Child Labor

Introduction

The term child labor refers to work performed by children who are below a country or state’s legal age for employment. Although abuses in child labor are historically associated with factory work performed by immigrant children in the 19th and early 20th centuries, child labor has remained an issue in the modern world. According to a 2016 report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 150 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are involved in some form of child labor.

Child labor also continues to impact immigrant and migrant children. For example, the children of agricultural migrants frequently work alongside their parents, putting in long hours that prevent them from attending school. Many children work in substandard or dangerous conditions and are paid far below the set minimum wage. Poor children and children from marginalized social groups, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, displaced people, girls, people living in remote geographical areas, and the physically disabled, are the most likely to be child laborers.

The reasons for child labor are many, but the most prevalent one is poverty. Many families experiencing poverty count on the wages of their children for survival. Experts note that children's earnings, even though they tend to be meager, make up as much as 40 percent of family income in many areas of the world. Other factors related to child labor include the lack of opportunities to attend school, cultural tradition (whereby children work alongside their parents), and economic factors such as the lack of better-paying jobs for adults or employers' inability to invest in modern labor-saving machinery. Because there is a cyclical relationship between the lack of educational opportunities and poverty, each acts as a cause and as an effect of the other.

Historical Background
APPRENTICE:
A person who is learning a trade from a skilled employer, having agreed to work at no or low wages for a fixed period.

FREE TRADE:
An economic policy allowing for the import and export of goods from separate economies that is free from such regulations as tariffs, quotas, and other prohibitions.

ICE RAID:
A surprise, coordinated operation by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) targeting undocumented immigrants at a particular location.

PIECEWORK:
Work done by piece and paid for at a set rate per unit (for example, parts of garments, pieces of machinery, or bushels in agricultural labor).

SWEATSHOP:
A factory, usually in the garment industry, where workers are employed at low wages for long periods of time, and in poor conditions.

Child labor has existed throughout history. In many countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa, young children have traditionally worked as domestic servants, farmworkers, and apprentices to tradespeople. In agricultural communities, children were regarded as free farm labor and were expected to put in long hours to help their families. Starting in the Middle Ages, teenage boys in northern European countries were often sent away from home to be apprenticed to masters in various trades and guilds, forcing the boys to provide free labor as they learned. Apprenticeships usually lasted 7 to 10 years but the time could be doubled if an apprentice broke his contract with the master in any way.
Child labor was prevalent in the United States before laws were passed restricting the use of children, especially in dangerous occupations. Here, child miners, referred to as Breaker Boys, pose for a photo with faces covered in soot in Pennsylvania in 1911. Many of the children were immigrants or sons of immigrants.

Lewis Wickes Hine/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Child labor increased in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the need for factory workers grew. In the United States the demand for industrial workers coincided with the turn-of-the-century immigration boom that brought as many as 10,000 immigrants a day through Ellis Island's immigration station between 1900 and 1914. During this period the most common countries of origin for immigrants shifted. Although 87 percent of the first wave of immigrants in the mid-19th century were from Great Britain and western and northern Europe, by 1900, 80 percent came mainly from eastern and southern Europe. These groups were considered less "desirable" than earlier immigrants and were more vulnerable to labor exploitation.

Children, many of them immigrants, worked alongside adults in textile mills, mines, glass manufacturing plants, home industries, agriculture, canneries, and specialized occupations such as chimney sweeping. They frequently
worked in conditions of semi-slavery, performing mandatory overtime without pay, rest, or meal breaks. In the urban areas of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and other states, children often worked in factories where sanitary and safety regulations were nonexistent or inadequately enforced.

Poorly paid Jewish immigrants, including children working either in sweatshops or completing piecework at home, formed the backbone of the garment industry in New York City. Managers often locked the factory doors once all the workers were inside to prevent them from taking unauthorized breaks. A tragic, infamous example of the consequences of this practice is the March 25, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City. Unable to open locked doors leading to fire escapes, 146 garment workers, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant teenage girls and young women, were killed when a building fire broke out.

Labor performed by migrants and some migrant children in the late 19th century was key to the farm-based and emerging industrial economies of the American South. With sharecropping growing in agricultural areas, rural families relied on their children's work to boost the family income. Children were also employed as unskilled workers in such businesses as textile mills in North Carolina and glass factories in Kentucky.

