

Population & Societies

Child labour affects 138 million children worldwide—and far more counting domestic work

Andrea Verhulst-Georgoulis*, Estelle Laurière*, Fengqing Chao**

Close to 138 million children around the world are subject to child labour. Child labour is not always easy to detect or to measure. How do international organizations define and measure child labour? How is domestic work taken into account? To tackle this critical issue, the authors propose a new database for better observation and monitoring of child labour patterns.⁽¹⁾

According to a recent joint report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [1], 137.6 million children in the world aged 5 to 17 are in child labour; that is, 7.8% of all children in this age group. Of these children, 55.5% are boys. However, these figures exclude the domestic work carried out by children for their family. Such household chores can represent a large number of hours, particularly for girls. How many children participate in household chores across the world, and what daily workload does it represent? How should the definition of child labour be expanded to include this domestic work?

Child labour according to the ILO

The ILO defines child labour as “work that children are too young to perform and/or work that, by its nature, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals” [1, p 12]. It is a sub-category of economic work⁽²⁾ prohibited under international standards.

A child is considered to be in child labour if they perform at least a certain number of hours of economic activity per week, a threshold that varies with their age: at least 1 hour per week if they are aged 5 to 11, at least 14 hours for those aged 12 to 14, and at least 43 hours a week for 15- to 17-year-olds. The definition of child labour also includes economic work done by minors aged 5 to 17 if it exposes them to significant hazards, regardless of the number of hours worked. Hazardous

work is measured using a list of working conditions (for example, exposure to high temperatures or toxic products) and industry sectors, such as construction or mining. Lastly, the ILO definition includes the “worst forms” of child labour, which include slavery and forced work, the use of child soldiers, sexual exploitation, and child participation in other illicit activities such as drug trafficking.

Child labour is measured using household survey questionnaires: an adult has to indicate, for a list of productive activities, how long the child spent doing each of them during the previous week. The Child Labour Database developed at INED (hereinafter CLD-INED, see Box 1), aims to serve as a tool for in-depth analyses of these data. The worst forms of child labour are generally studied separately and are not usually included in figures on child labour. Rates have already been estimated by the ILO, however, and they appear to impact less than 5% of the total number of children in child labour [2].

Child labour rates have fallen, but not everywhere and not among the youngest children

According to the ILO-UNICEF joint report, the number of children in child labour has fallen substantially, from 215.2 million in 2008 to 137.6 million in 2024 (Figure 1), or 13.6% to 7.8% globally among 5- to 17-year-olds [1]. Furthermore, between 2008 and 2024, rates of hazardous work fell from 7.3% to 3.1% among children aged 5 to 17.

In 2024, 79 million children aged 5 to 11 were in child labour, corresponding to 8.2% of this age group. This proportion has remained stable since 2012 in children aged 5 to 11, while child labour rates have fallen among older children. These figures remain a long way off the goal to end child labour in 2025, set

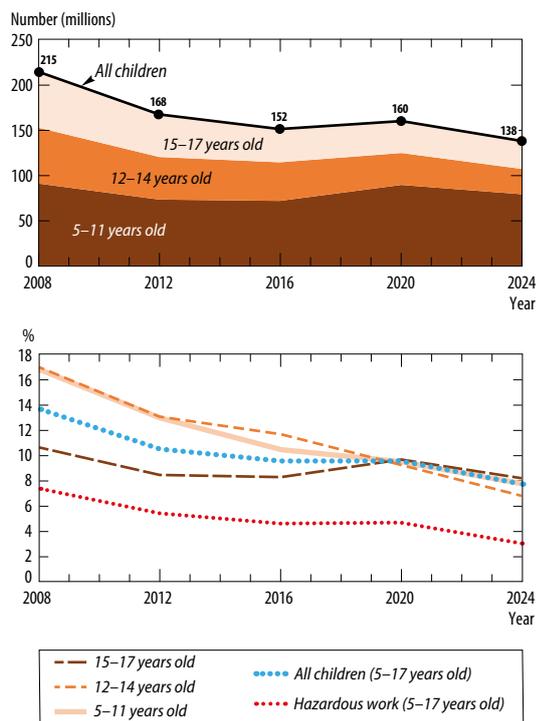
(1) Data for the tables and figures are available in Excel format in the ‘Related documents’ tab on [INED's web page](#) for *Population & Societies*.

(2) Economic work corresponds to the market production of goods or services. Production for household consumption, on the other hand, is considered optional by the ILO when defining child labour.

