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**Walter E. Block\*\*\***

## The Economics of Child Labor

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### Abstract

Many commentators attribute the decline of child labor in advanced economies to legislation prohibiting this practice. But another view asserts that the amount of child labor declined because rising affluence curbed the demand for and the supply of child laborers. Growing prosperity and cultural changes made it more convenient to educate children, thereby absolving the need for this practice. Although the decline of child labor is best explained by material prosperity, it will be demonstrated in this paper that not only can abolishing child labor be counterproductive, but in some cases, it is a vital platform for the accumulation of human capital. Did child labor all but end in advanced countries because of legislation prohibiting it? Or was it due to the fact that these economies were so well developed, so wealthy, that they could afford to keep youngsters in school instead? The former view is the most popular, the latter, the most correct, as we show in this paper.

### Keywords

Child labor, economic development, legislation

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**T**his paper explores why child labor has been utilized throughout history and has, for the most part, been phased out in the modern era. While child labor has become too minute to register significance in North America and rich European countries, it remains crucial to the economies of underdeveloped countries. It is no surprise that child labor has been frowned upon for its unsafe working conditions and poor wages, but when is a child eligible to work? What constitutes fair labor for youth, and should it be eliminated entirely? This paper will explain why it persists and is sometimes still necessary through the lenses of education, family needs, and national wealth.

**T**his paper is not a defense of child labor per se; however, its purpose is to elucidate reasons for its legitimacy in some places. There is no doubt that there are cases indicating the historical and contemporary atrocities of child labor. History books are replete with stories of chimney sweeps becoming stuck and forgotten or scavengers being sent under running machines only to be maimed by the moving parts. Today, these workplace injuries still occur in places like “sweatshops” and mines alike. But ultimately, it is rising affluence that leads to the decline of child labor.<sup>2</sup>

**I**n section II, we discuss labor as a contract. Section III is dedicated to our analysis of education as it impacts child labor. The burden of section IV is to address family needs, and in section V, we ask how national wealth is impacted by child labor. We offer a history of this phenomenon in several countries in section VI and conclude in section VII.

## Labor as Contract

**I**t is important to first understand that all fair labor agreements are contractual. This means that the employer and employee have an agreement in terms of work, compensation, working conditions, etc. It is to be understood that if one agrees to a contract, then the conditions of the contract are understood as beneficial at least ex ante by both parties. From an outside perspective, things like compensation and working conditions may be seen as meager, unfair, and unfit; but not to the worker who agreed to these stipulations. As far as the employee knew, this was the best offer, all things considered, offered to him. An example of this in the modern world is Mexican short-term immigration to the United States for agricultural work. The pay and living conditions are often lackluster and seen by many Americans as unfit for human living; but those who are in said situations have voluntarily agreed to these conditions. For the most part, migrant laborers are coming to work

1. The authors thank Ross Selvaggi for helpful comments regarding an earlier version of this paper. The usual proprieties always apply: the present authors are solely responsible for all remaining errors of omission or commission.

2. We are not discussing the “child labor” of children who are very well-paid movie actors, singers, musicians, prodigies, etc. It cannot be denied that they, too, face challenges, but they are of a very different sort than those who are faced by the subject of the present paper.

3. We assume (legal) job mobility. If employees are only allowed to work for a single employer or face expulsion from the country, it is easier for them to get taken advantage of and represents less freedom.

for remittances to support their families back home. They are more than willing to accept poor living conditions in trade for more pay. Although this agreement may seem unjust from an outsider's perspective, it is solely up to the employer and employees. It is their contract which decides what is mutually acceptable.<sup>3</sup>

**N**o matter how absurd the conditions of a contract may seem, if they are agreed upon, they are to be considered fair; as a result, no intervention or justification is required. Hence, if a child agrees, with the support of his guardian, by contract to work for "X" legal age, then it is to be considered welfare-enhancing. The rebuttal to this argument is that child labor is often exploitative, understandably so because when is a child able to make such a decision? To this issue, Wendy McElroy writes, "Free-labor children lived with their parents or guardians and worked during the day at wages agreeable to those adults. But parents often refused to send their children into unusually harsh or dangerous work situations."<sup>4</sup> As Lawrence W. Reed notes, "Private factory owners could not forcibly subjugate 'free labour' children; they could not compel them to work in conditions their parents found unacceptable."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, solutions do indeed exist to deter exploitative agreements between youths and their employers.<sup>6</sup>

