Child Labor, 1870 - 1938

The 1900 U.S. Census revealed that approximately 2 million children were working in mills, mines, fields, factories, stores, and on city streets across the United States.

For centuries, the work of children was essential to the survival of their families.
In every culture, much of the work that children did was farm work. Many families grew their own food, and made the things they needed for everyday life themselves.
So when parents began to work on other people’s farms, in cities, factories, mines, mills and other industries, the children went to work with them.
It is hard to imagine children working long hours and either attending school infrequently or not at all.
SOME CHILDREN WHO WORK IN YOUR STATE

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR THEM?

ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FEDERAL CENSUS

Exhibit panel. New York, New York (1913 or 1914)
Although the place and type of work may have changed, the family often stayed together to work. Children worked in over 100 types of jobs.
Whether they worked in the mills,
A view of Ewen Breaker of the Pa. [Pennsylvania] Coal Co. The dust was so dense at times as to obscure the view. This dust penetrates the utmost recesses of the boy's lungs. (See labels 1927 to 1930 for names of some of these.) A kind of slave driver sometimes stands over the boys, prodding or kicking them into obedience. Location: South Pittston, Pennsylvania. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
in the coal mines


LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
A greaser in a Coal Mine. See 1835. Location: Bessie Mine, Alabama. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
Miner picking coal. Out of narrow seam (5.5 ft.) Makes $2. $9.00 a day (some days). Brown Mine, Brown, W. Va
LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
on tobacco farms,

Field-workers, Goodrich Tobacco Farm, near Gildersleeve, Conn. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
Family of L.H. Kirkpatrick, Route 1, Lawton, Okla. Children go to Mineral Wells School #39. Father, mother and five children (5, 6, 10, 11 and 12 years old) pick cotton. "We pick a bale in four days." Dovey, 5 years old, picks 15 pounds a day (average) Mother said: "She jes works fer pleasure." Ertle, 6 years, picks 20 pounds a day (average) Vonnie, 10 years, picks 50 pounds a day (average) Edward, 11 years, picks 75 pounds a day (average) Otis, 12 years, picks 75 pounds a day (average) Expect to be out of school for two weeks more picking. Father is a renter. Works part of farm on shares (gives 1/4 of cotton for rent) and part of farm he pays cash rent. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
All these children were working in the sugar beets for Louis Startz, a farmer near Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The children are brought out from the nearby town to work the beets. See Hine Report, Wisconsin Sugar Beet, July 1915. Location: Fond du Lac [vicinity], Wisconsin. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
in canneries,

Group of oyster shuckers in Barataria Canning Co. In this group are Gertrude Kohn, five years old, and Pauline ---, eight years old. Location: Biloxi, Mississippi. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
as street vendors,

Pretzel and gum vendors - Newsies are good customers. A boy sells a basketful of pretzels every afternoon at the "news" office, to the boys getting their afternoon papers. Henry Schertzer, (left) 14 yrs. old. Abel Schertzer, (right) 12 yrs. old. Sam Tumin, (centre) 10 yrs. old. Sam sells gum, often till 10 P.M. Taken at 8:15 P.M. Location: Newark, New Jersey. LOC National Child Labor Committee Photo Collection
as boot blacks,
as
newsgirls and boys,
as newsstand tenders,
as workers at home,

The wagon that delivers home work

The wagon that delivers home work (who is not the driver) is O.H. Brown, 27 Main Street, Reading Mass. These wagons (about 4 in all) are worked on commission, not owned by the factory. Location: Somerville, Massachusetts.
Stringing wooden buttons (button moulds) in a crowded home, Williamsburg, Mass. Mrs. Weeks and her children 13 years, 11 years, 7 years and her grand children 7 years, 5 years and 4 years old, all working after school, holidays, etc., stringing these button moulds. Mrs. Weeks said that the most they ever made was from $7 to $10 a month; usually less. The house was crowded up and the floor not very clean. Mrs. Weeks said that one time the children were all confined to the house by scarlet fever, and then she strung the most buttons she ever did. Location: Williamsburg, Massachusetts.
picking nuts,

