

What is Child Labor?

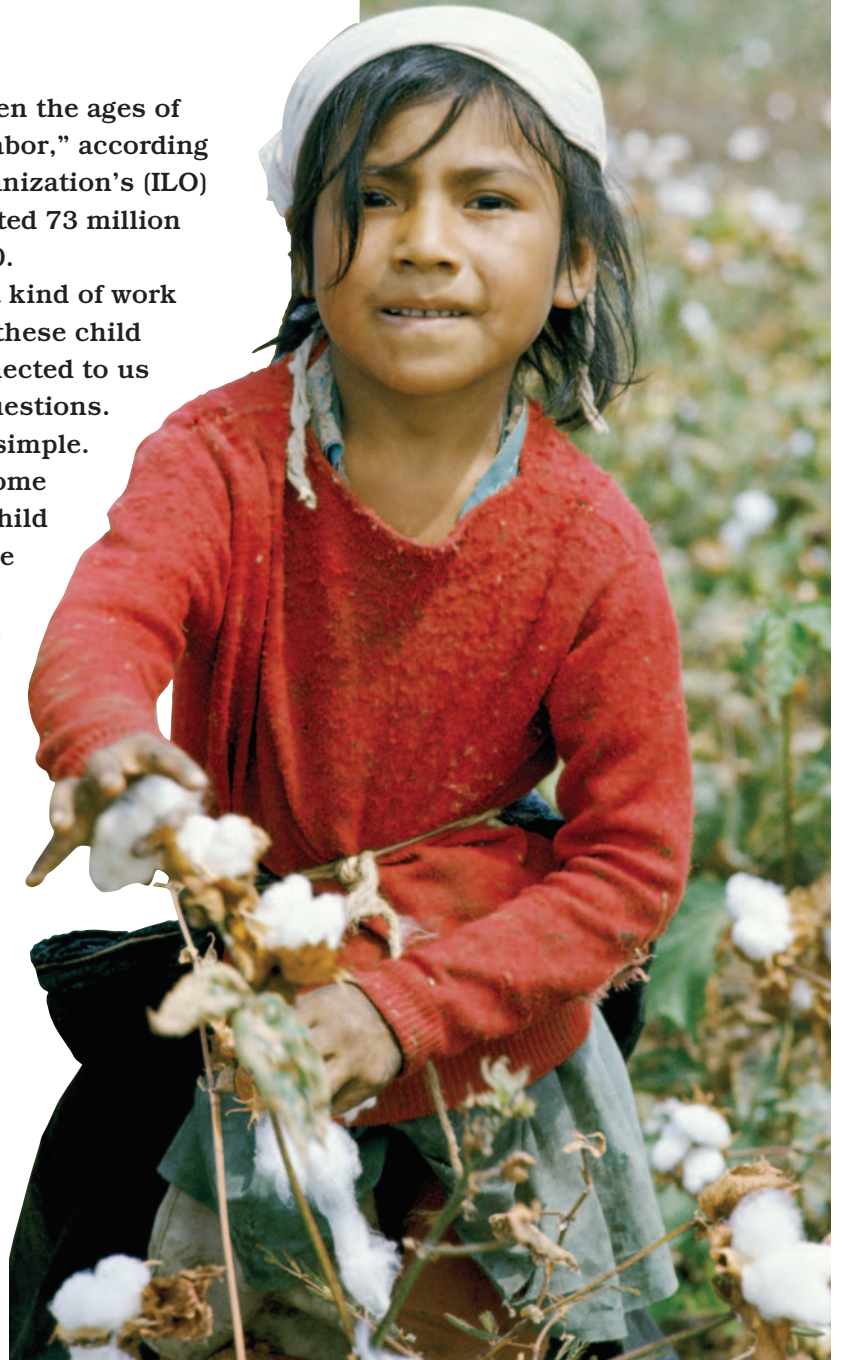
About 246 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are engaged in “child labor,” according to the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) 2000 global estimate. An estimated 73 million of these children are below the age of 10.

