

In 2020, Sierra Leone made minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government launched a new National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and carried out an awareness-raising campaign to promote education access for girls. However, children in Sierra Leone are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in mining and commercial sexual exploitation, each sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Children also engage in dangerous tasks in quarrying stone and fishing. The types of hazardous work prohibited for children do not cover all sectors in which child labor is known to occur, and the government does not have a sufficient number of labor inspectors to adequately enforce labor laws throughout the country. In addition, Sierra Leone lacks a national policy and social program to address all relevant worst forms of child labor.



I. PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Children in Sierra Leone are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in mining and commercial sexual exploitation, each sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Children also engage in dangerous tasks in quarrying stone and fishing. (1) Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Sierra Leone. Data on some of these indicators are not available from the sources used in this report.

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)	5 to 14	35.1 (Unavailable)
Attending School (%)	5 to 14	78.2
Combining Work and School (%)	7 to 14	32.2
Primary Completion Rate (%)		83.2

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2019 published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021. (2)

Source for all other data: International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 6 (MICS 6), 2017. (3)

Based on a review of available information, Table 2 provides an overview of children's work by sector and activity.

Table 2. Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity

Sector/Industry	Activity
Agriculture	Cultivation of cassava, including processing into garri flour, oil (palm), cocoa, coffee, peanuts, and rice (4,6)
	Fishing,† including artisanal fishing (1,6,7)
Industry	Mining† for diamonds, and gold (1,7,8)
	Quarrying† and crushing stone, including granite, and shoveling gravel (1,7,8)
	Construction, including housing construction, and serving as laborers for contractors (1,6,7)
	Manufacturing,† activities unknown (1,7,9,10)
	Production of charcoal (1,7,9)
Services	Scavenging scrap metals and recyclable materials from dumpsites (1,11-13)
	Domestic work (1,7,13)
	Street work, including begging, trading, and selling goods (1,7,13,14)
	Portering, including carrying heavy loads† (8)
	Working as apprentices, including in auto repair shops and on transportation vehicles, including mini buses and motorbike taxis (6,14)
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor†	Forced begging, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (1,7,15)
	Forced domestic work, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (1,7,15)
	Commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (1,7,15)

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Table 2. Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity (Cont.)

Sector/Industry	Activity
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor†	Forced labor in street hawking, domestic work, mining, agriculture, scavenging for scrap metal, and motorbike taxi driving, quarrying granite, and mining for alluvial diamonds, each sometimes as a result of human trafficking (1,7,8)
	Cultivation of marijuana (7)

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

Sierra Leone is a source, transit, and destination country for children trafficked for forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. (16-19) Sierra Leone has a form of internal child trafficking called “*men pikin*,” meaning foster care in Krio, in which family members send children with promises of better educational opportunities to relatives in urban areas. However, some children are instead subjected to forced labor, including in street hawking, domestic work, mining, agriculture, scavenging for scrap metal, and motorbike taxi driving. (7,13) Some children sent to Koranic schools are also trafficked for labor exploitation. (13,19) Research indicates that a decreased number of commercial sexual exploitation cases were reported during the reporting period, likely due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. (6,7)

In 2019, the government published a report based on household-level survey data collected in 2018, which included a discussion of child labor in Sierra Leone. However, the data were not fully disaggregated to show the prevalence of child labor among children under age 10. (9) The government did not publish any data on child labor in 2020. (7)







Despite government initiatives to make education free through secondary school, substantial barriers remain, including a lack of schools and teachers, the costs of uniforms and supplies, limited transportation to schools, and sexual and gender-based violence by teachers and other students. (1,7,20,21) In particular, one report indicated that teachers demanded sex from students in exchange for higher grades. (7) Research also found that the government did not pay all teacher salaries, and that unqualified teachers were removed from schools in several rural communities without being replaced, resulting in some schools closing. All of these factors contributed to a high dropout rate, especially among girls. (7)

In March 2020, the government officially overturned its policy that prevented pregnant girls from attending school and taking secondary and post-secondary entrance exams. (1,22,23) In addition, the government launched an awareness-raising campaign to promote education access for all girls. (7)

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Sierra Leone has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 3).