Mrs. Mary Rena, 46 Laight St., 3d floor front, picking nuts with dirty baby in lap. Two neighbors helping. Girl is cracking nuts with her teeth, not an uncommon sight. Mr. Rena works on dock. New York, New York
1 P.M. Family of Onofrio Cottone, 7 Extra Pl., N.Y., finishing garments in a terribly run down tenement. The father works on the street. The three oldest children help the mother on garments. Joseph, 14, Andrew, 10, Rosie, 7, and all together they make about $2 a week when work is plenty. There are two babies. Location: [New York, New York (State)], LOT 7481, no. 3255[P&P] LC-H5-3255, LC-DIG-nclc-04305
making and stringing tags,
carrying and delivering goods between the home workers and the manufacturers,

A Load of kimonos just finished. Girl very reticent. Thompson St., New York, New York
life as a working child was not easy.
The conditions in which these children worked were often bad, no matter where they worked.
Things that child workers made in their homes.

Part of exhibit, New York Child Labor and Consumers League. New York, New York
Exhibit Panels condemning children working at home
Children and adults protested against child labor.
There were many attempts to pass laws that would change or regulate child labor.

1832 New England unions condemn child labor
The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen resolve that “Children should not be allowed to labor in the factories from morning till night, without any time for healthy recreation and mental culture,” for it “endangers their . . . well-being and health”

1836 Early trade unions propose state minimum age laws
Union members at the National Trades’ Union Convention make the first formal, public proposal recommending that states establish minimum ages for factory work

1836 First state child labor law
Massachusetts requires children under 15 working in factories to attend school at least 3 months/year

1842 States begin limiting children’s work days
Massachusetts limits children’s work days to 10 hours; other states soon pass similar laws—but most of these laws are not consistently enforced

1876 Labor movement urges minimum age law
Working Men’s Party proposes banning the employment of children under the age of 14
1881 Newly formed AFL supports state minimum age laws
The first national convention of the American Federation of Labor passes a resolution calling on states to ban children under 14 from all gainful employment

1883 New York unions win state reform
Led by Samuel Gompers, the New York labor movement successfully sponsors legislation prohibiting cigar making in tenements, where thousands of young children work in the trade

1892 Democrats adopt union recommendations
Democratic Party adopts platform plank based on union recommendations to ban factory employment for children under 15

1904 National Child Labor Committee forms
Aggressive national campaign for federal child labor law reform begins

1916 New federal law sanctions state violators
First federal child labor law prohibits movement of goods across state lines if minimum age laws are violated (law in effect only until 1918, when it’s declared unconstitutional, then revised, passed, and declared unconstitutional again)
1924 First attempt to gain federal regulation fails
Congress passes a constitutional amendment giving the federal government authority to
regulate child labor, but too few states ratify it and it never takes effect

1936 Federal purchasing law passes
Walsh-Healey Act states U.S. government will not purchase goods made by underage children

1937 Second attempt to gain federal regulation fails
Second attempt to ratify constitutional amendment giving federal government authority to
regulate child labor falls just short of getting necessary votes

1937 New federal law sanctions growers
Sugar Act makes sugar beet growers ineligible for benefit payments if they violate state
minimum age and hours of work standards

1938 Federal regulation of child labor achieved in Fair Labor Standards Act
For the first time, minimum ages of employment and hours of work for children are regulated by
federal law

Excerpted from
http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/about/us_history.html
In 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act placed limits on many forms of child labor and regulated other types of labor in different ways.
The Fair Labor Standards Act was declared constitutional in 1941 by the U.S. Supreme Court. This act set

1. a work week of 40 hours.
2. a minimum wage of 40 cents per hour.
3. age 18 as the minimum age for work in industries classified as hazardous. No minimum age was set for non-hazardous agricultural employment after school hours and during vacations. Children aged 14 and 15 could be employed in non-manufacturing, non-mining, and non-hazardous occupations outside of school hours and during vacations for limited hours.

It prohibited

1. child labor for children under age 16 while allowing minors 16 and over to work in non-hazardous occupations.
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http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/nclchtml/nclcarrange.html
National Child Labor Committee (Lewis Hine Photographs)

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