CHILD LABOR

IN THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

CARICOM







PREPARED BY :

FREE THE SLAVES

THE CHALLENGE

Across the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), nearly one in eight children is engaged in child labour. The majority of these children, some 58%, are between the ages of 5 and 11 (ILO, 2024a). They work in domestic service, small-scale trade, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and mining. In the most severe cases, children are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, recruited into criminal organisations, or exposed to hazardous conditions that put their health and safety at serious risk.

This is not a problem with a single cause. Poverty, limited access to education, family instability, unsafe migration, and longstanding cultural norms all play a role, creating environments where exploitation becomes more likely and harder to prevent. Understanding how these conditions interact is a critical first step toward changing them.

This fact sheet covers the 15 CARICOM member states: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

WHAT CHILD LABOUR DOES TO CHILDREN

When a child is pulled into labour, the effects reach into every part of their life. The harm is not limited to the hours they spend working. It reshapes their health, their relationships, their access to education, and their prospects for the future.



Their bodies pay the price. Children engaged in hazardous work are exposed to conditions no child should face: dust and chemical fumes, extreme heat, heavy physical loads, dangerous machinery, and prolonged hours of physically demanding activity. In sectors like mining, construction, and agriculture, the risk of serious injury is constant. In some settings, children are also exposed to sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. The physical consequences can include chronic pain, respiratory illness, impaired growth, and lasting disability. The psychological toll, including anxiety, depression, and trauma, can be just as severe and often goes unaddressed (European Commission, 2021b; Iqbal et al., 2021).



Their social world shrinks. Childhood is when people form their first friendships, learn to navigate social situations, and begin to develop a sense of who they are. Children who spend their days working miss out on these experiences. They have less time to play, less contact with peers, and fewer opportunities to take part in the kinds of group activities that build confidence and social skills. Over time, this can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth, effects that often carry into adulthood (Trinh, 2020).



Their education suffers, and so do their options. Child labour and schooling are difficult to combine. Children who work are less likely to attend school consistently and far more likely to drop out altogether. Even those who manage to stay enrolled often miss classes, arrive exhausted, or fall behind their peers. The result is that child labour does not just take away a child's present; it narrows the range of what is possible for their future. Lower educational attainment means fewer job opportunities, lower lifetime earnings, and reduced ability to break free from the conditions that led to exploitation in the first place (European Commission, 2021a).



The cycle passes to the next generation. One of the most troubling aspects of child labour is how self-reinforcing it can be. Research consistently shows that children whose parents were child labourers are more likely to enter the workforce early themselves. When one child in a household starts working, siblings often follow, particularly when the family is under economic pressure with few alternatives available. Without deliberate intervention, these patterns repeat across generations, embedding child labour not as an exception but as a structural feature of how families and communities survive (Thévenon and Edmonds, 2019).

WHAT DRIVES CHILD LABOUR IN THE CARIBBEAN

There is no single explanation for child labour in the region. Instead, several conditions overlap and reinforce one another, creating environments where children are more vulnerable to exploitation.

Poverty is the most persistent and pervasive driver. When families face financial hardship, children are often the first to be called upon to contribute, whether by earning income directly or by taking on household responsibilities so that adults can work. During economic downturns, natural disasters, or public health crises, these pressures intensify. For many families, the question is not whether to send a child to work, but whether the household can survive if they do not. This dynamic is especially acute in communities where social protection systems are weak or inaccessible, leaving families without a safety net when conditions deteriorate (ILO, 2024b).

Gaps in education leave children without a viable alternative to work. Across the Caribbean, access to quality education remains uneven. In rural communities especially, secondary schools may be distant, under-resourced, or poorly staffed. School-related costs, including uniforms, supplies, and transportation, can be prohibitive for low-income families. When the quality of available schooling is low or the barriers to attending are high, parents may see little return on keeping a child in the classroom. Higher dropout rates in underserved areas directly correlate with higher rates of children entering agriculture, fishing, domestic service, and other forms of informal work at a young age (ILO, 2024b).

Family instability and violence push children out of the home and into work. Children who experience or witness domestic violence, neglect, or the breakdown of family structures may leave home with no financial support and no safety net. In these circumstances, children are forced to become economically independent before they are developmentally ready to do so, making them highly susceptible to exploitative work arrangements, trafficking, and involvement in illicit activities. The absence of adequate child protection systems in some CARICOM countries means these children often fall through the cracks (ILO, 2024b).

Migration adds another layer of vulnerability. The Caribbean is a region of significant migration, both within and across national borders. Migrant families frequently face unstable incomes, precarious housing, limited access to social protection, and bureaucratic barriers to enrolling children in school or accessing public services. Children in these households may be drawn into informal or exploitative work simply because the family lacks the documentation, resources, or networks to access alternatives. For unaccompanied or separated migrant children, the risks are even greater (Marcus et al., 2021).

Cultural norms can make child labour harder to recognise. In many Caribbean communities, it is common and expected for children to help out on the family farm, assist with fishing, work in a parent's shop, or learn a trade through informal apprenticeship. These traditions are deeply valued and are often seen as positive ways for children to develop responsibility, practical skills, and a work ethic. In many cases, this participation is age-appropriate and safe. However, the line between a child helping out and a child being exploited is not always clear, and cultural acceptance of children's work can make it more difficult for communities, service providers, and even families themselves to recognise when that line has been crossed. This is precisely why prevention and awareness efforts must be culturally informed, working with communities rather than against their values, to help distinguish between participation that supports a child's development and work that harms it (ILO, 2024b).



REGIONAL OVERVIEW

According to ILO estimates, more boys than girls appear in child labour statistics, with the widest gap among those aged 15 to 17 (ILO-UNICEF, 2024). However, this does not necessarily mean fewer girls are affected. Girls often perform unpaid household and care work that goes unrecorded and is therefore missing from the data (ILO and Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour, 2025).

