



## Does prohibiting child labor increase secondary school enrolment? Insights from a new global dataset

### Background

Studies have shown that completing secondary school has a positive impact on individuals' income, employment, and health outcomes across a wide range of economies.

At a population level, increasing completion of secondary education has significant economic benefits. For example, closing the gender gap in secondary school completion across 65 low- and middle-income countries would boost global GDP by \$92 billion per year.

However, according to UNESCO, 74 million secondary-aged youth were out of school in 2008, putting them at a lifelong disadvantage in employment, earnings, and health outcomes.

For the world's 215 million child laborers, work may pose an obstacle to school completion. For example, a study in Ghana found that each hour of work reduced a child's school attendance by 0.38 hours.

Legislation establishing a minimum age for work has the potential to reduce child labor. However, some workers in the field have suggested that these laws may also cause harm by reducing household income or forcing children into illegal work, while others have suggested that the income from a child's labor might enable their siblings to attend school. Some authors have also questioned whether conventional legislation can be an effective tool for decreasing girls' labor participation and increasing their school enrollment since many girls perform unpaid domestic work, which is far more difficult to regulate.

In light of these debates about child labor legislation, and given the demonstrated importance of secondary school, it makes sense to empirically examine whether establishing 15 as the minimum age of employment, as recommended by the International Labor



Organization, has any effect on secondary school enrollment. This study represents the first effort to examine how the legislated minimum age of employment affects girls' and boys' educational opportunities worldwide.

### Methods

Data from a global dataset created by the WORLD Policy Analysis Center at UCLA and McGill University, containing information on child labor legislation for 185 countries in 2008, was merged with data available through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics on enrollment ratios for secondary education.

We first examined the number of countries that have a minimum age of work, and how many countries protect children from working until at least age 15. We next used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to examine the association between having a minimum age of employment of 15 or over and secondary school enrollment rates, controlling for per capita GDP, level of urbanization, and whether lower secondary education is compulsory in each country.

## Findings

Around the world, 179 countries (96%) have set a minimum age for children to work with parental permission. Of these, 45 countries (24%) allow children to work before the ILO-recommended age of 15. Four countries (2%) allow work at the age of 12 and an additional two (1%) allow work at age 13. Six countries (3%) have no explicit minimum age for a child to work with parental permission.

A minimum age of employment laws set at age 15 or higher associated with net enrollment rates that were 9.5 percentage points higher for girls and 7.8 percentage points higher for boys.

For the average low-income country in the regression sample, there is an estimated increase from 25.4% to 33.3% net enrollment for countries without compulsory lower secondary education and an increase from 40.7% to 48.6% for countries with it.

## Discussion

As this data is cross-sectional, further research is needed to assess whether raising the age in child labor laws causes increases in secondary school attendance, completion rates, and learning outcomes.

These early findings suggest that by raising the minimum age of employment to at least 15, governments may improve secondary enrollment rates.

A range of complementary policies would likely increase the effectiveness of this intervention, including:

- *Making secondary school compulsory*—States tend to accept greater responsibility for providing education when it is required by law, which may result in improvements in education quality and accessibility. With these improvements, parents may perceive sending a child to school as a more valuable and feasible investment.
- *Strengthening families' financial security*—To offset the loss of income from child labor, countries should provide families with short-term financial assistance, while also ensuring that adult workers' wages are sufficient to meet household needs.
- *Imposing sanctions on employers who hire children below age 15*—Child labor laws must be enforced to be fully effective, which requires holding employers accountable.

*Table 1. Net secondary enrolment ratios (Model 2)*

	Males ( $\beta$ )	Females ( $\beta$ )
Work not allowed until age 15	7.75*	9.47**
Lower secondary is compulsory	17.62***	12.57**
Percentage of the population in urban area	-0.12	-0.06
Natural log of per capita GDP	14.17***	15.28***
Constant	-68.31***	-78.49***
<i>N</i>	89	89
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.75	0.74

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

*This research brief presents key findings from the following article: Heymann J, Raub A, and Cassola A. Does Prohibiting Child Labor Increase Secondary School Enrolment? Insights from a New Global Dataset. International Journal of Educational Research. 2013; 60: 38–45. To access this and other WORLD publications, please visit: <http://worldpolicycenter.org/publications>.*

