

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Child labor and its impact on children's health***Trabajo infantil y sus consecuencias en la salud de los niños*Luís Ignacio López-Michelena<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Universidad El Bosque - Faculty of Medicine - Bogotá D.C. - Colombia.

Open access

Received: 05/08/2023

Accepted: 18/09/2023

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**Keywords:** Child Labor; Public Health; Pediatrics; Occupational Medicine; Occupational Exposure (MeSH).

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo infantil; Salud pública; Pediatría; Medicina ocupacional; Exposición ocupacional (DeCS).

**How to cite:** López-Michelena LI. Child labor and its impact on children's health. *Rev. Fac. Med.* 2024;72(2):e110450. English. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15446/revfacmed.v72n1.110450>.

**Cómo citar:** López-Michelena LI. [Trabajo infantil y sus consecuencias en la salud de los niños]. *Rev. Fac. Med.* 2024;72(2):e110450. English. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15446/revfacmed.v72n1.110450>.

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Dear Editor:

Children and adolescents have been part of the workforce since ancient times and although child labor is now recognized as an activity that violates their rights and puts their health in danger, it is estimated that 160 million children were working in 2020, especially in Africa.<sup>1</sup> In Colombia, child labor is allowed from the age of 15 by the Code of Childhood and Adolescence.<sup>2</sup> However, according to data from the *Gran Encuesta Integrada De Hogares* (Large Integrated Household Survey or GEIH by its Spanish acronym) conducted in 2022 by the National Administrative Department of Statistics, as of December 2022 the working child population was 369 000 children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years of age, of which 55% (206 000) were located in rural areas and 69.5% were boys (257 000).<sup>2</sup>

Child labor is found in all economic sectors, but especially in the agricultural and domestic work sectors.<sup>1,3</sup> While national (Resolution 2400 of 1979)<sup>4</sup> and international standards (Conventions 138 and 182 of the International Labour Organization)<sup>5,6</sup> state that children cannot perform hazardous work, child labor conditions around the world show an unsafe exposure profile. Worldwide, working children are exposed daily to chemical substances, physical hazards (ionizing radiation, vibrations), biomechanical risk factors (manual handling of loads, inadequate and prolonged postures), and occupational accidents. These occupational hazards can affect their physical and mental development, compromise their health in adulthood, and cause early impairment of their occupational capacity, which in turn has a negative socioeconomic impact on nations with high rates of child labor.<sup>1,7-9</sup>

It has been reported that half of the world's occupational accidents in children and adolescents occur in the agricultural sector.<sup>9</sup> In addition, several studies have demonstrated the negative effects of work on children's health. For example, Arcury *et al.*,<sup>10</sup> in a study of 202 "farm" boys and girls working on farms in southern United States, found high percentages of dermatological (44.1%), musculoskeletal (42.6%), heat stroke (45.5%), and trauma (26.2%) injuries. In Colombia, Torres-Tovar *et al.*<sup>11</sup> reported the presence of children and adolescents in labor activities in rice, coffee, sugarcane and cotton crops, finding high rates of occupational accidents with serious consequences for their health and development, mainly amputations of the limbs.

On the other hand, mental health problems appear early in the working child population. For example, it has been reported that children and adolescents working as soldiers and in domestic work may develop psychiatric disorders such as depression, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social phobia.<sup>12</sup> It has also been described that the rates of physical and sexual abuse in children doing domestic work are high, which is a very disturbing situation if we consider that these activities occur mostly in family contexts.<sup>12</sup>

Undoubtedly, child labor poses an ethical problem for the health, economic, and political authorities of nations, but the actors involved (parents and/or legal guardians, employers, and authorities) cannot continue to tolerate this form of work that violates the rights of children and adolescents. Even though social sanctions against child labor are becoming increasingly frequent, actions must also be taken by the academia to guarantee the effective protection of this population.

Mr. Editor, it is necessary to make it clear that writing, documenting, and doing research on child labor should never be perceived as a validation of this type of work. On the contrary, providing written evidence of this problem is our responsibility as adults and academics, and it is also a way of giving a voice to all children and adolescents who are subjected to the worst forms of labor in the country and in the world on a daily basis. There is no denying that we are far from achieving the Sustainable Development Goal<sup>8,7</sup>, which aims to eradicate all forms of child labor worldwide by 2025,<sup>8</sup> but failure to act, censorship, and tolerance of this practice moves us further away from this goal.

### Conflicts of interest

None stated by the author.

### Funding

None stated by the author.

### Acknowledgments

None stated by the author.

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