Across the region, child labour is most common in the service sector, including domestic work and small-scale trade. Children also work in agriculture and in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and mining (ILO-UNICEF, 2024).



WHERE THE SITUATION IS MOST CONCERNING

While child labour affects the entire CARICOM region, available data points to particularly serious challenges in six countries.



Belize. Nearly one in eight children is engaged in child labour, with the highest rates among those aged 5 to 11 and children from the poorest households (UNICEF, 2024). There are reports of commercial sexual exploitation, children's involvement in drug and contraband trafficking, and hazardous work in agriculture, construction, and fishing (U.S. Department of Labour, 2024a).



Guyana. Child labour is most prevalent among children aged 5 to 11, particularly in rural areas and poor households (UNICEF, 2023a). Documented concerns include child sexual exploitation and hazardous work in agriculture, mining, construction, domestic work, welding, street vending, and begging (U.S. Department of Labour, 2024b).



Haiti. Child labour is widespread in agriculture, fisheries, construction, domestic work, street vending, begging, and car washing. Children have also been found in commercial sexual exploitation and drug trafficking, and some have been recruited by armed groups (U.S. Department of Labour, 2024c).



Jamaica. Around 4% of children aged 5 to 17 are in child labour, with higher rates in rural areas and among younger children (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2023). Hazardous work persists in agriculture and industry, and children are found in commercial sexual exploitation, forced domestic work, forced begging, and criminal recruitment. Children's involvement in financial scams and drug and gun trafficking is a growing concern (U.S. Department of Labour, 2024d).



Suriname. Roughly 6% of children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in child labour, with significantly higher rates among the poorest households and in rural interior areas (Ministry of Social Affairs and Public Housing, 2020). Children work in gold mining, construction, forestry, and agriculture. The worst forms include commercial sexual exploitation, involvement in narcotics sales, and hazardous street-based work (U.S. Department of Labour, 2024e).



Trinidad and Tobago. About 4% of children aged 5 to 17 are in child labour, with higher rates in urban areas and among younger children. Children from poor households are more than twice as likely to be affected. Around 3% of working children face hazardous conditions, including dust, fumes, extreme temperatures, loud noise, vibration, and heavy physical loads (UNICEF, 2023b).



LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

All 15 CARICOM member states have ratified the two foundational ILO conventions on child labour.

ILO Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999) requires states to act urgently to ban and eliminate the most serious forms of child labour.

ILO Convention No. 138 (Minimum Age, 1973) requires member states to set a minimum working age and adopt national policies to progressively raise it, protecting children's development and their right to education.

Every CARICOM member state has also passed national legislation addressing child labour, though in some cases these laws do not fully align with international standards. The table below summarises the minimum employment age and key legislation in each country.

CARICOM Member State	Minimum Age	Key National Legislation
Antigua and Barbuda	16	1975 Labour Code
Bahamas	14	2001 Employment Act; 2007 Child Protection Act
Barbados	16	2012 Employment Rights Act
Belize	14	2020 Labour Act; 2022 National Child Labour Policy and Strategy
Dominica	14	1977 Labour Standards Act; 2001 Child Abuse Prevention legislation
Grenada	16	2001 Employment Act
Guyana	15	1942 Labour Act
Haiti	15	1961 Labour Code
Jamaica	15	1961 Shops and Offices Act
Montserrat	14	2012 Labour Code
Saint Kitts and Nevis	16	1986 Protection of Employment Act; 2013 Child Justice Act
Saint Lucia	15	2006 Labour Code
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	14	1935 Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act; 2003 Protection of Employment Act
Suriname	16	1963 Labour Act (Arbeidswet)
Trinidad and Tobago	16	2007 Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Act

KEY TERMS

Child. A person under the age of 18 (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999).

Minimum age. The legal age at which a child may be employed. While each state sets its own threshold, ILO Convention No. 138 identifies 15 as the baseline (Minimum Age Convention, 1973).

Child labour. Work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development. This includes work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous, as well as work that interferes with schooling, whether by preventing attendance, forcing early withdrawal, or requiring children to combine school with excessively long hours of work (ILO, 2025).

Worst forms of child labour (WFCL). As defined by ILO Convention No. 182, these include all forms of slavery and similar practices (such as trafficking, debt bondage, and forced recruitment into armed conflict); the use of children for prostitution or pornography; the use of children for illicit activities such as drug production and trafficking; and any work that is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.

Worst forms of child labor that are CHILD SLAVERY		**Worst forms of child labor**		**Hazardous child labor**	**Work done by children**
Using, procuring or offering a child for indentured servitude or servitude, forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for armed conflict.	Using, procuring or offering a child for prostitution, to produce pornography or for pornographic performances.	Using, 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.	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	Labour that jeopardizes the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child, either because of its nature or because of the conditions in which it is carried out, is known as “hazardous work.”	Does not affect health, personal development or schooling; work that provides skills, experience and responsibilities.

LOOKING AHEAD

Child labour in the Caribbean is not inevitable. It is the product of conditions that can be changed, and in many cases, the legal foundations for that change already exist. Every CARICOM member state has ratified the core international conventions and passed domestic legislation addressing child labour. The challenge now is closing the gap between what the law says and what children actually experience.

That means strengthening enforcement, aligning national laws with international standards, and expanding access to quality education, especially in rural and underserved communities where school needs to be a real and consistent alternative to work. It means investing in social protection so that families are not forced to depend on their children's labour to survive. And it means approaching prevention in ways that respect local cultures and engage communities as partners in the solution.

No single action will be enough. But when governments, civil society, communities, and international institutions work together, grounded in evidence and guided by the experiences of those most affected, lasting change is possible.







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