**A**nother point to consider is the welfare effect of abolishing child labor. Given that child laborers supplement income and boost welfare, abolishing the practice could lead to adverse effects for both children and their families. When the United States coerced Bangladesh into discontinuing child labor in garment factories, instead of returning to school, children resorted to worse jobs. Many fell prey to homelessness, and several became prostitutes. This example is a clear case of a well-intended policy producing perverse outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

## Education

**E**ducation is one of the main foundations on which objections to child labor are based. It is no secret that education plays a seminal role in the growth of a country; education translates to human capital and therefore leads to economic growth. One might say that education is paramount to a child's life, but in underdeveloped countries, these children's labor is more important to their livelihoods than schooling. The issue raises a problem for those who posit that child labor deprives children of the opportunity to be educated and increase human capital. However, early in its history, the United States adopted a flexible approach to child labor that permitted children to work if they were enrolled in school for a specified amount of time.

4. W. McElroy, *Legal Child Abuse*, "The Free Market", 2001, Vol. 19, No. 1, <https://mises.org/library/legal-child-abuse>, (access 12.09.2023).

5. L.W. Reed, *Child Labor and the British Industrial Revolution*, Mackinac Center 2001, <https://www.mackinac.org/3879>, (access 12.09.2023).

6. For the general case in favor of legalizing child labor, see: R. Rojas, *The Fallacy of "Child-Labor-Free"*, Mises Daily Articles 2010, <https://mises.org/library/fallacy-child-labor-free>, (access 12.09.2023); W.E. Block, *Defending the Undefendable*, The Mises Institute 2008, <https://mises.org/library/defending-undefendable>, (access 12.09.2023); J.A. Tucker, *The Trouble With Child Labor Laws*, Mises Daily Articles 2008, <https://mises.org/library/trouble-child-labor-laws>, (access 12.09.2023); T.J. DiLorenzo, *The Union Myth*, "The Free Market", 2004, Vol. 24, No. 10, <https://mises.org/library/union-myth>, (access 12.09.2023); W. McElroy, *Legal Child...*, op. cit.; L.W. Reed, *Child Labor...*, op. cit.; J. Rose, *Child labor, family income, and the Uruguay Round*, "The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics", 1998, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 75–87; B. Kauffman, *The Child Labor Amendment Debate of the 1920's*, "Journal of Libertarian Studies", 1992, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 139–169; C. Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution*, Indiana University Press 1990.

7. See on this: M. Nonkes, *A look at child labor inside a garment factory in Bangladesh*, "World Vision", 2015, <https://www>.

Lucy Manning shows how the appetite for education led to the adoption of flexible child labor laws: “This lack of education brought the first effort to control child labor by law. In 1813, Connecticut passed a law requiring mill owners to have the children in their factories taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. In 1836, Massachusetts required that children under 15 working in factories attend school for 3 months a year. Other States passed similar laws.”<sup>8</sup>

The lawmakers of the time realized that education was important not only for children but also for the growth of the economy. Many underdeveloped countries are still stuck in the cycle of poverty created by child labor. If these countries desire to overcome these issues, it is their duty to break the cycle of poverty by creating reforms that balance child labor laws with the demands for education.

Child labor should not be seen as the enemy of human capital because it often functions as a path to human capital accumulation. Mainstream thinking suggests that education and human capital are synonyms, but this categorization is inaccurate. Human capital refers to the application of education and does not constitute mere book learning.<sup>9</sup> Joel Mokyr, in his assessment of Britain’s industrial supremacy, has argued that the English had a comparative advantage in skills and refining products rather than a schooling advantage.<sup>10</sup> Working as laborers provides children with the opportunity to hone practical skills and develop human capital. Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, dropped out of college but succeeded in business because they had spent years honing their skills. Conversely, Steve Jobs, who built Apple, studied calligraphy instead of computer science. These cases exemplify the claim that child labor is not the enemy of human capital but rather its ally.

## Family Needs

One of the main reasons that child labor still exists today is out of necessity to support the family. Children in developed countries have the privilege of not having to work because their parent(s) or guardians are able to provide for them. Let us not forget that there was a time in the United States when children did have to help provide for their families. Is it fair for the US to punish nations that use child labor when the US used it previously when it was a developing country? This is like punishing developing countries for polluting, even though most of them are not the primary producers of greenhouse emissions.

Conversely, in less developed countries, families still need the help of their children to make ends meet, which is why we still see it today. It is not to say that these children want to work; rather,

[worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-labor-garment-factory-bangladesh](https://www.worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-labor-garment-factory-bangladesh), (access 12.09.2023); U.S. Department of Labor, *Child Labor in the Informal Garment Production in Bangladesh. Task Order II, Task VI: In-Country Mixed-Methods Research and Data Collection*, 2012, [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/research\\_file\\_attachment/2013GarmentBangladesh.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/research_file_attachment/2013GarmentBangladesh.pdf), (access 12.09.2023); U.S. Department of Labor, *Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports*, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/bangladesh>, (access 12.09.2023); J. Moulds, *Child labour in the fashion supply chain. Where, why and what can be done*, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/ng-interactive/2015/jan/19/child-labour-in-the-fashion-supply-chain>, (access 12.09.2023).

