

## Reading One: Child Labor Violations are Growing in the U.S.

Some people think of child labor in the United States as a relic of the past, something eliminated by the creation of progressive labor laws a century or more ago. However, the number of minors who are working long hours in difficult or even dangerous conditions remains very high—and recent waves of migrant children have been especially vulnerable to exploitation.

U.S. child labor law generally prohibits the employment of children who are under age 14. It restricts the hours and types of work that can be performed by children under age 16, and prohibits employers from hiring anyone under the age of 18 in any hazardous occupation.

Notably, the law currently makes exceptions for agricultural workers. “An estimated 300,000 children still work for wages in agriculture, performing backbreaking labor in searing heat,” according to the [Child Labor Coalition](#). Currently, federal law allows children who are only 12 to work unlimited hours as long as they are working when school is not in session. (To see rules about children working in agriculture in your state, see this [U.S. Department of Labor](#) chart.) Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor [show](#) reported cases of child labor violations increasing steadily since 2015. In a February 2023 article for the Guardian, labor reporter Michael Sainato gave an overview of the issue. Sainato wrote:

Child labor law violations have increased in the U.S., with a [37% increase](#) in fiscal year 2022, including 688 children working in hazardous conditions, with the number likely much higher as the recorded violations stem from what was found during labor inspections.

The Department of Labor issued a [press release](#) in July 2022 noting child labor violations and investigations have increased since 2015.

Several high-profile investigations involving child labor have been exposed over the past year, including the use of child labor in [Hyundai and Kia supply chains](#) in Alabama, at [JBS meatpacking plants](#) in Nebraska and Minnesota, and at fast-food chains including [McDonald’s](#), [Dunkin Donuts](#) and [Chipotle](#).

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/11/us-child-labor-laws-violations>

A major New York Times [exposé](#) in early 2023 documented a “shadow workforce” of young people in industries across the country working in “dangerous jobs that violate child labor laws — including in factories that make products for well-known brands like Cheetos and Fruit of the Loom.”

In the article, investigative reporter Hannah Drier reported that the number of unaccompanied minors entering the U.S. climbed to a high of 130,000 in 2022 — three times what it was five years earlier. This group of young people has been particularly vulnerable to abuse. These children, most from Central America, “are driven by economic desperation that was worsened by the pandemic,” Drier wrote. “This labor force has been slowly growing for almost a decade, but it has exploded since 2021, while the systems meant to protect children have broken down.” The detailed picture painted in the New York Times report vividly illustrated the extent of the problem. As Drier explained:

The Times spoke with more than 100 migrant child workers in 20 states who described jobs that were grinding them into exhaustion, and fears that they had become trapped in circumstances they never could have imagined....

In town after town, children scrub dishes late at night. They run milking machines in Vermont and deliver meals in New York City. They harvest coffee and build lava rock walls around vacation homes in Hawaii. Girls as young as 13 wash hotel sheets in Virginia....

“They should not be working 12-hour days, but it’s happening here,” said Valeria Lindsay, a language arts teacher at Homestead Middle School near Miami. For the past three years, she said, almost every eighth grader in her English learner program of about 100 students was also carrying an adult workload.

Migrant child labor benefits both under-the-table operations and global corporations, The Times found. In Los Angeles, children stitch “Made in America” tags into J. Crew shirts. They bake dinner rolls sold at Walmart and Target, process milk used in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and help debone chicken sold at Whole Foods. As recently as the fall, middle-schoolers made Fruit of the Loom socks in Alabama. In Michigan, children make auto parts used by Ford and General Motors.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

Protections for child workers are crucial for their health and long-term financial well-being. Available data shows that younger workers are [much more likely](#) to be injured on the job than adults, and that data is probably an undercount due to fears of reporting. Meanwhile, being pulled away from school in order to work, often at jobs that pay poorly, [limits](#) young peoples’ future career opportunities and the good-paying jobs that come with them.

Inspectors for the Labor Department, who are tasked with tracking down and punishing businesses that put children in such hazardous conditions, report that their offices are understaffed and unable to respond to follow-up on all tip-offs about abuses taking place.

As a result, many children today slip through the cracks, and continue to spend much of their time in perilous, low-paying jobs – while being denied the educational opportunities that could enrich their lives now and in the future.

**For Discussion:**

1. Did the reading surprise you? Were you aware that so many children are at work in the U.S.?
  2. According to the reading, what are some of the factors that have led to a resurgence in violations of child labor law?
  3. Why do you think child labor has persisted, even though it is largely illegal in the U.S.?
  4. What do you think about the U.S. law's exemption for child labor in agriculture?
  5. The reading describes reports that products sold by popular U.S. companies, such as Walmart and Whole Foods, may have been made by children. Would you purchase a product if you knew that it was made using child labor? Why or why not?
  6. What responsibility do you think big brands have for ensuring that their products are not made under abusive conditions?
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**Reading Two:**

**The Long Fight Against Child Labor—Past and Present**

As people seek to address child labor in the United States today, it is worth looking back at the activists who organized around this same issue more than 100 years ago—and who succeeded in winning landmark laws to curtail abuses of young workers.