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Figure 1. Children aged 5–17 in child labour by age group (number and %)



A. Verhulst-Georgoulis, E. Laurière, F. Chao, *Population & Societies*, 641, February 2026, INED.
Note: These estimations only account for economic work.
Source: ILO and UNICEF [1].

by the United Nations as part of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.⁽³⁾

Child labour remains primarily concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 87 million children aged 5 to 17 affected there as of 2024 (Figure 2). This figure has increased since 2012, principally due to population growth. The relative proportion of children affected in this region has, on the other hand, slightly decreased since 2020. In Asia and the Pacific, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean, there has been a much clearer reduction in child labour.

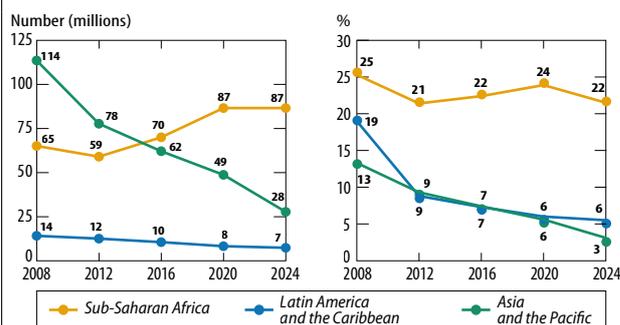
In high-income countries (according to the World Bank classification), child labour affected less than 1% of children in 2024 and mostly involved children between 15 and 17. However, relatively high rates of child labour can be observed in certain middle-income countries of Europe, particularly in the Balkans and Eastern Europe (see Box 2).

Participation in household chores is rarely counted

The Global Estimates published in the ILO–UNICEF report are based exclusively on economic work. However, a significant proportion of children’s productive activities comprises “non-economic” work, particularly domestic work performed for the family. This domestic work includes all household chores, such as the collection of water or firewood, cleaning, cooking, and looking after young children or older members of the household.

(3) Goal 8.7 of the SDG aims to end child labour in all its forms.

Figure 2. Children aged 5–17 in child labour by region (number and %)

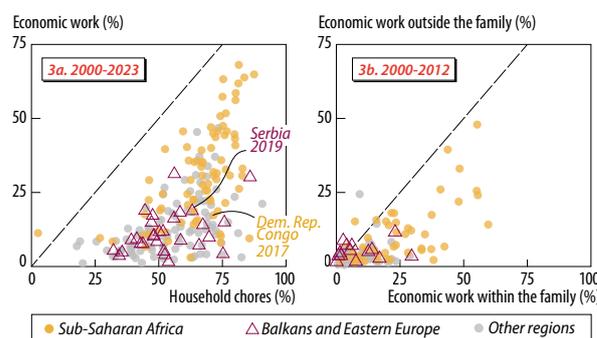


A. Verhulst-Georgoulis, E. Laurière, F. Chao, *Population & Societies*, 641, February 2026, INED.
Note: These estimations only account for economic work.
Source: ILO and UNICEF, 2025.

The data collected in the CLD–INED database now enables us to measure how much household work is done by children aged 5 to 14 in 90 countries, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) conducted between 2000 and 2023. Among children in this age range, participation in household chores is much more widespread than economic work (Figure 3a). Furthermore, in the Balkans and Eastern Europe we see relatively high rates of child engagement in work (both economic and non-economic), somewhat comparable to those seen in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Between 2000 and 2012, the same data were used to identify whether the economic work was performed within a family setting (e.g., a family farm or business) or for an external third party. With a few exceptions, particularly the Balkans and Eastern Europe, engagement in economic work for the family remained more common than economic work performed externally (Figure 3b).

Figure 3. Children aged 5–14 participating in productive activities for at least 1 hour per week (%)

