

Whether or not particular forms of work can be called 'child labor' today depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is done and the intentions sought by individual countries. The answer varies from country to country, as well as within countries. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports the largest number of child workers are in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

It is reported that an estimated 158 million children, aged 5-14, are engaged in child labor—one in six children in the world. Millions of children are engaged in hazardous situations or conditions, such as working in mines, with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture or working with dangerous machinery. They are everywhere hidden from view, working as domestic servants in homes and laboring in workshops.

Exploitative child labor includes paid and unpaid work that is forced or results in unfair wages. Children may be forced into marriage, to work in sweatshops, on construction sites, on the streets as child beggars, in wars as child soldiers, on farms, or in restaurants and hotels. Some are forced into commercial sexual exploitation, prostitution and other illegal activities, such as trafficking drugs. In 2005, an estimated 5.7 million children were in forced and bonded labor.

Millions of girls work as domestic servants and unpaid household help and are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Servitude may include cleaning, childcare, cooking, gardening and looking after the elderly. In its most extreme forms, child labor involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to provide for themselves on the streets of large cities at a very early age.

International efforts to combat exploitative child labor includes resolutions and acts like the International Labour Organization's Convention.

Child labor is considered exploitative if it involves:

2. Full-time work at too early an age.
3. Too many hours devoted to working.
4. Work that has excessive physical, social, or psychological stress.
5. Bad working and living conditions.
6. Inadequate pay.
7. Too much responsibility.
8. Work that limits access to education.
9. Work that undermines children's dignity and self-esteem, such as slavery, bonded labor, or sexual exploitation.
10. Work that is harmful to social and psychological development.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is an international treaty that recognizes the human rights of children, defined as persons up to the age of 18 years. The Convention establishes in international law that States Parties must ensure that all children, without discrimination in any form, benefit from special protection measures and assistance; have access to services such as education and health care; can develop their personalities, abilities and talents to the fullest potential; grow up in an environment of happiness, love and understanding; and are informed about and participate in, achieving their rights in an accessible and active manner. This document has been signed by all but two countries--Somalia and the United States. The United States has indicated its intention to ratify, but has yet to do so. By ratifying the Convention, governments state their intention to put this commitment into practice. State parties are obligated to amend and create laws and policies to fully implement the Convention; they must consider all actions taken in light of the best interests of the child. The task, however, must engage not just governments but all members of society.

Article 32 of the CRC refers specifically to child labor. Based on the CRC, organizations like UNICEF help governments create laws and services that will protect children's rights.

According to Human Rights Watch, double standards in U.S. labor law today allow children to work at younger ages, for longer hours and under more hazardous conditions in agriculture than in any other industry. These circumstances endanger children's health and safety and access to education is at stake.

Sources: UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org>; Convention on the Rights of the Child; International Labor Organization' World Bank Facts and Figures <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/237384/toolkitfr/pdf/facts.pdf>
<http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/programs/child-labor/>, UNICEF, International Labor Organization, Fair Trade International <http://www.fairtrade.net>