Children most often worked with the full approval of their parents because their income was essential to the family's survival. Many manufacturers preferred child workers because they could be paid less than adults and they were easy to manage. As early as 1832 the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen was the first organization to officially condemn the excessive number of hours worked by children in factories, often from morning until night with no breaks, as endangering their health. Although some social and religious organizations registered their disapproval of child labor, laws governing minimum age, type of work, and hours of work for children were virtually nonexistent until almost the middle of the 20th century. One exception was the state of Massachusetts, which in 1836 required child workers under the age of 15 to attend school for a minimum of three months a year.

After peaking in the early 1900s, child labor began to decline as a result of labor reform movements, increased factory mechanization, and the passage of laws regulating minimum education requirements. Public outrage following the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire forced impartial investigations by the state of New York into garment laborers' working conditions and resulted in the growth of unions such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which eventually eliminated most sweatshops in the United States.
Many immigrant families and their descendants lived in tenement housing in urban areas such as New York City. Here a Jewish family works on garters in the kitchen of a tenement home in 1912. The photographer, Lewis Wickes Hine, served as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. In this role he took images that documented various aspects of child workers, including their living and work conditions.

Lewis Wickes Hine/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

During the Progressive Era (1890–1920), reformers began to address the problem of child labor. Among Progressive reformers, Episcopal priest the Reverend Edgar Gardner Murphy (1869–1913) from Montgomery, Alabama, was a leading voice for reform around the turn of the 20th century. He helped organize the National Child Labor Committee and published 10 pamphlets for his Alabama Child Labor Committee. Alabama had forbidden child labor for those age 14 and younger in 1887 but repealed the law in 1894, leading to one-fourth of all textile workers in the state being age 16 or younger by 1900. Thanks to Murphy and the National Child Labor Committee's efforts, 12 states (including Alabama) passed new restrictions on child labor in the first decade of the 20th century.
The National Consumers League, founded in 1899, and the National Child Labor Committee, established in 1904, worked in concert to end sweatshops and to lobby for free, compulsory education for all children. Their work ultimately led to the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which set federal standards for child workers, addressing such issues as minimum wage, minimum age, education and health provisions, and the enforcement of laws against violators of these standards. Even before the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Keating-Owen Act of 1916 at the federal level put an end to the transport across state lines of any goods manufactured by child laborers under the age of 14 or anything mined by miners under 16; this act was struck down by the US Supreme Court in 1918, but it was an important initial legislative effort in the area of child labor.

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IMMIGRANT LABOR AND THE 1911 TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE

On March 25, 1911, a deadly fire started on the top floors of the Asch Building in New York City in the factory of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. The garment workers at the company were primarily Jewish immigrant women from Europe who ranged in age from mid-teens to early 20s, and they worked in poor and unsafe conditions every day of the week for little pay. Their youth, coupled with their poverty and, for some, their inability to speak fluent English, made the garment workers hesitant to report safety issues for fear of losing their jobs. After the fire started in a rag bin, many of the workers could not escape: doors were locked from the outside (to prevent workers from taking unapproved breaks), the elevator stopped working, and the fire escape ladder collapsed. Some women attempted to jump from the building to the street below. Ultimately, 146 people died in the fire.

The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were not found to be responsible for the deaths in court. But the public was outraged. Labor rights activists, victims' families, and concerned New Yorkers called for employers to provide safe working conditions for factory employees. Scholars of labor movements have argued that the deadly fire ultimately encouraged lawmakers to pass legislation that requires companies to prioritize the safety of their workers. Although a significant amount of scholarly attention has been focused on how the fire jump-started a larger conversation about safe working conditions in the United States, less attention has been given to the fact that the people who died in the fire were immigrants.

It remains a reality in the 21st-century United States that demanding, low-skill jobs are worked by immigrant laborers, some of whom are undocumented. (US visas became more difficult to acquire in the 20th century.) Immigrant laborers in the United States are more susceptible to exploitation from their employers than workers who have citizenship. Like the immigrant women who
worked for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, today's immigrant workers in the United States are unlikely to complain about working conditions because they do not want to lose their jobs.

**Impacts and Issues**

Millions of migrants, about a third of them children and young adults, cross national boundaries worldwide in search of work, to escape violent conflicts, to exit failed states, to avoid forced marriage, or to flee natural disasters or resource and environmental issues. Because many migrant children do not have proper documents, they are barred from access to education, health care, and various other basic services. Vulnerable and socially marginalized, they often end up being economically exploited as agricultural laborers, garment workers, and domestics or are forced into drug trafficking, prostitution, or military conflicts.