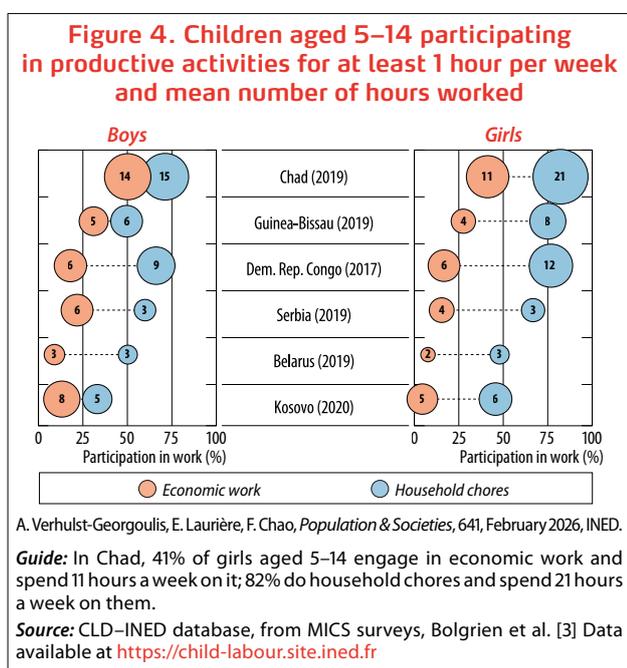


A. Verhulst-Georgoulis, E. Laurière, F. Chao, *Population & Societies*, 641, February 2026, INED.
Guide: In Serbia in 2019, 19% of children aged 5 to 14 spent at least 1 hour per week doing economic work (this proportion increases to 63% among the same age group for household chores). A point located under the diagonal line therefore indicates that child participation in household chores is higher than it is in economic work. In Figure 3b, a point situated under the diagonal line indicates that child participation in economic work is more common within the family setting than outside it.
Note: Each point corresponds to a country and a year. The category “Other regions” includes Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, and North Africa.
Source: CLD–INED database, from MICS surveys, Bolgrien et al. [3]. Data available at <https://child-labour.site.ined.fr>

Household chores as a proportion of total working hours

As we have seen, children who perform economic activities primarily do so within a family setting, where they are also required to help with household chores. Depending on how long they take, these chores can be detrimental to the well-being and development of children, and particularly to their schooling [2]. It is therefore important to analyse how much time they spend on these chores.

Household chores can represent a very large number of hours—sometimes more hours than are spent on economic work—, particularly in African countries, as shown in Figure 4 for six African and European countries. On average, girls spend more time on them, while boys are more heavily involved in economic work.



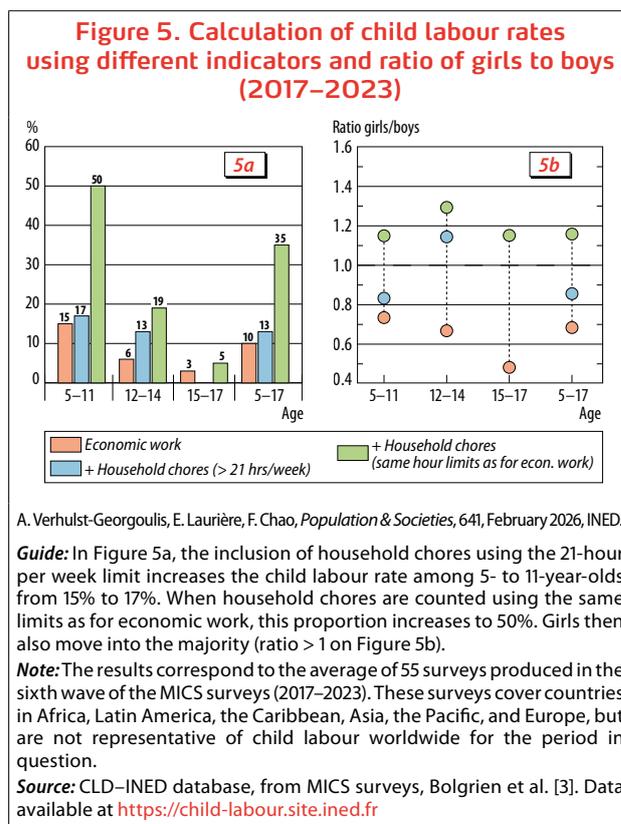
International comparisons also reveal wide disparities. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, the mean number of hours worked is around 3 times higher in Chad than in Guinea-Bissau. Likewise, while the figures for Serbia show, for boys, a similar volume of economic work to that seen in Democratic Republic of the Congo, the time spent on household chores is 3 times lower. Such marked disparities also emerge within Europe, particularly between Belarus and Kosovo.

How should the definition of child labour be expanded to include household chores?

In order to integrate household work into the measurement of child labour, the United Nations uses an indicator within its SDGs. This is based on counting the number of children who perform economic work for more hours per week than the ILO limits; it then adds children aged 5 to 14 spending at least 21 hours per week on household chores (which are not counted for children aged 15 or over).

Figure 5 shows the proportion of children engaged in work (and the ratio of girls to boys), with and without the inclusion of household chores. When we include children who perform at least 21 hours of household work, rates of child labour increase from 15% to 17% among children aged 5 to 11. The difference is more marked among children aged 12 to 14, many of whom, particularly girls, work at least this volume of hours.

