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The minimal role of child labor in the United States today is one of the more remarkable changes in the social and economic life of the nation over the last two centuries. In colonial America, child labor was not a subject of controversy. It was an integral part of the agricultural and handicraft economy. Children not only worked on the family farm but were often hired out to other farmers. Boys customarily began their apprenticeship in a trade between ages ten and fourteen. Both types of child labor declined in the early nineteenth century, but factory employment provided a new opportunity for children. Ultimately, young women and adult immigrants replaced these children in the textile industry, but child labor continued in other businesses. They could be paid lower wages, were more tractable and easily managed than adults, and were very difficult for unions to organize.

The educational reformers of the mid-nineteenth century convinced many among the native-born population that primary school education was a necessity for both personal fulfillment and the advancement of the nation. This led several states to establish a minimum wage for labor and minimal requirements for school attendance. These laws had many loopholes, however, and were in place in only some states where they were laxly enforced. In addition, the influx of immigrants, beginning with the Irish in the 1840s and continuing after 1880 with groups from southern and eastern Europe, provided a new pool of child workers. Many of these immigrants came from a rural background, and they had much the same attitude toward child labor as Americans had in the eighteenth century.

The new supply of child workers was matched by a tremendous expansion of American industry in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that increased the jobs suitable for children. The two factors led to a rise in the percentage of children ten to fifteen years of age who were gainfully employed. Although the official figure of 1.75 million significantly understates the true number, it indicates that at least 18 percent of these children were employed in 1900. In southern cotton mills, 25 percent of the employees were below the age of fifteen, with half of these children below age twelve. In addition, the horrendous conditions of work for many child laborers brought the issue to public attention.

Determined efforts to regulate or eliminate child labor have been a feature of social reform in the United States since 1900. The leaders in this effort were the National Child Labor Committee, organized in 1904, and the many state child labor committees. These organizations, gradualist in philosophy and thus prepared to accept what was achievable even if not theoretically sufficient, employed flexible tactics and were able to withstand the frustration of defeats and slow progress. The committees pioneered the techniques of mass political action, including investigations by experts, the widespread use of photography to dramatize the poor conditions of children at work, pamphlets, leaflets, and mass mailings to reach the public, and sophisticated lobbying. Despite these activities, success depended heavily on the political climate in the nation as well as developments that reduced the need or desirability of child labor.
During the period from 1902 to 1915, child labor committees emphasized reform through state legislatures. Many laws restricting child labor were passed as part of the progressive reform movement of this period. But the gaps that remained, particularly in the southern states, led to a decision to work for a federal child labor law. Congress passed such laws in 1916 and 1918, but the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional.

The opponents of child labor then sought a constitutional amendment authorizing federal child labor legislation. Congress passed such an amendment in 1924, but the conservative political climate of the 1920s, together with opposition from some church groups and farm organizations that feared a possible increase of federal power in areas related to children, prevented many states from ratifying it.

The Great Depression changed political attitudes in the United States significantly, and child labor reform benefited. Almost all of the codes developed under the National Industrial Recovery Act served to reduce child labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which for the first time set national minimum wage and maximum hour standards for workers in interstate commerce, also placed limitations on child labor. In effect, the employment of children under sixteen years of age was prohibited in manufacturing and mining.

This success arose not only from popular hostility to child labor, generated in no small measure by the long-term work of the child labor committees and the climate of reform in the New Deal period, but also from the desire of Americans in a period of high unemployment to open jobs held by children to adults.

Other factors also contributed in a major way to the decline of child labor. New types of machinery cut into the use of children in two ways. Many simple tasks done by children were mechanized, and semiskilled adults became necessary for the most efficient use of the equipment. In addition, jobs of all sorts increasingly required higher educational levels. The states responded by increasing the number of years of schooling required, lengthening the school year, and enforcing truancy laws more effectively. The need for education was so clear that Congress in 1949 amended the child labor law to include businesses not covered in 1938, principally commercial agriculture, transportation, communications, and public utilities.

Although child labor has been substantially eliminated, it still poses a problem in a few areas of the economy. Violations of the child labor laws continue among economically impoverished migrant agricultural workers. Employers in the garment industry in New York City have turned to the children of illegal immigrants in an effort to compete with imports from low-wage nations. The recent liberalization of the federal government’s rules concerning work done at home also increases the likelihood of illegal child labor. Finally, despite the existing laws limiting the number of hours of work for those still attending school, some children continue to labor an excessive number of hours or hold prohibited jobs. Effectiveness in enforcement varies from state to state. Clearly, the United States has not yet eliminated all the abuses and violations, but it has met the objective of the child labor reformers and determined by law and general practice that children shall not be full-time workers.

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