Child labor often goes hand in hand with illegal immigration in the United States and other nations. Raids conducted by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents on agricultural migrant workers laboring in farm fields typically also uncover children working alongside their parents. Because farm managers often hire undocumented immigrants at substandard wages and pay them by the number of fruits or vegetables picked rather than at an hourly rate, many parents enlist the aid of their children to help them pick enough to make a living wage. This practice not only prevents the children of undocumented immigrants from attending school, but it also allows businesses to profit from and perpetuate the use of cheap labor.

**Reemergence of Child Labor in the United States**

Even though much of the cheapest US garment production has moved overseas, approximately 255,000 workers labor in sweatshops in New York, Texas, and California. During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, competition in the apparel industry and the climbing costs of production have resulted in enormous pressure on US manufacturers to produce items more quickly and cheaply.

As a result, there has been a resurgence of sweatshops that employ undocumented immigrants, including children as young as 12. These workers sometimes put in 24 hours of work at a stretch, are paid below the minimum wage, and receive no overtime or paid time off. They often work in cramped, squalid, and unsafe conditions, with nonworking toilets or improper ventilation. Although their wages are low by US standards, they exceed the rates the workers would receive in Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, South Korea, Taiwan, and some other countries. Because most of these workers do not speak English and lack proper documentation, they accept these jobs and remain in them for long periods of time.
Child Labor as a Global Issue

Although US laws prohibit child labor, the United States can be unknowingly implicated in child labor overseas through trade contracts. A 2010 report issued by the US Department of Labor titled “List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor” documents that many products imported into the United States are prepared for export in various nations that routinely use child labor. Examples include coffee from Guatemala and Kenya, vanilla from Madagascar, garments from Bangladesh, and shrimp from Thailand.

Some economists argue that free trade practices result in wealth for all, but others point out that profit is unequally distributed and that removing trade barriers often hurts the position of workers, especially children. Even though the World Trade Organization (WTO) currently has representatives in some 150 countries globally to monitor and negotiate free trade agreements, its standards do not address child labor. Proposed bans in the 1990s on imports from countries using child labor were ruled in violation of WTO laws, and the
US Trade Act of 2002 merely encourages trade negotiators to promote respect for workers’ rights and the rights of children.

**International Child Labor Initiatives**

Contemporary discussions focus on child labor as an economic and **human rights** issue, recognizing that it is both caused by poverty and contributes to poverty. Various national governments have to be persuaded not only to pass anti–child labor laws but also to make the political choices to end it. Since 1992 the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) has concentrated on child labor campaigns, advocating for prevention and elimination of all forms of child labor. The ILO’s adoption of Convention Number 182 in 1999 set as one of its primary goals the abolition of child labor around the world.

**Percentage of Children Who Work, Ages 5 to 14, by Region**

*Source*: UNICEF global databases, 2016, based on DHS, MICS and other nationally representative surveys, 2009–2015

Note: China is not included.
Rates of child laborers are highest in Africa. Within each region, the percentages of male and female child laborers is similar.

Nevertheless, child labor persists in many areas of the world in the 21st century. According to a 2015 report by the International Labour Organization, between 2007 and 2013 more than 30 percent of the adolescent population aged 15 to 17 years in Cambodia and Nicaragua was employed in hazardous work. Vietnam, Laos, Honduras, and Guinea also have large populations of adolescents employed in dangerous conditions. In many countries hazardous work, particularly in industry and agriculture, accounts for the majority of jobs available to children and adolescents. Child advocates emphasize the elimination of child labor in hazardous jobs and helping children return to school as essential steps toward ending child labor.

Even though watchdog organizations such as the Fair Labor Association and the Worker Rights Consortium exist, they are so understaffed and overextended around the globe that inspections of factories and workshops cannot be consistently performed. In some nations nongovernmental and private initiatives have contributed to ending child labor practices. For example, Rugmark, founded by activist Kailash Satyarthi (1954–) in 1994, is an organization that works against child exploitation in India’s carpet industry. The organization seeks to develop demand for child labor–free products.

SEE ALSO Education; Employment; Families; Global Immigration and Migration Patterns: 20th and 21st Centuries; Industrialization; Labor: Low-Skill, High-Skill, and Elite Migration; Undocumented Workers and the Labor Market

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