Table 3. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

Convention	Ratification
 ILO C. 138, Minimum Age	✓
 ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor	✓
 UN CRC	✓
 UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict	✓
 UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography	✓
 Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons	✓

The government has established laws and regulations related to child labor (Table 4). However, gaps exist in Sierra Leone's legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the lack of specific provisions on light work.

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	15	Section 125 of the Child Right Act; Section 52 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act (24,25)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Section 128 of the Child Right Act; Sections 47–56 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act (24,25)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Section 128 of the Child Right Act; Sections 47–56 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act; Sections 164 and 170 of the Mines and Minerals Act (24-26)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Part II, Section 2, and Part IV, Sections 14–15 and 21 of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act; Section 19 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone (27,28)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Part II, Section 2, and Part IV, Sections 14–15 and 21 of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act; (24)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	Yes		Sections 19–34 of the Sexual Offenses Act; Part II, Section 2, of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (27,29,30)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	Yes		Sections 7 and 13 of the National Drugs Control Act (31)
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	Yes	18	Section 28 of the Child Right Act (24)
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No		
Compulsory Education Age	Yes	15	Section 3 of the Education Act; Section 125 of the Child Right Act (24,32)
Free Public Education	Yes		Section 3 of the Education Act; Section 9 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone; Section 11(c) of the Child Right Act (24,28,32)

* No conscription (42)

The Child Right Act sets the minimum age for light work at age 13; however, it is not specific enough to prevent children from involvement in child labor because it does not limit the number of hours per week for light work, determine the activities in which light work may be permitted, or specify the conditions in which light work may be undertaken. (24) Although the Child Right Act identifies hazardous work prohibited for children, the types of hazardous work prohibited for children do not cover scavenging for recyclable materials at dumpsites, where children are exposed to toxic fumes and smoke from burning trash, as well as sharp objects and broken bottles. (12)

During 2020, drafting and consultations continued with two pieces of legislation, the Prevention of the Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants Act and the Overseas Employment and Migrant Act of 2019. (7)

III. ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labor (Table 5). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate enforcement of their child labor laws.

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Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Organization/Agency	Role
Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS)	Enforces labor laws in the formal sector. Through its Child Labor Unit, formulates, implements, and monitors compliance with child labor regulations. (1,16) MLSS District Labor Officers enforce labor laws in the formal sector. (1,16)
Ministry of Justice's Director of Public Prosecution	Undertakes criminal proceedings, including enforcement of criminal laws against forced child labor, child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, recruitment and use of child soldiers, and use of children in illicit activities. (1)
Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources	Enforces regulations against the use of child labor in mining. Authorized to suspend licenses of mining operators found using child labor. (1,16)
Ministry of Internal Affairs' Police and Transnational and Organized Crime Unit	Leads the investigation and prosecution of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse through Police Family Support Units, which are mandated to minimize and eradicate the incidence of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse. (1) Through its Transnational Organized Crime Unit, enforces human trafficking laws and provides statistical data and general information on cases of human trafficking. (1)

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2020, labor law enforcement agencies in Sierra Leone took actions to combat child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS) that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including a limited number of inspectors and a lack of funding.

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2019	2020
Labor Inspectorate Funding	Unknown (1)	\$40,000 (7)
Number of Labor Inspectors	30 (1)	29 (7)
Inspectorate Authorized to Assess Penalties	Yes (1)	Yes (25)
Initial Training for New Labor Inspectors	Yes (1)	Yes (7)
Training on New Laws Related to Child Labor	N/A (1)	N/A (7)
Refresher Courses Provided	No (1)	Yes (7)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted	450 (1)	Unknown (7)
Number Conducted at Worksite	450 (1)	Unknown (7)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	0 (1)	0 (7)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	N/A (1)	N/A (7)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	N/A (1)	N/A (7)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Yes (1)	Yes (7)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Unknown (1)	Yes (7)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Unknown (25)	Unknown (25,34)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Unknown (1)	Unknown (7)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	No (1)	No (7)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	No (1)	No (7)

The number of labor inspectors is likely insufficient for the size of Sierra Leone's workforce, which includes more than 2.9 million workers. According to the ILO's technical advice of a ratio approaching 1 inspector for every 40,000 workers in least developed economies, Sierra Leone would employ about 75 inspectors. (35,36) In addition, there is a significant lack of resources for labor inspections because the MLSS has only one vehicle for inspections. (1,7)