8. L. Manning, *Why Child Labor Laws?*, Publication No. 313, U.S. Department of Labor, Children’s Bureau 1946, <https://www.marquette.edu/cgi-bin/cuap/db.cgi?uid=default&ID=6440&view=Search&mh=1>, (access 12.09.2023).

9. Gary Becker has done important work in the analysis of human capital. See: G. Becker, *Human Capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*, The National Bureau of Economic Research 1964.

10. J. Mokyr, *The Holy Land of Industrialism: rethinking the Industrial Revolution*, “Journal of the British Academy”, 2021, Vol. 9, pp. 223–247, DOI: [10.5871/jba/009.223](https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.223).



they must if they are to survive. Although it is an unfortunate reality, these children have a limited selection of alternatives; labor, for them, arises out of pure necessity. Rod Rojas writes, “a parent who puts a child behind a loom for ten hours a day does so, not out of callous greed, but because this is what brings food to the table.”<sup>11</sup> In some instances, it is a choice of life or death for these children. If the family is unable to make enough money to survive, they will perish. Similar to the minimum wage argument, low wages are better than no wages.<sup>12</sup> When parents must choose between hard labor or starvation, the choice is easy.

On the contrary, child labor activists focus on the negative effects of child labor, often disregarding the reasons for its existence in the first place. In many cases, the children are made better off by working, regardless of the conditions they work in, than they would be otherwise. Bill Kauffman says, “Parents, many of them new in the mill towns, just in from the piedmont or the hardscrabble, ‘felt the children should continue to do their part to help support the family, just as they had done on the farm.’”<sup>13</sup> Given that the root of child labor is often within the family, whether that be helping out on the farm or assisting with family businesses, many parents of child laborers not unreasonably felt that the child’s support of the family should not have stopped just because of the new environment they were in. Rather, their roles as workers should merely shift.

## National Wealth

In terms of national wealth, countries across the globe such as the United States, Canada, Japan, France, Germany, and Australia, to name a few, are some of the richest countries in the world. One thing that all these countries have in common is strict child labor laws. These countries did not implement child labor laws because of the social issue of it. Rather, they no longer needed to employ children to thrive. Rojas writes, “the only reason our children don’t have to do this type of labor is that we are wealthier, not because of our child-labor laws nor because we are somehow culturally or racially superior.”<sup>14</sup> Rojas makes it known that the usage of child labor is dependent upon family and national financial stability rather than the social beliefs of it. Of course, child labor is a complicated social dilemma, however, it is utilized by underdeveloped countries out of necessity. There are child working exceptions in the US for agriculture. Given this, how do we justify the law?

Countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia are some of the poorest countries in the world. These nations also have something in common: they still utilize child labor.<sup>15</sup> They utilize child labor in a variety of ways, but most often in the form of low-skilled labor, such as textile

11. R. Rojas, *The Fallacy of...*, op. cit.

12. See on this: J. Lingenfelter, J. Dominguez, L. Garcia, et al., *Closing the Gap: Why Minimum Wage Laws Disproportionately Harm African-Americans*, “Economics, Management, and Financial Markets”, 2017, 12 (1), pp. 11–24; R. Batemarco, C. Seltzer, W.E. Block, *The Irony of the Minimum Wage Law: Limiting Choices Versus Expanding Choices*, “Journal of Peace, Prosperity & Freedom”, 2014, Vol. 3, pp. 69–83; B. Powell, *A Case against Child Labor Prohibitions*, Economic development bulletin NO. 21, 2014, <https://www.cato.org/economic-development-bulletin/case-against-child-labor-prohibitions>, (access 12.09.2023); C. Hovenga, D. Naik, W.E. Block, *The Detrimental Side Effects of Minimum Wage Laws*, “Business and Society Review”, 2013, Vol. 118, Issue 4, pp. 463–487; P. Cappelli, W.E. Block, *Debate over the minimum wage law*, “Economics, Management, and Financial Markets”, 2012, 7 (4), pp. 11–33; H. Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson*, Ludwig von Mises Institute 2008; V. Vuk, *Professor Stiglitz and the Minimum Wage*, Mises Daily Articles 2006, <https://mises.org/mises-daily/professor-stiglitz-and-minimum-wage>, (access 12.09.2023); W.E. Block, *The Minimum Wage: A Reply to Card and Krueger*, “Journal of The Tennessee Economics Association”, 2001, [https://www.walter-block.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/block\\_minimum-wage-once-again\\_2001.pdf](https://www.walter-block.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/block_minimum-wage-once-again_2001.pdf), (access 12.09.2023); P. McCormick, W.E. Block, *The Minimum*

