OVERVIEW OF CHILD LABOR

What is Child Labor?

Child labor is work that harms children or keeps them from attending school. Around the world and in the U. S., growing gaps between rich and poor in recent decades have forced millions of young children out of school and into work. The International Labor Organization estimates that 246 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 currently work under conditions that are considered illegal, hazardous, or extremely exploitative.

Underage children work at all sorts of jobs around the world, usually because they and their families are extremely poor. Large numbers of children work in commercial agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, mining, and domestic service. Some children work in illicit activities like the drug trade and prostitution or other traumatic activities such as serving as soldiers.

Child labor involves at least one of the following characteristics:

* Violates a nation’s minimum age laws
* Threatens children’s physical, mental, or emotional well-being
* Involves intolerable abuse, such as child slavery, child trafficking, debt bondage, forced labor, or illicit activities
* Prevents children from going to school
* Uses children to undermine labor standards

Where does most child labor occur?

Child labor can be found in nearly every industry.

**Agriculture:** Children in commercial agriculture can face long hours in extreme temperatures, health risks from pesticides, little or no pay, and inadequate food, water, and sanitation. Nearly 70% of child labor occurs in agriculture, fishing, hunting, and forestry. Children have been found harvesting:

- bananas in Ecuador
- cut flowers in Colombia
- cocoa in the Ivory Coast
- fruits and vegetables in the U.S.
- cotton in Egypt and Benin
- oranges in Brazil
- tea in Argentina and Bangladesh

**Exploitive** = cruel, unfair
**Illicit** = illegal
**Traumatic** = shocking, hurtful
**Bondage** = kept down by force
**Undermine** = weaken, challenge

**Pesticides** = insect killers
**Inadequate** = not enough
**Sanitation** = cleanliness
Manufacturing  About 15 million children are estimated to be directly involved in manufacturing goods for export, including:

- **Carpets** from India, Pakistan, Egypt
- **Clothing** sewn in Bangladesh
- **Footwear** made in India and the Philippines
- **Soccer balls** sewn in Pakistan
- **Glass and bricks** made in India
- **Fireworks** made in China, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, India, and Peru
- **Surgical instruments** made in Pakistan

**Domestic Service**  Many children, especially girls, work in domestic service, sometimes starting as young as 5 or 6. This type of child labor is linked to child trafficking. Domestic child laborers can be victims of physical, emotional, and sometimes sexual abuse.

**Mining and Quarrying**  Child laborers suffer extremely high illness and injury rates in underground mines, opencast mines, and quarries. Children as young as 6 or 7 years old break up rocks, and wash, sieve, and carry ore. Nine-year-olds work underground setting explosives and carrying loads. Children work in a range of mining operations, including:

- **Gold** in Colombia
- **Charcoal** in Brazil and El Salvador
- **Chrome** in Zimbabwe
- **Diamonds** in Cote d’Ivoire
- **Emeralds** in Colombia
- **Coal** in Mongolia

**Hotels, Restaurants, and Retail**  Some of the work of young people in this sector is considered legitimate, but there are indications of considerable abuse. Low pay is the norm, and in some tourist areas, children’s work in hotels and restaurants is linked to prostitution. In at least one example, child hotel workers received such low pay that they had to take out loans from their employers; the terms of the interest and repayment often led to debt bondage.

**“Unconditional Worst Forms” of Child Labor**  8.4 million children are involved in work that, under any circumstance, is considered unacceptable for children, including the sale and trafficking of children into debt bondage, serfdom, and forced labor. It includes the forced recruitment of children for armed conflict, commercial sexual exploitation, and illicit activities, such as producing and trafficking drugs.