agency collaboration for stunting prevention (Saputri, 2019). Specific responsibilities include policy formulation, community engagement, data system improvements, capacity-building for village officials, and aligning local budgets with stunting prevention goals. The emphasis on data-driven approaches and collaboration among ministries, local governments, and community stakeholders underscores the holistic nature of these efforts.

In response to these national directives, the Lampung Provincial Government has taken proactive steps to address stunting through its regulatory framework. Lampung Governor Regulation Number 19 of 2019 and the subsequent Governor's Decree in 2022 formalized the establishment of TP2S across regional and local levels. This initiative has been mirrored at the district level, as evidenced by South Lampung Regency's enactment of Regulation Number 15 of 2023, which encompasses strategies, interventions, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation in stunting prevention. These regional measures align with the broader strategy of achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by focusing on five key pillars: enhancing leadership commitment, promoting behavioral change and community empowerment, integrating specific and sensitive interventions, improving food and nutrition security, and advancing research and innovation. By fostering convergence and systemic strengthening, these strategies aim to create sustainable and impactful solutions for reducing stunting prevalence, thus ensuring healthier generations to come.

The South Lampung Regency Government outlines its commitment to accelerating stunting reduction through a comprehensive strategy detailed in activities, outputs, targets, timelines, and the involvement of both responsible and supporting parties. This commitment is operationalized through a collaborative and integrated regional stunting reduction program that actively engages local governments, village and sub-district authorities, and community members. At the

core of this strategy lies the Nutrition Self-Sufficiency Movement, which has proven effective in addressing stunting and broader nutritional challenges. The ambitious goal set by the South Lampung Regency is to achieve zero stunting by 2024. The acceleration efforts focus on two primary intervention targets: specific and sensitive. Specific interventions target adolescent girls, women of childbearing age, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and children aged 23–59 months. Meanwhile, sensitive interventions are directed toward families and communities. Key initiatives include providing weekly iron supplements, conducting anemia screenings in high schools, and offering reproductive health counseling for adolescents, ensuring a holistic approach to combating stunting and fostering community well-being.

The initiatives and programs aimed at reducing stunting, as outlined in the South Lampung Regent Regulation Number 15 of 2023 concerning the Acceleration of Stunting Reduction, are comprehensive and inclusive, targeting all stakeholders, including families at risk of stunting. Central to these efforts is the South Lampung Regency Superior Generation Printing Project, which incorporates movements such as Self-Sufficiency Toilet, Self-Sufficiency Nutrition, Self-Sufficiency My Home, Self-Sufficiency School, Self-Sufficiency K3, and Inclusive Health Services. These initiatives are coordinated by the Stunting Handling Acceleration Team and align with the South Lampung Regency PPKB Service's ongoing efforts to identify and support families at risk of stunting, thereby preventing its occurrence. Article 10 of the regulation emphasizes specific intervention activities targeted at adolescents, including the provision of iron supplements to adolescent girls, both in schools and through adolescent health posts; distribution of iron tablets to prospective brides and couples of childbearing age with anemia; anemia screening in high schools; hemoglobin examinations for female adolescents with clinical indications of anemia; and reproductive health counseling services for adolescents.

The local government has demonstrated a proactive approach to stunting prevention by addressing risk factors starting from adolescence. These efforts are supported by the PPKB Office of South Lampung Regency, which prioritizes at-risk groups, such as teenagers, prospective brides and grooms, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, postpartum women, and children aged 0–59 months. Additionally, the GENRE (Planned Generation) Ambassador program in South Lampung plays a pivotal role in engaging adolescents across all villages. These ambassadors advocate for planned generation initiatives, addressing issues faced by teenagers and providing guidance on preparing for education, careers, and family life in a planned and responsible manner. Their campaign includes movements to prevent drug use, early marriage, and premarital sexual activity. Ensuring the continuity and expansion of these programs is vital to reaching all

adolescents across South Lampung Regency and achieving long-term reductions in stunting rates.

The program targeting adolescents is critical, as evidenced by the significant correlation between the number of marriage dispensation applications and stunting prevalence rates in South Lampung Regency. A reduction in marriage dispensation applications is associated with lower stunting prevalence, underscoring the importance of policies aimed at minimizing these applications, particularly those targeting adolescents. Interviews with stakeholders, such as the Deputy PA Kalianda, reveal that most marriage dispensation applications result from unintended pregnancies, highlighting the urgent need for preventive measures to address this issue. Although various government programs exist to combat early marriage, they lack comprehensive legal frameworks, necessitating the consolidation and expansion of these initiatives into a single, cohesive regulation.

In this context, it is proposed that GENRE Ambassadors operate not only at the Village, Sub-district, Regency/City, and Province levels but also extend their presence to all schools, including elementary, middle, and high schools. Additionally, routine socialization efforts should be conducted at the school level and across administrative divisions to emphasize the importance of planned family life, education, employment, and marriage, in alignment with the reproductive cycle and individual readiness. These initiatives should also address the adverse impacts of adolescent negligence. By integrating these programs into a comprehensive regulation focused on accelerating stunting reduction, particularly through early marriage prevention, the South Lampung Regency Government aims to achieve its ambitious goal of zero stunting by 2024.

D. CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes the significant impact of early marriage on children's growth and development, often manifesting as stunting, where children's height or length falls below standard benchmarks. This issue is particularly evident in South Lampung Regency, where stunting prevalence is closely associated with the frequency of marriage dispensations. In response, the South Lampung Regency Government has introduced comprehensive measures under South Lampung Regent Regulation Number 15 of 2023 to accelerate stunting reduction. These efforts include the Nutrition Self-Sufficiency Movement and the establishment of the Stunting Handling Acceleration Team, which facilitates coordinated actions across administrative levels, from districts to villages, ensuring widespread participation. Additionally, Regional Apparatus Organizations have initiated various programs to address the root causes of stunting. Despite these concerted efforts, the aspiration of achieving zero stunting remains unfulfilled, highlighting the pressing need for strengthened policies that directly address the determinants

of stunting, including early marriage. By focusing on such critical underlying factors, the government can enhance its strategic framework, fostering sustainable progress in reducing stunting prevalence. This approach requires a robust and inclusive policy framework that not only targets immediate outcomes but also promotes long-term developmental improvements, ensuring that efforts to combat stunting are both impactful and enduring.

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COMPETING INTEREST

We declare that there are no competing interests among the authors regarding this research article

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