What is meant by “child labor”? What kind of work constitutes child labor? And where are these child laborers found? How is child labor connected to us as Americans? These are very simple questions. The answers, unfortunately, are not so simple.

It has taken many years to come to some kind of agreement on the definition of child labor. While experts continue to disagree on some aspects of the definition, international human-rights conventions have helped to guide international efforts to eliminate child labor.

In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child examined the issue. According to Article 32 of this convention:

“State Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.”



Who picked the cotton that made your jeans? Children in Northern Peru spend hours every day picking cotton, a backbreaking and thorny job.



He's only 14, but he already looks like he's been laboring a long time. His work is crushing rocks to build a road, and he earns less than \$1 for a 12-hour workday.

In 2000, the ILO conducted a study of the scope and magnitude of child labor. The Asia-Pacific region has the highest incidence of child labor. About 127.3 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are found in Asia, 73 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 17.4 million in Latin American and the Caribbean. And about 5 million are found in both developed countries and transition economies. This is only an estimate; it is nearly impossible to accurately measure the problem. But we know that this problem is widespread.

When people hear the phrase "child labor," they often think of problems in faraway places—problems in poor, developing countries. While it is true that the highest incidence of child labor takes place in these poor countries, America has its share of the problem. In fact, American history is filled with abusive forms of child labor, such as children working in mines, sawmills, and sweatshop factories. Today, some child labor continues to exist in America. We can still find children working on farms under some of the most hazardous conditions. In states such as California and Texas, for example, children are picking onions and other agricultural products that end up in some of our supermarkets and that are eaten by you and me.

Child Labor through the Years

1639 The earliest recorded account of cruelty to a child occurred when a master killed his young apprentice.

1790s Child labor rose in the United States during the Industrial Revolution. Eventually laws were passed to limit how much children can work.



1904 The National Child Labor Committee was formed in the United States.

1909 The first Conference on Children was held at the White House.

1938 The United States Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, freeing children under the age of 16 from having to work.



Not only are children working rather than going to school, but it is not uncommon in Africa to find children doing dangerous work, such as welding.

As Americans, we are also connected to global child labor, directly and indirectly. About 70 percent of child labor takes place in agriculture. This includes the harvesting of bananas in Central America and cocoa beans for chocolate in West Africa and the picking of coffee beans and tea leaves in Latin America and Africa. Some of these agricultural products end up on our supermarket shelves. For better or for worse, we are connected to some of the most unacceptable forms of child labor.

Besides agriculture, what other forms of child labor exist? The list is long, and we can only cite a few categories, to give an idea of the scope of the problem. Some children are used to promote unlawful activities such as the drug trade. Some children are kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers. Others are abducted to perform labor similar to slavery, such as working as servants in other people's homes. Other children, especially those orphaned by HIV/AIDS, are left to fend for themselves on the streets. These are the children who labor from dawn until dusk in dangerous conditions and live without knowing where their next meal will come from.

These 246 million children suffer from some of the cruelest human rights violations on a daily basis.

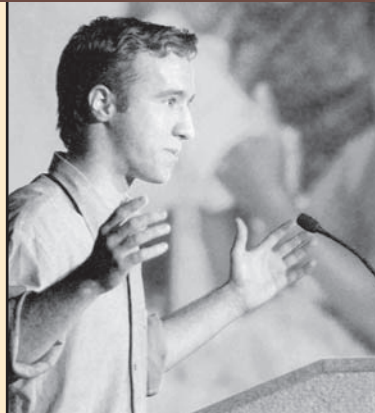
Adapted from an article by Chivy Sok

Child Labor through the Years

1974 The United States Congress created the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.

1989 The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention asks that all member nations protect their children's rights.

1995 Twelve-year-old Craig Kielburger founded Free the Children, an international organization of children who help other children.



2001 The international global movement Say Yes for Children began to gain millions of members worldwide.

2004 The first Children's World Congress on child labor is held in Florence, Italy. A follow-up session is held in India the following year.

2006 As many as 250 million children are being held in bondage and working as slaves around the world.