manufacturing, mining, construction, and agricultural work. In many ways, this mirrors the history of developed countries during the early development of the United States; child labor was utilized in these same sectors of textile manufacturing, mining, construction, and agriculture. According to Rojas, "Indeed, economic development is the precursor of all things good and humane."<sup>16</sup> It was only until our nation's wealth grew that we began to see a greater focus on eliminating child labor.

## History

**C**hild labor played a vital role in the early economic development of England and the United States of America. Both countries relied on the labor of children during their transitions to modern economic growth. As a result, the horrors of child labor are often invoked to taint the American and British revolutions. However, children were already prominent as laborers prior to the industrial revolution in both countries. As pre-industrial societies, England and America appropriated the labor of children on family farms and in small-scale manufacturing businesses. Income generated from child labor was used to supplement the family income, and as this paper demonstrates, child labor declined considerably as both places became wealthier and employed sophisticated technologies to boost output. With the rising wealth of the adult population, child labor was displaced as the norm, and the emphasis shifted to the education of children.

## England

**E**mploying children as laborers was the norm in England long before the Industrial Revolution. Records show<sup>17</sup> that during the medieval era, children assisted their parents in economic production. Children in pre-industrial England were expected to work if they were able to do so. Toddlers as young as four would assist their parents with domestic chores and supervise younger siblings, and by age eight, many were working unsupervised. Quite often, children would secure employment as servants or agricultural helpers. Children were recruited from nearby villages and would work as apprentices in small establishments before starting their businesses as young adults. Therefore, child labor prepared youngsters for entrepreneurship and nurtured human capital accumulation.

**D**uring the late-eighteenth century, growing demand for consumer goods and new technologies stimulated the industrial revolution and further supported child labor. Child laborers became more prominent in the manufacturing sector, particularly in the textile and mining industries. However, the share of children working in agriculture increased during the nineteenth century<sup>18</sup> as more adults migrated to manufacturing. Mining also featured prominently as an employer of children.

*Wage: Does it Really Help Workers*, "Southern Connecticut State University Business Journal", 2000, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 77-80; D. Neumark, W. Wascher, *Minimum Wages and Employment: A Case Study of the Fast-Food Industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania: Comment*, "American Economic Review", 2000, Vol. 90, No. 5, pp. 1362-1396; D. Neumark, W. Wascher, *Minimum wage effects on employment and school enrollment*, "Journal of Business Economics and Statistics", 1995, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 199-206; G. Becker, *Human Capital...*, op. cit.; D. Deere, K. Murphy, F. Welch, *Employment and the 1990-91 Minimum-Wage Hike*, "American Economic Review", 1995, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 232-237; D. Hamermesh, F. Welch, *Review Symposium: Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage*, "Industrial and Labor Relations Review", 1995, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 827-849; D. Neumark, W. Wascher, *Employment Effects of Minimum and Subminimum Wages: Panel Data on State Minimum Wage Laws*, "Industrial and Labor Relations Review", 1992, Vol. 46, No.1, pp. 55-81; W.E. Williams, *The State Against Blacks*, McGraw-Hill 1982; J. Mincer, *Unemployment effects of minimum wages*, "Journal of Political Economy", 1976, Vol. 84, No. 4, pp. 87-104; M. Friedman, *A minimum-wage law is, in reality, a law that makes it illegal for an employer to hire a person with limited skills*, <http://izquotes.com/quote/306121>, (access 12.09.2023); M.N. Rothbard, *Outlawing Jobs: The Minimum Wage, Once More*, <http://archive.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard315>.

However, due to labor segregation, children and adults performed distinct functions in the labor market. It's usually asserted that during the Industrial Revolution, the work conducted by children was more appropriate for adults; however, this view is unsupported by historical evidence.<sup>19</sup> For example, in the mining sector, children were often disallowed from performing tasks they were unable to manage physically. Instead, they performed light work like operating trapdoors to ventilate early pits. As agricultural laborers, they also did age-appropriate tasks like crow-scaring.

