

COVID-19 and the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Addressing Increased Vulnerability Around the World

Due to COVID-19, communities worldwide, particularly in developing countries, are facing heightened economic and social pressures that deepen the vulnerability of children to the worst forms of child labor.¹

Outlined below are some of the key factors increasing the risk of child labor exploitation. Following these factors are suggested actions for governments and other stakeholders to take to protect children from being victimized in the worst forms of child labor during the pandemic.

International COVID-19 factors that increase vulnerability to the worst forms of child labor

- **Furlough/Job Loss.** As formal sector employers close businesses to adhere to social distancing guidelines, some are laying off/furloughing employees, leaving an employment vacuum. This is likely to expand the world's already significant informal sector, which has documented high levels of child labor exploitation.² Unscrupulous employers operating in the informal sector are likely to further increase their economic activities to take advantage of this vacuum. Workers laid off/furloughed from formal sector jobs and their children are vulnerable to being lured into unregulated informal sector jobs.
- **Family Illness.** Adults are more vulnerable to dying from COVID-19 than children.³ Deaths of adult wage earners are likely to place increased pressure on children to work to support the family. These children are likely to find employment in informal sector jobs. Moreover, as adults pass away, children who are orphaned will be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

¹ The U.S. Department of Labor uses the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 definition of the Worst Forms of Child Labor : “(a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;(c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.” United Nations General Assembly, *Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (New York: United Nations, 1999), accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182.

² The ILO estimates that more than 60% of the world's workers are in the informal economy, where the majority are denied decent working conditions, rights and social protection. The International Labour Organization, *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture. Third edition* (Geneva, 2018), accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang-en/index.htm.

³ Jonas F. Ludvigsson, *Systematic Review of COVID-19 in children shows milder cases and a better prognosis than adults* (Acta Paediatrica, March 20, 2020), accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340100284_Systematic_review_of_COVID19_in_children_show_milder_cases_and_a_better_prognosis_than_adults.

- **Increased Medical Costs.** Healthcare costs for family members with COVID-19 will intensify financial stress on households, increasing pressure on children to work.
- **School closures.** To stem the transmission of COVID-19, schools are closing. With more children idle in the home, families desperate for income are more likely to put their children to work.
- **Decreased Food Security.** Many children in developing countries depend on schools for meals. With schools closed, families may encourage children to work—even in harmful conditions. Children may work to earn money for food, or on farms in exchange for food if farm owners are facing cash shortages due to decreased business stemming from COVID-19. Moreover, food insecurity can trigger or exacerbate conflict. This is likely to occur in countries prone to using child soldiers or with large populations of already vulnerable children displaced by protracted strife.
- **Increased Domestic Violence.** Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increased reports of domestic abuse, which is a key reason children run away from home. Many runaway children end up living in the street, where they are vulnerable to exploitation—particularly in the commercial sex industry.
- **Fewer Labor Inspections.** As many foreign government employees shelter at home worldwide, labor inspectorates are performing fewer in-person work site inspections. As a result, more child labor violations will go undetected and unaddressed.

Suggested possible actions by governments and other stakeholders

- **Incorporate child labor education into broader COVID-19 awareness efforts.** As governments and civil society actors educate communities about protective actions against COVID-19, such as social distancing and frequent hand washing, incorporate information about the increased vulnerability of children to labor exploitation during the pandemic into this messaging. Emphasize the negative long and short-term health and financial impacts of the worst forms of child labor on children, families, and communities, and provide resources to help combat it.
- **Condition financial assistance on a commitment to protect children.** As stakeholders make increased financial assistance available to needy families, to the extent possible, condition benefits on a commitment from beneficiaries to protect their children from child labor exploitation.
- **Integrate materials about child labor into at-home learning resources.** . As governments and schools develop and disseminate hard copy and online at-home learning resources, include information on child labor exploitation. Provide reader-friendly data to children, parents, and extended family members on the increased risk of child labor exploitation during COVID-19, the short and long-term negative impacts, and resources to prevent and address it.

- **Combine anti-child labor messaging with food security efforts.** Schools that continue to make meals available to children in poor families can aim to incorporate pro-education/anti-child labor messaging into meal distribution routines. For example, banners marking food distribution sites can exhibit slogans promoting remote educational resources and condemning child labor. This messaging can also be visible on the sides and backs of trucks carrying food boxes to communities. In times of need, such as COVID-19, such banners and food trucks are likely to draw substantial, captive audiences. The same strategy can be incorporated into food distribution routines in humanitarian aid efforts in conflict-affected environments.
- **Train COVID-19 medical first responders about child labor exploitation.** Increasingly, governments and other stakeholders are working to connect families to free or low-cost COVID-19 health services. Incorporate into these efforts training for medical first responders about child labor exploitation. Ensure that first responders know how to talk with patients and their families to identify homes with children at risk of, or engaged in, the worst forms of child labor. Moreover, equip medical workers to provide families with resources to address this exploitation.
- **Train mental health first responders about child labor exploitation.** Establish, where possible, remote options via telephone or online, for community members to report domestic violence to mental health professionals who can intervene. As part of this effort, train mental health first responders to engage with their beneficiaries to identify homes with children at risk of, or engaged in, the worst forms of child labor and to provide them with resources to combat this exploitation.
- **Explore remote labor inspection options.** Research the feasibility of applying innovative new approaches, such as satellite and mobile application technology, to conduct remote child labor inspections at work sites.