Since the 21-hour threshold for the inclusion of household chores is very high,⁽⁴⁾ we are also proposing a second indicator based on the same age-specific hour limits used for economic work. Using this second indicator, the rate of child labour among children aged 5 to 17 is 3 times higher than with the usual indicator that only considers economic work, and reveals far higher rates in girls than in boys.



The indicators used in the ILO–UNICEF report provide insights into patterns of child labour across the world. However, the exclusion of household chores is a major gap, given how widespread child engagement in these chores is worldwide and how significant they are in the lives of children; as a result, a significant proportion of children’s work is rendered invisible, the type of work most often done by girls. The ILO [4] recognizes this shortcoming, which could be addressed by establishing thresholds for working hours deemed excessive.

However, no consensus has been reached on this measure. It is generally accepted that children’s participation in

(4) In effect, a 10-year-old child who helps at the family farm for 1 hour per week would be counted as being in child labour, whereas he would not be counted if he spends 20 hours per week cleaning, preparing meals, or looking after his brothers and sisters.

Box 1. The Child Labour Database (CLD–INED)

Accessible online and regularly updated (<https://child-labour.site.ined.fr>), the Child Labour Database (CLD–INED) is a tool for the in-depth analysis of existing data using various definitions.

The statistics on child labour are primarily derived from household surveys conducted at irregular intervals, and generally representative at national level. Some of these address the subject specifically, such as Child Labour Surveys (CLS); others cover a broader range of topics and include a module on child labour. Surveys of the latter type include UNICEF’s Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and large numbers of national socio-economic surveys.

To date, this database includes most of the MICS surveys with a module on child labour: 208 surveys conducted in 90 countries between 2000 and 2023, the variables of which have been harmonized by the IPUMS project [3].

Based on these data, we are developing and documenting a set of indicators using various definitions of child labour. The CLD–INED database aims to provide, at different geographical levels, measurements with a high level of detail by age, gender, type of work (economic or non-economic), and volume of hours.

household chores, provided it remains limited to a reasonable number of hours and does not present any risks, helps their development and encourages their socialization [4].

The definition of child labour is critical: it determines who is counted and recognized, and how public policies and intervention programmes protect children [5]. With this in mind, the CLD–INED database aims to document this phenomenon based on a range of definitions, in turn gaining more insight into what the figures reveal and what they overlook.

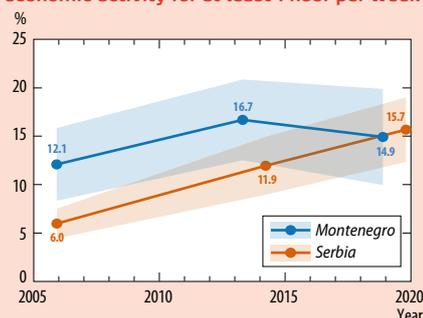
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Box 2. Child labour in Europe

The ILO estimates that, as of 2020, 3.6 million European children aged 5 to 17 years were in child labour [6]. The majority of these children are concentrated in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. The data available in the CLD–INED database reveal high rates of participation in economic work, as well as large increases in Montenegro and Serbia (Figure). The largest increase is observed in Serbia, among 5- to 11-year-olds, where the proportion of these children engaged in economic activity rose from 6.0% to 15.7% between 2005 and 2019. In Montenegro, work participation rates remained high but fairly stable over the same period (the increase observed before 2015 is not statistically significant).

Figure. Children aged 5–11 participating in economic activity for at least 1 hour per week (%)



A. Verhulst-Georgoulis, E. Laurière, F. Chao, *Population & Societies*, 641, February 2026, INED.

Note: The coloured areas represent margins of error.
Source: CLD–INED database, from MICS surveys, Bolgrien et al. [3]. Data available at <https://child-labour.site.ined.fr/>

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Abstract

Close to 138 million children aged 5 to 17 around the world are in child labour, according to a joint report published by the ILO and UNICEF in 2025. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most strongly affected region, with 87 million children there in child labour. However, it is also an issue in certain regions of Europe, such as the Balkans. These estimates, moreover, are based on a strictly economic definition of work and exclude a large proportion of the domestic work performed by children. The Child Labour Database (CLD–INED), on the other hand, highlights the significant engagement of children across the globe in household chores, as well as the large workload that such chores represent for children, particularly girls.

Keywords

Child labour, domestic work, household chores, economic work, CLD–INED database



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