Children also proved to be quite useful as factory laborers because they performed some tasks more efficiently at a cheaper cost than adults. However, as technology matured, factory demand for children was reduced, and they featured more prominently as ancillary workers. Jobs that did not require much specialization or technical knowledge became the purview of children. Therefore, they comprised a large share of service workers.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding the lower intensity of jobs conducted by children, a reform movement emerged to limit the employment of children.

Indeed, the decline of child labor in England is attributed to the passage of pioneering laws that sought to thwart child labor, but were these laws effective or did they coincide with the demise of child labor due to greater societal wealth? The latter is correct. The deplorable working conditions experienced by some children in industrial facilities energized reformers to tackle the "scourge" of child labor. Years of lobbying to curb the employment of children resulted in the Factory Act of 1802.<sup>21</sup> This law limited working hours to 12 hours per day and made provisions for educational instruction.

But despite the fanfare, it was poorly enforced and failed to effect sweeping changes in the approach to child labor.<sup>22</sup> Although magistrates were permitted to appoint inspectors, these officials had no executing power, and neither were they taught how to conduct proper assessments. Due to these lapses, the law was unsuccessful in its attempt to tame the employment of children. Moreover, it only exercised jurisdiction over parish apprentices and could not obstruct the employment of free children who were under the control of their parents.

Subsequent measures were passed in 1819 and 1825 to combat child labor in England, but like the earlier law of 1802, they proved to be equally ineffective. However, in 1833, a new law was instituted that imposed stiffer penalties for breaching offenses and empowered inspectors to enforce rules and offer new regulations to improve working conditions. The Factory Act of 1833 was followed

html, (access 12.09.2023); G. North, *How Minimum Wage Laws Promote Racial Discrimination*, <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2014/07/gary-north/want-young-black-males-to-get-jobs/>, (access 12.09.2023); D. Neumark, *The Effects of Minimum Wages on Employment*, FRBSF, <https://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/publications/economic-letter/2015/december/effects-of-minimum-wage-on-employment/>, (access 12.09.2023); S.H. Hanke, *Minimum Wage Laws Kill Jobs*, <https://www.cato.org/blog/minimum-wage-laws-kill-jobs>, (access 12.09.2023); S.H. Hanke, *Let the Data Speak: The Truth Behind Minimum Wage Laws*, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/let-data-speak-truth-behind-minimum-wage-laws>, (access 12.09.2023).

13. B. Kauffman, *The Child Labor...*, op. cit., pp. 139–169.

14. R. Rojas, *The Fallacy of...*, op. cit.

15. K. Reid, *Child labor: Facts, FAQs, and how to end it*, "World Vision", 2023, <https://www.worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-labor-facts>, (access 12.09.2023); S. Jaiswal, *Child labour in third world countries*, 2021, <https://blog.ipleaders.in/child-labour-in-third-world-countries/>, (access 12.09.2023); Z. Naeem, F. Shaukat, Z. Ahmed, *Child labor in relation to poverty*, "International Journal of Health Sciences", 2011, 5 (2), pp. 48–49.

16. R. Rojas, *The Fallacy of...*, op. cit.

by a series of other laws aimed at regulating child labor, including the Chimney Sweepers Regulations Act of 1864, The Mines Regulation Act (1872), and the 1878 Factory Act.

However, historians question the primacy of these acts as a tool to eradicate child labor. Jane Humphries<sup>23</sup> and Carolyn Tuttle<sup>24</sup> have argued contrary to traditionalists that industrialization initiated more opportunities for children to work. However, there are subtle differences between the two of their viewpoints. According to Humphries, the detailed division of labor sparked by industrialization led to the emergence of low-level tasks for which children were suited, whereas Tuttle claims that industrialization increased the desirability of children due to their age-related characteristics. Being smaller and more nimble, it made greater sense to use children to operate some machines and perform certain tasks.

Yet there is an older and more compelling view asserting that rising incomes generated by industrialization led to the fizzling of child labor. An influential proponent of this argument, Clark Nardinelli, posits that the Factory Acts fast-tracked an ongoing process of declining child labor.<sup>25</sup> Nardinelli credits the rising wages of adults and technological advancements as the major drivers of declining child labor.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, legislation erected deterrents to child labor, but law was never the primary force behind its decline. Did legislators attempt to take credit for these decreases, which would have occurred in any case due to greater wealth?

Rising affluence had a profound impact on cultural values, which led to a reevaluation of children and their place in society. Humphries<sup>27</sup> concurs with Nardinelli that poverty predicted rates of child labor in England. More specifically, Humphries observes that with rising incomes, schooling was perceived as an investment, and the rising earnings of men strengthened notions of masculinity, which led to the thinking that educating children was evidence that one was masculine and could provide for his family.<sup>28</sup>

In England, labor laws made employing children costly, but they were not the catalyst for the sharp reduction in child labor, which had occurred by the early twentieth century. Instead, the sharp declines in child labor observed by historians resulted from the rising prosperity of adults and cultural changes with profound implications for how children were valued.