Although the Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources can conduct inspections on mining concessions and revoke licenses from employers who are found to be using child labor, research found that a limited number of inspectors and a lack of funding may have hindered enforcement efforts. (16,37,38) During the reporting period, the government conducted an awareness campaign throughout the country and inspected several factories, including a factory in the Eastern Region and the Tonkolili mining areas. (7)

During the reporting period, a majority of labor inspections were conducted in the formal sector and at factories and quarries only in the capital city area, leaving children working in the informal sector and rural areas without protection. (6) Although the total number of labor inspections is unknown, the MLSS reportedly found no child labor violations in 2020. (7) The practice of notifying employers in advance of inspections may have contributed to the lack of violations found. (39) In addition, research indicates that the law does not establish penalties severe enough to deter child labor violations. (40)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2020, criminal law enforcement agencies in Sierra Leone took actions to combat child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of the criminal enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including the lack of data on criminal law enforcement efforts.

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2019	2020
Initial Training for New Criminal Investigators	Yes (1)	Unknown (7)
Training on New Laws Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	No (1)	N/A (7)
Refresher Courses Provided	No (1)	Unknown (7)
Number of Investigations	0 (1)	Unknown (7)
Number of Violations Found	Unknown (1)	Unknown (7)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (1)	Unknown (7)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (1)	Unknown (7)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (1)	Unknown (7)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Yes (1)	Yes (7)

The Police Family Support Units reported 15 total child trafficking cases, including 13 that resulted in forced labor. (6) Research found that criminal law enforcement in Sierra Leone, particularly efforts to address human trafficking, is hampered by a lack of coordination, limited funding, and a lack of training of law enforcement personnel and the judiciary. (1,19) During the reporting period, the government did not provide information on whether training was provided to new investigators or whether refresher courses were provided. It also did not provide the number of investigations conducted, violations found, prosecutions initiated, or convictions. (7)

IV. COORDINATION OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established mechanisms to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8). However, gaps may exist that hinder the effective coordination of efforts to address child labor, including efficacy in accomplishing mandates.

Table 8. Key Mechanisms to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

Coordinating Body	Role & Description
National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labor	Coordinates efforts to address child labor. (1) Led by MLSS and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA) and includes representatives from 10 other government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs. As part of the National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labor, the National Commission for Children advises the government on ways to improve child welfare. (1) Research was unable to determine whether the National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labor was active during the reporting period.
National Trafficking in Persons Task Force	Coordinates issues related to child trafficking, and supports agencies that provide shelter and services for human trafficking victims, gathers data on reported human trafficking cases, and meets regularly to develop policies related to child trafficking. (1,7) The Ministries of Social Welfare and Justice lead the National Trafficking in Persons Task Force. (41) During the reporting period, the Task Force met regularly to coordinate on TIP issues, and launched the National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. (6,7)

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Table 8. Key Mechanisms to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor (Cont.)

Coordinating Body	Role & Description
Child Welfare Committees	Promote awareness of children's rights and report child welfare concerns to officials responsible for children's issues. Provide recommendations in giving support to children in villages and address village inhabitants' complaints and concerns. (1,7,19,42,43) During the reporting period, the Child Welfare Committees were active, offering support to communities that reported child rights violations to the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police. (6)
Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA)	Serves as the lead agency to oversee child protection issues, including child labor, in criminal law enforcement efforts, and refers children found through investigations to social services and interim care centers. (1,6,33) MGCA is currently reviewing the 2007 Child Rights Act and the Street Child Strategy. During the reporting period, MGCA carried out several activities including consultation and sensitization on the review of the 2007 Child Rights Act and the Street Child Strategy, with the aim to reduce child trafficking in Sierra Leone. (6)

The Child Rights Act requires the establishment of a Child Welfare Committee in every village and chiefdom (the third level of administrative subdivision, below districts and provinces); however, research indicates that these committees have been established in only a few parts of the country due to budgetary constraints. (24,44)

V. GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 9). However, gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including covering all worst forms of child labor.

Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Policy	Description
National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2021–2023)†	Aims to coordinate cooperation between NGOs, international organizations, and government agencies in combatting TIP, and calls for a review of Sierra Leone's Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2005. (45,50) The plan also aligns with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons. (19)

† Policy was approved during the reporting period.

‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor. (1,20,46)

Although the Government of Sierra Leone has adopted the National Action Plan on Human Trafficking, research found no evidence of a policy on other worst forms of child labor, including child labor in mining and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

VI. SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHILD LABOR

In 2020, the government funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor (Table 10). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including the adequacy of programs to address the problem in all sectors.

Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

Program	Description
Child Trafficking Shelters‡	Government-funded program that refers child trafficking victims to privately run shelters that house child victims of forced labor and human trafficking. (19,47) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the Child Trafficking Shelters program during the reporting period.
Free Quality School Education (2018–2023)†	Program that covers the costs of school tuition and fees and provides meals, textbooks, and some teaching materials in remote communities. In 2020, 22 percent of the national budget was allocated to implement the Free Quality School Education program—an increase from 21 percent—which widened access to primary, secondary, vocational, and university education. (1,7)
USG-Funded Projects	The USDOS Program to End Modern Slavery funded a study to research the prevalence, methods, and impacts of child trafficking and labor in Kono, Kenema, and Kailahun. Research will continue on child trafficking and labor in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, specifically Kambia District. (6) During the reporting period, a qualitative study was carried out that consisted of interviews with key informants and child trafficking victims, and focus group discussions in the three child trafficking hotspots of Kono, Kenema, and Kailahun. A separate qualitative study also consisted of 3,000 household surveys. (6)

† Program is funded by the Government of Sierra Leone.

‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. (48,49)

Sierra Leone has too few and underfunded shelters and safe houses for children who have been withdrawn from working on the streets or in forced labor. (17) Although the Government of Sierra Leone has implemented programs to assist child trafficking survivors, research found no evidence that it has carried out programs specifically designed to assist children working on the streets, in agriculture, and in domestic work. (1)

VII. SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

Based on the reporting above, suggested actions are identified that would advance the elimination of child labor in Sierra Leone (Table 11).

Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Legal Framework	Ensure that the law's light work provisions specify the activities and conditions in which light work may be undertaken and limit the number of hours of light work.	2015 – 2020
	Ensure hazardous work occupations prohibited for children are comprehensive, including scavenging at dumpsites.	2020
	Ensure that the law criminally prohibits the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2016 – 2020
Enforcement	Establish a complaint and reciprocal referral mechanism for labor law enforcement efforts.	2015 – 2020
	Increase the number of labor inspectors to meet the ILO's technical advice.	2011 – 2020
	Provide labor law and criminal law enforcement officials with sufficient resources to adequately enforce labor laws throughout the country.	2012 – 2020
	Enforce laws prohibiting child labor in mining, particularly in the diamond mining sector.	2015 – 2020
	Publish information on the number of labor inspections conducted, including at worksites.	2011 – 2020
	Ensure that penalties for child labor violations are adequate to deter violations.	2020
	Ensure that unannounced inspections are permitted and conducted.	2020
	Improve coordination between criminal law enforcement agencies and provide sufficient training to enforcement personnel and the judiciary to ensure that violations are adequately investigated and prosecuted.	2014 – 2020
Coordination	Publish information on criminal law enforcement efforts, including training for criminal investigators, the number of investigations undertaken, criminal violations found, prosecutions initiated, convictions obtained, and penalties imposed for the worst forms of child labor.	2015 – 2020
	Ensure that village-level and chiefdom-level Child Welfare Committees are established and operational in all areas.	2014 – 2020
	Ensure that all coordinating bodies are able to carry out their intended mandates.	2020
Government Policies	Adopt policies to address child labor in relevant sectors, such as mining, quarrying, and commercial sexual exploitation.	2019 – 2020
Social Programs	Publish activities undertaken to implement social programs during the reporting period.	2020
	Ensure that data for household surveys are fully disaggregated and published so the prevalence of child labor at all ages, including below age 10, in Sierra Leone is known.	2019 – 2020
	Institute programs in the education sector to address issues of lack transportation, to increase the number of schools and teachers, reduce school-related costs, and to eliminate abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence, by teachers and other students.	2013 – 2020
	Increase the availability of and funding for shelters and safe houses for victims of forced labor and for children removed from street work.	2009 – 2020
	Institute programs to address child labor in the sectors of agriculture, domestic work, and street vending.	2019 – 2020

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