What Can Be Done about Child Labor?

An Overview of Recent Research and Its Implications for Designing Programs to Reduce Child Labor

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Abstract

This paper examines the research on child labor and places the phenomenon in a broader development agenda. It explains the demand for and supply of child labor, linking these factors to others such as the supply of education. Then it looks into the private and social costs of and benefits from child labor. Against this background, strategies for reducing child labor are debated.
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Bjorne Grimsrud*

1 Who and How Many

What do we mean by child labor? In this paper child labor will be used as the notion for those forms of work or labor children legally should not undertake. Hence not all work done by children can be regarded as child labor. We need to draw a line between child labor on the one hand and activities considered part of a natural socialization process on the other hand. Child laborers are those entering the labor market and taking on too much work and too many duties at too early an age. Defining the amount of work and the age will be subject to national and international regulations. Essentially, however, we understand child labor to be activities that unduly reduce children’s present welfare or future income earning capabilities, either by shrinking their future external choices or by reducing their own future individual productive capabilities (Andvig, 2001). This understanding is the basis of national and international legislation on child labor.

Three conventions, ILO Convention 138, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, form the basis for the international legal definition of child labor and the worst forms of child labor.1 The conditions set forth in the three conventions are, as mentioned above, based on the effect of the work or activity on the child and the child’s development. The work should not be

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1 All UN members except Somalia and the United States have ratified the CRC. ILO Convention 138 has been ratified by approximately 100 states. Further to this it forms a part of the so-called ILO Core Conventions, which all ILO member states have committed themselves to respect regardless of ratification. ILO Convention 182 was unanimously adopted by the ILO annual conference in 1999, and was also included in the group of core conventions.
hazardous or harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, moral, or social development. In addition, for children of primary-school age, the work or activity should not interfere with the child’s education.

Since the qualitative conditions for child labor are difficult to translate into exact measurable figures, like the number of hours worked, some guidelines are necessary to develop workable protection instruments. Part of this is left to the national legislators to decide. Both the ILO Conventions (C138 and C182) request national governments to list what they defend as worst forms or hazardous child labor. But further to this the following general age limits and conditions for child labor are set forth: 2

A child is defined as a person under 18 years of age. No person under 18 should undertake work that includes health-threatening or hazardous activities. The minimum age for legally entering the labor market as a full-time worker is set at 14 years of age for developing countries and 15 in other countries. In all cases full-time work must begin only after the age of completing compulsory education. The minimum age for entering the labor market doing light work is set at 12 for developing countries and 13 in other countries. At this age the child can do some work outside of the household provided that the work does not interfere with schooling or cause a threat to the child’s health. The child may also enter into vocational training.

If a child is under 12–13 years of age, he or she should not be active in the labor market, but may still undertake duties within the household or under the guidance of the parents and as part of the socialization process, provided the activity does not interfere with schooling or pose a health. Figure 1 illustrates the definition of child labor.

This definition of child labor and the worst forms of child labor is as describe the result of many years of international cooperation in this field. The definitions do leave several questions open but never the less provides us with the tool needed to map and analyze

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2 The Convention on the Rights of the Child covers all children under 18 years of age, but in the area of child labor it calls for minimum ages to be implemented, though it does not specify them. However, through the work of the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child, the reference in the CRC to relevant international standards on minimum ages for employment has been interpreted as being those of ILO convention 138. ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor covers all children under the age of 18; this convention refers to ILO Convention 138 as the basic child labor convention.
child labor. Some academics have questioned the definition\(^3\) but in the research community in general (see for example Rodgers, G., and G. Standing, 1981) and among national and international stakeholders the three conventions command strong support.

**Figure 1.**

**International definition of “child labor”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Up to age 18</th>
<th>Dangerous or hazardous work</th>
<th>Full-time work</th>
<th>Light work in the labor market; vocational training</th>
<th>Light work in the home under the guidance of the parents and as a part of the socialization process, provided the work does not interfere with school or threaten health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to age 14/15 or the age of completed compulsory education (if higher)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to age 12/13</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*activities listed in gray areas are considered child labor, activities in white areas are not*

Despite the existence of an international recognized definition of child labor, most analyses of the phenomenon are based on data of economically active children as a proxy for child laborer. \(^4\) Most important in this respect are the data on child labor published by the International labor Organization (ILO).

In 1995 ILO estimated that in developing countries 12 percent of children between ages 5 and 14 were working full time and an equal number part time. Among the full-time workers, boys were found to outnumber girls by three to two. The study extrapolated an estimate that worldwide at least 120 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are working full-time. The number of children working increases to 250 million if those in part-time work are included (ILO, 1996).

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\(^3\) The concept of general age limits has been criticised by some researchers. Judith Ennew (1997) put forward the view that this is based on speculative use of documentary evidence based on the folk model of childhood in industrialised countries.

\(^4\) To be defined as economically active, a person needs to have worked one hour or more in the reference week or to have been searching for work. The work performed must be in the labor market and hence excludes so-called non–labor market production, such as housework (ILO, 1990).
Using the internationally recognized definitions of child labor rather than the number of economically active children as a basis for analyzing the phenomenon makes the figure look somewhat different. In countries with low primary school enrollment, the number of economically active children will tend to be less than the number of child laborers, this because you will have a number of children then working full time in the family chore. In countries with high primary school enrollment, the number of (combined of full-time and part-time) economically active children tends to be higher than the number of child laborers, because part time economically active children legally employed will be included. .. The majority of the world’s child laborers are girls (Grimsrud, 2001); most economically active children are boys. This difference in number and gender composition is a result of children’s working in the household, activities defined by the ILO as noneconomic. The children working in their own home will make up a considerable numbers of the worlds child laborers. Comparing statistics on full time economically active children estimated by ILO (1996) to make up 12 per cent of the children in primary school age and attendance figures from UNICEF (1999) estimating that 21 per cent of the same age group are not attending school indicate that the number of non economically active child laborer may be only slightly less than the economically active group.

A second group, perhaps the largest, comprises children working the family plot or land. These children should in theory be included in the figures of working economically active children, but often they are not captured in labor market statistics.

The next important group comprises children working in more direct contact with the labor market but still in the households, such as those participating in subcontracted schemes or arrangements where the work takes place at home. Children working in their own household, at the family plot, and in subcontracting at home make up the bulk of the world’s child laborers. Andvig (2001) estimates that this group comprises something like 90 percent of all child labor in Africa. The same is probably true on the Indian subcontinent, the second most common place for child labor after Africa (Burra, 1995).

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5 As in part of the carpet manufacturing industry in Pakistan and garment manufacturing industry in India and Bangladesh (Grimsrud and Melchior, 1996).