17. J.M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval Country Side: Gender and Household in Bridgestock Before the Plague*, Oxford University Press 1990.

18. J. Humphries, *Childhood and child...*, op. cit.

19. Ibidem.

20. Ibidem.

21. H. Hindman, *Coming to Terms with Child Labor*, in: *The World of Child Labor: an Historical and Regional Survey*, ed. H. Hindman, Routledge 2015, pp. 45–49.

22. E.L. Edmonds, *Education and early factory inspectors*, "The Vocational Aspect of Education", 1958, Vol. 10, Issue 21, pp. 85–95.

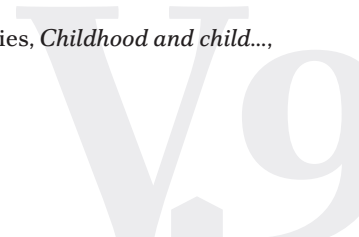
23. J. Humphries, *Childhood and child...*, op. cit.

24. C. Tuttle, *Hard at Work in Factories and Mines. The Economics of Child Labor During the British Industrial Revolution*, Westview Press 1999.

25. C. Nardinelli, *Child labor and the factory acts*, "The Journal of Economic History", 1980, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 739–755.

26. C. Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial...*, op. cit.

27. J. Humphries, *Childhood and child...*, op. cit.



## America

**C**hild labor was crucial to economic production during colonial America. Unlike today, colonial Americans felt that children needed to be economically useful to support the family. The consensus was that they became a burden to society if they failed to work. Except for Southern planters and wealthy Northern merchants, most Americans could not afford to school their children, so child labor became a viable economic alternative. By thirteen, boys were allowed by their families to work either on the family farm or as an apprentice for a local craftsman.

**C**hild labor became an avenue for the ambitious to acquire useful skills and pursue entrepreneurial endeavors. As a critical source of social capital, apprenticeship provided young men with the expertise and networks they required to succeed in business or as professionals. In fact, child labor was perceived as a part of America's industrialization strategy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Daniel Roberdeau, a leading manufacturer in 1775 at an address in Philadelphia, averred that employing the cheaper labor of children allowed American cloth manufacturers to outcompete the British.<sup>29</sup>

**B**ecause child labor was appreciated for anchoring economic growth in America, as the economy industrialized, child labor became more prominent. As the example of England demonstrated earlier, adopting technology can complement child labor. Manufacturing technology in 18<sup>th</sup> century America unleashed new opportunities for children to work. Manufacturers were even lauded for employing children since doing so was seen as rescuing them from idleness.<sup>30</sup> In fact, from 1608 to 1860, over half of America's textile workers were children.<sup>31</sup>

**W**ith economic advancements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, child labor became even more significant in thriving American cities. For instance, in 1828, almost half of the residents in Manayunk, Philadelphia were children under the age of fifteen.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, one might think that technological improvements lead to the decline of child labor, but this is primarily a long-run outcome, rather than a short-term one. Reductions in child labor are observed when the efficiency gains of adopting technology outweigh employing children.

**N**either can it be assumed that a lower share of children in manufacturing is evidence that they are being displaced by technology. Claudia Goldin and Kenneth Sokoloff credit the declining share of women and children in manufacturing in 1840 to the shift of men from agriculture to that sector.<sup>33</sup>

28. J. Humphries, *Child Labor: Lessons from the Historical Experiences of Today's Industrial Economies*, "The World Bank Economic Review", 2003, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 175–196.

29. Ch. Rosenberg, *Child labor in America: a history*, Mcfarland and Company Inc Publishers 2013.

30. Ibidem.

31. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *History of child labor in the United States—part 1: little children working*, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/history-of-child-labor-in-the-united-states-part-1.htm>, (access 12.09.2023).

32. R. Lacobacci, *Fabric of a Nation*, Lulu Press 2019.

33. C. Goldin, K. Sokoloff, *Women, Children, and Industrialization in the Early Republic: Evidence from the Manufacturing Censuses*, "The Journal of Economic History", 1982, Vol. 42, Issue 4, pp. 741–774.