The movement against child labor in this country first came to [prominence](#) in the late 1800s, during America's industrial revolution. Throughout this era, many factory owners relied on the labor of children. Working children were paid less than adults, but they experienced many of the same dangers in the workplace, making them vulnerable to injury. In a 2011 article for the Social Welfare History Project at Virginia Commonwealth University, policy expert John E. Hansan summarized some of the efforts to protect this workforce:

Historical documents revealed American children worked in large numbers in mines, glass factories, textiles, agriculture, canneries, home industries, and as newsboys,

messengers, bootblacks, and peddlers. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, many labor unions and social reformers advocated aggressively for state and local legislation to prevent extreme child labor. By 1900, their efforts had resulted in state and local legislation designed to prevent extreme child labor; however, the condition in states varied considerably on whether they had child labor standards, their content and the degree of enforcement.

<https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfarechild-labor/child-labor/>

The movement against child labor intensified at the start of the 1900s. During this time, the storied Irish-American labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones organized a group of children who had suffered work-related injuries to march on President Theodore Roosevelt’s vacation home to demand child labor reform. In a January 2017 article for the Monthly Labor Review, writer Michael Schuman chronicled this famous 1903 March of the Mill Children:

During a strike at a Kensington, PA, mill, at least 10,000 children left work. Mary Harris “Mother” Jones took up their cause and drew publicity to the plight of working children. She assembled a group of young toilers for a public demonstration. In doing so, she chose children “with their fingers off, and hands crushed and maimed.”

Not stopping with a mere static display, she took the children on a march to the Oyster Bay, NY, retreat of President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, however, refused to meet with them. His response was issued through Assistant Secretary to the President B.F. Barnes. Barnes explained that “the children had the President’s heartfelt sympathy . . . but under the Constitution, Congress had no power to act. . . . The states alone have the power to deal with this subject.”

Despite Roosevelt’s refusal to meet with the children, the procession of 200 youngsters from Pennsylvania to New York drew attention from onlookers and brought publicity to their issue.

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/history-of-child-labor-in-the-united-states-part-2-the-reform-movement.htm>

Public support for passing child labor laws grew in the first decades of the 1900s, with various state legislatures passing reforms curtailing child labor. Yet progress was hard-fought, and a 1924 constitutional amendment for federal child labor legislation did not gain ratification.

A window of opportunity opened during the 1930s amid the Great Depression. Reformers who found an ally in President Franklin D. Roosevelt were able to pass the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. The act banned businesses from employing children under 16 for more than three hours on school days and from employing kids under 18 for certain hazardous jobs, such as mining and construction. However, the law did not apply to several key forms of child labor, including [agricultural work](#).

Activists won key victories and succeeded in making child labor abuses today far rarer than they had been before. But, in spite of these gains, they were unable to fully eradicate the business exploitation of children.

Today, new challenges have emerged. Despite the troubling history of child labor in the United States, some lawmakers are currently aiming to weaken labor protections for children at the state level. In an April 2023 article for the Pew Charitable Trusts, state policy reporter Stephen Elliott [summarized](#) these efforts. Elliott wrote:

In the past two years, lawmakers in at least 11 states have sought to loosen child labor laws to help employers fill empty jobs, even as federal officials and news investigations suggest that many minors working in manufacturing, meatpacking and construction jobs are being exploited or hurt.

The unemployment rate sits at 3.5% – a level last reached in 1969 – and businesses of all types, from factories to restaurants to retail stores, are struggling to find workers.

Some state legislators, most of them Republicans, see teenagers as a partial solution. They also argue that relaxing the rules will prompt more teens to seek out valuable work experiences and make it easier for them to supplement their families' incomes.

But opponents say the bills, backed by business groups, are an attempt to roll back crucial child labor protections that are nearly a century old.

“Do you remember the images of children in manufacturing and other dangerous work situations from the early 1900s?” Connie Ryan, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, [asked lawmakers](#) during a hearing on a bill there. “There is a reason our society said that it is not appropriate for children to work in those conditions.”

The legislation in Iowa would, for example, [allow children as young as 14 to work](#) in meat coolers and industrial laundries.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/04/18/child-labor-laws-targeted-lawmakers-11-states-seek-weaken/11682548002/>

A variety of organizations are working together to stop child labor. For example, the [Child Labor Coalition](#) includes 39 organizational members dedicated to strengthening protections for children and advocating for better enforcement of child labor laws in the U.S. and internationally.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Have you heard of the March of the Mill Children before? What details of the protest stuck with you the most? Why?
3. According to the reading, what protections did the Fair Labor Standards Act establish for working children?
4. Why are some business groups today pushing to loosen child labor laws? Do you agree or disagree with their arguments? Why or why not?
5. Given the persistence of child labor in the United States, what do you think are the best approaches to tackling this issue?
6. Do you think that any tactics from the past that might be relevant today?
7. What might you do to address this issue?