The decline of child labor in the United States occurred gradually, and as recently as 1890, child laborers comprised one-fifth of the total workforce.<sup>34</sup> These findings are interesting because by the 1840s, several states in America had anti-child labor regulations. By 1849, Pennsylvania had prohibited children from working for more than ten hours a day, and children under twelve were barred from working in textiles.<sup>35</sup>

**D**espite passing a litany of laws from the 1840s to the early twentieth century, child labor remained relevant in America. Rather than limiting the demand for child labor, anti-child labor regulations coincided with the decline of child labor. Researchers in a landmark 1992 paper<sup>36</sup> conclude that child labor declined in U.S. fruit and vegetable canning industry due to the adoption of capital-intensive technologies and rising adult incomes. Child labor regulations were thus unsuccessful in the U.S.; however, they were endorsed by large corporations interested in putting their competitors out of business.

**A**s the economy became more sophisticated, demands for higher-level skills increased, and manufacturers became more appreciative of the benefits of education. Therefore, employing children became an expense for innovative companies whose successes were linked to the application of higher-order skills. Similarly, because parents were becoming richer, they no longer saw the need for children to be supplementing the family income. Essentially, investing in education became a family investment instead.

**N**or has it been proven that compulsory education led to the dissolution of child labor. Statistical evidence compiled by Carolyn M. Moehling shows that laws mandating compulsory schooling failed to reduce child labor. Instead, she opines that although compulsory schooling laws are correlated with reductions in child labor, there is not a causal relationship between them.<sup>37</sup> This is because child labor also declined in states without such laws. More recent research<sup>38</sup> has shown that although compulsory schooling laws reduce educational inequality, they do not have a uniform impact on all groups in the United States.

**F**urthermore, the significance of compulsory schooling laws is that they shape the preferences and economic choices of parents. Compulsory schooling laws increase the cost of having children; therefore, parents are incentivized to have fewer children and invest in the quality of their offspring. The increased returns on investments in education result in parents recognizing that schooling is

34. Ch. Rosenberg, *Child labor...*, op. cit.

35. J.A. Filter, *Child labor in America: The Epic Legal Struggle to protect children*, University of Kansas Press 2018.

36. M. Brown, J. Christiansen, P. Phillips, *The Decline of Child Labor in the U.S. Fruit and Vegetable Canning Industry: Law or Economics*, "The Business History Review", 1992, Vol. 66, No. 4, pp. 723-770.

37. C.M. Moehling, *State labor laws and the decline of Child labor*, "Explorations in Economic History", 1999, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 72-106.

38. A. Lleras-Muney, *Were Compulsory and Child Labor Laws Effective? An Analysis from 1915 to 1939*, "Journal of Law and Economics", 2002, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 401-436.

a preferable substitute for child labor. Hence, the link between compulsory schooling laws and reductions in child labor appears to be at most very indirect.

**L**ike the British example, rising affluence in America led to a new valuation of children that was interwoven into the fabric of middle-class culture. Enrolling children in school indicated that men had the resources to provide for their families. A man whose children and wife worked fell short of the standards established by middle-class society. Therefore, working to provide for oneself and family became integral to a man's sense of purpose.

**I**n England and America, economic prosperity and cultural changes spawned large-scale reductions in child labor. Affluence made child labor objectionable because people became more attuned to the needs of children, who were now valued for their future potential rather than considered as assets who ought to be exploited for the sustenance of the family in the short run.

## Modern Day Child Labor

**O**ver 160 million children across the globe are still employed as child laborers.<sup>39</sup> Most of these children are employed in Asia and Africa. Modern-day child labor is considered a violation of children's rights. Critics contend that child laborers are deprived of access to a quality education and are often employed in deplorable conditions. However, liberal activists in rich Western countries are unappreciative of the broader socio-cultural context in which this phenomenon occurs.

**C**hild labor is pervasive in underdeveloped countries precisely because they are yet to matriculate to developed status. Families in poorer countries do not have the luxury of ensuring that children have basic amenities if they fail to work. Such people are cognizant of the risks associated with child labor; however, it is simply a practical reality in several parts of the world. Without child labor, several families would suffer in penury, and unlike their rich counterparts in the West, these societies lack wealthy philanthropic organizations and projects that can ameliorate living conditions.

**A**frica is the continent with the highest number of child laborers,<sup>40</sup> and it is also the poorest continent. Many African countries are dependent on agriculture and the exportation of raw materials, which are most conducive to this type of labor. Children are not to be found working for Microsoft or Boeing.

39. UNICEF, *Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades*, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/child-labour-rises-160-million-first-increase-two-decades>, (access 12.09.2023).

40. International Labour Organization, *Child labour in Africa*, <https://www.ilo.org/africa/areas-of-work/child-labour/lang--en/index.htm>, (access 12.09.2023).

In Africa, agriculture constitutes 85 per cent of all child labor,<sup>41</sup> but globally it accounts for 60 per cent of child workers in the 5-17 age range.<sup>42</sup> Child laborers in agriculture are usually employed on family farms and commercial property, engaged in livestock herding, and execute a wide array of tasks. Working in agriculture can be quite strenuous for children who are still developing, and as a result, they suffer injuries ranging from mild to serious. As laborers, children are required to carry heavy loads and sometimes operate complex machinery. However, a greater threat to the health of children is exposure to pesticides.

Exposure to pesticides can lead to DNA damage, neurological disorders, poor growth, neurobehavioral deficits, hypothyroidism, and other ailments. Some countries have taken steps to mitigate these dangers by teaching staff how to assess risks for all laborers. Apart from agriculture, garment manufacturing and mining are also sectors with large numbers of child laborers. Garment manufacturing is a prominent employer of child laborers in Southeast Asia, and a recent report<sup>43</sup> likens the conditions of child laborers in the Indian textile industry to modern slavery. It argues that laborers are compelled to work for long hours and are forced to reside in dilapidated hostels. These workers are lured by promises of higher wages and superior living conditions, but instead, they receive low wages and are constantly monitored by employers. Many of these workers are from poor families, exposing them to greater mistreatment since they rarely have opportunities to advocate for themselves.

Such mistreatment has an adverse effect on the mental health of child laborers. Activists emphasize physical risks when advocating the abolition of child labor or reform, but some harms are psychosocial. According to a study by Indonesian researchers,<sup>44</sup> child workers are likely to suffer from poor mental health during adolescence and experience depression later in life. These mental health issues will pose problems for productivity and the interpersonal relationships of workers in adulthood.

But although the harms of child labor are amplified by the media, some researchers adopt a dissenting view. These dissidents posit that most tasks performed by children do not entail harm. They<sup>45</sup> marshal a litany of evidence asserting that harms associated with child labor have been exaggerated and that many farm-related tasks are harmless. These scholars paint child labor as a necessity in some societies that must be approached with caution before attempts at reform.

41. Ibidem.

42. International Labour Organization, *Child labour in agriculture*, <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Child-Labour/Child-Labour-In-Agriculture#introduction>, (access 12.09.2023).

43. M. Theuws, P. Overeem, *Flawed Fabrics: The abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry*, Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations, India Committee of the Netherlands 2014.

44. D. Jayawardana, N.V. Baryshnikova, T.C. Cheng, *The long shadow of child labour on adolescent mental health: a quantile approach*, "Empirical Economics", 2023, Vol. 64, pp. 77-97.

45. M. Dunne, S. Humphreys, C. Szyp, *Education and Work: Children's Lives in Sub-Saharan Africa*, in: *Children's Work in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Harmful and the Harmless*, eds. J. Sumberg, R. Sabates-Wheeler, Bristol University Press 2023, pp. 81-115.



These authors point out that in poor rural African communities where the quality of schooling is poor, this type of labor provides children with a superior alternative to acquire skills and contribute to community development. Indeed, other evidence asserts that school quality is an important determinant of student success; hence, mandating schooling in underdeveloped countries with low-quality education is counterproductive and leads to idleness and child poverty.<sup>46</sup> Agriculture is a critical plank of many African economies, and eliminating child labor can limit its productive potential and pose risks to food security. Therefore, abolishing child labor can lead to an economic fall-out in Africa and other places with a dependence on community agriculture. Rather than eliminating harm, the premature abolition of child labor could well amplify harm in destitute communities.

Child labor is a critical node on the path to human capital accumulation in a poor country. Unlike among the affluent, parents in poor nations must engage in trade-offs daily because many alternatives are competing for limited resources. In rich countries, the incentive to enroll children in school is greater, but in a poor country, where teachers are untrained, children and parents benefit more when children work to build professional ethics, acquire useful skills, and engage in entrepreneurial activity. Without work, youngsters become a burden to the family unit and eventually society when entering adulthood lacking useful skills.

## Conclusion

Child labor has been phased out in most first-world countries like the United States. Why? Some claim that this is due to wise, ethical legislation prohibiting the practice. We have attempted to debunk this interpretation. If the ban were implemented, say, in the twelfth century, the results on the economy would have been obviously detrimental. Instead, the reason for the gradual elimination of this type of labor, we have demonstrated, lay in the direction of increasing wealth due to better technology and more economic freedom. Then, as this phenomenon dissipated the need for child labor, legislatures attempted to gain credit for these improvements by forbidding work for younger workers.

46. J. Sarkar, D. Sarkar, *Why does child labor persist with declining poverty*, "Economic Enquiry", 2015, Vol. 54, Issue 1, pp. 139–158.

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