

In 2022, Panama made moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. Panama passed Law 285, establishing pecuniary penalties, suspension, and closure of commercial premises for companies found using child labor. The government also increased its number of labor inspectors from 105 to 198 and created new sub-committees to address child labor in the provinces of Chiriquí, Herrera, Panamá East, and Panamá Oeste. In addition, the government prepared a new 5-year National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Person and developed a network of private sector companies committed to eradicating child labor. However, children in Panama are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Children also perform dangerous tasks in agriculture. Although the government made meaningful efforts in all relevant areas during the reporting period, Panamanian law allows minors under age 16 to engage in hazardous work within training facilities in violation of international standards. Moreover, labor law enforcement agencies lack the financial and human resources necessary to fulfill their mandates. Finally, existing social programs are insufficient to address the full scope of the child labor problem in the country, in particular for children living in rural areas and from indigenous and Afro-Panamanian communities.



## I. PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Panama.

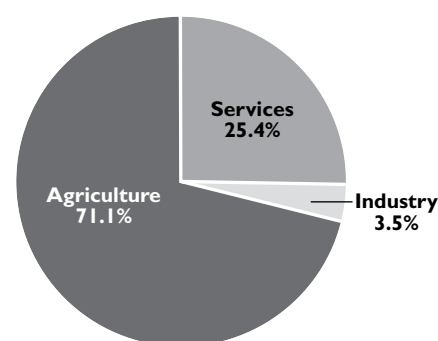
**Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education**

Children	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)	5 to 14	4.5 (33,594)
Attending School (%)	5 to 14	95.7
Combining Work and School (%)	7 to 14	5.0
Primary Completion Rate (%)		94.2

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2021, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023. (1)

Source for all other data: International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from Encuesta de Trabajo Infantil (ETI), 2016. (2)

**Figure 1. Working Children by Sector, Ages 5-14**



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	Production of coffee, melons, and onions (3,4-8)
	Raising livestock, including cattle and poultry (3,9,10)
	Fishing† (3,4,8-10)
Industry	Construction,† including painting and carpentry (8,9,11)
Services	Domestic work† (3,9,10,12,13)
	Waste collection in garbage dumps† (8,14)
	Street work,† including vending,† washing cars, shining shoes,† and collecting recyclables† (3,4,8,10,11,15)
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Forced domestic work (16,17)
	Use in the production of pornography, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (3,4,8)
	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (4,8,12,16,18)
	Use in illicit activities, including in drug production and drug trafficking (8,10)

† 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.

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Children in Panama are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, as well as forced labor, particularly domestic servitude. (16) They also perform dangerous tasks in agriculture, for which their working conditions may involve the use of chemicals, machinery, machetes, and other dangerous tools. (8,12) In addition, children working as street vendors are vulnerable to exploitation, gang activity, harassment, abuse, and vehicular accidents. (12)

Although the Panamanian Constitution recognizes the right to education without discrimination, indigenous, migrant, and Afro-Panamanian children in rural communities face barriers to accessing education due to a lack of transportation, documentation, infrastructure, quality sanitation, technology, and teachers, particularly in autonomous indigenous areas, or *comarcas*. (4,8,10,11) Some schools lack potable water and electricity, and in some cases, students in different grades are forced to share the same classroom. (10) Children of indigenous descent often live in difficult to reach areas and face severe inequity in education access. (8) Indigenous children have very low school enrollment rates, especially in secondary and higher education. (19) Panamanian law requires that schools integrate children with disabilities, but most public schools do not have adequate facilities for these children. (20)

## II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Panama 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 Panama's legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including regulations that permit children to perform hazardous work starting at age 14 while participating in training programs.

**Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor**

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	14	Article 70 of the Constitution; Articles 508, 509 and 716 of the Family Code; Articles 117, 119, and 123 of the Labor Code (21-23)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	No	18	Article 510 of the Family Code; Article 203 of the Penal Code; Article 4 of Executive Decree No. 19 of 2006; Article 118 of the Labor Code (21-26)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Articles 2, 2A, and 2B of Executive Decree No. 19 of 2006; Article 118 of the Labor Code (23,24,26)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Articles 207 and 456 of the Penal Code; Article 489 of the Family Code; Articles 4 and 63 of Law 79 on Human Trafficking; Article 21 of the Constitution (21,22,25,27)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Articles 205–208 and 456 of the Penal Code; Article 489.17 of the Family Code; Article 63 of Law 79 on Human Trafficking (22,25,27)

**Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor (Cont.)**

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	Yes		Articles 179–187, 189–191, 202, 203, 207, and 456 of the Penal Code; Article 63 of Law 79 on Human Trafficking (25,27)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	Yes		Articles 318, 333, and 336 of the Penal Code; Article 489.16 of the Family Code; Article 2.16 of Executive Decree No. 19 of 2006 (22,25,26)
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	N/A†		
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A†		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	Yes		Article 448 of the Penal Code (25)
Compulsory Education Age	Yes	15	Articles 34 and 45 of the Law on Education; Article 489 of the Family Code; Article 95 of the Constitution (21,22,28,29)
Free Public Education	Yes		Articles 34 and 41 of the Law on Education; Article 95 of the Constitution (21,28,29)

† Country has no standing military (21)

In 2022, the Government of Panama ratified ILO convention 129 on inspection in agricultural work, which is meant to strengthen the country's labor inspection capacity in agricultural sectors. (30) Law 285 was also approved by the president on February 15, 2022. This law establishes protections for children related to economic exploitation, commercial sexual exploitation, and hazardous work. (31) The law also divided the responsibility for child labor issues between two agencies: the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF) is now responsible for child labor issues in the informal sector, while the Ministry of Labor (MITRADEL) is responsible for child labor issues in the formal sector. In addition, the new law provides pecuniary penalties, suspension of business licenses or certificates of operation, and closure of commercial premises for companies promoting child labor. (8,31)

Panama has a list of hazardous occupations prohibited for children under age 18, but it permits children to perform hazardous work in training programs starting at age 14, in violation of international standards. (24) Although the Constitution, Family Code, and Labor Code set the minimum age for employment at age 14, the Family Code and Labor Code specify exceptions for agricultural work. (21-23) Article 119 of the Labor Code allows children between the ages of 12 and 15 to perform light work in agriculture if the work is outside of regular school hours. The Labor Code, however, does not define the kinds of activities children may perform as light work. (23) In addition, the minimum age for work is lower than the compulsory education age, which may encourage children to leave school before the completion of compulsory education. (21-23,28,29)

### 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 & Activities
Ministry of Labor (MITRADEL)	Enforces child labor laws through two directorates with direct authority over child labor matters: the Directorate Against Child Labor and for the Protection of Adolescent Workers (DIRETIPAT), and the Labor Inspection Directorate. DIRETIPAT is responsible for overseeing the enforcement of laws related to working children, planning and executing public policies, and carrying out education programs on child labor for employers, parents, and children. (12,32,33) DIRETIPAT also manages the Direct Government Action Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor. Refers cases of children found in exploitative work to the Child and Adolescent Courts, or to the National Secretariat for Childhood, Adolescence, and Family (SENNIAF), which conducts inspections in the informal sector. (12) The Labor Inspection Directorate enforces the Labor Code in areas in which children may be working, particularly in the formal sector. (12)
Attorney General's Office	Investigates and prosecutes crimes of sexual exploitation. Investigations are initiated by the Judicial Investigative Directorate, after which cases are passed to the prosecutors. (12)
Juvenile Police	Assists, collaborates, and coordinates with authorities and organizations to address the education, prevention, protection, and rehabilitation of children, including those in child labor. (34) It is a special body of the National Police. (10)

### Labor Law Enforcement

In 2022, labor law enforcement agencies in Panama took actions to address child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the authority of the Ministry of Labor (MITRADEL) that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including insufficient allocation of financial resources.

**Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor**

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Labor Inspectorate Funding	\$1,151,738 (10)	\$1,071,188 (35)
Number of Labor Inspectors	105 (10)	198 (8)
Mechanism to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes (23)	Yes (23)
Training for Labor Inspectors Provided	Yes (10)	Yes (8)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted at Worksites	14,686 (36)	29,866 (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	4 (10)	7 (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	0 (10)	7 (8)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	0 (10)	Unknown (8)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Yes (10)	Yes (8)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Yes (10)	Yes (8)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (23)	Yes (23)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Yes (10)	Yes (8)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Yes (10)	Yes (8)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	Yes (10)	Yes (8)

In 2022, MITRADEL identified 49 cases of child labor. (8) It also nearly doubled its number of labor inspectors by adding 93 to its labor inspectorate in 2022, for a total of 198 inspectors. (8,37) However, MITRADEL reported that only 20 inspectors focus exclusively on child labor, and that this number is insufficient to ensure child labor prevention and compliance of existing laws. (8,35) The number of labor inspections conducted at the workplace is a high number of inspections conducted by each inspector, and it is unknown whether this high number affects the quality and scope of inspections. (38) MITRADEL also reported a need for additional funding for tools such as telephones, laptops, and vehicles to carry out their work. (4,8,10,39)

### Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2022, criminal law enforcement agencies in Panama took actions to address child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including insufficient allocation of financial resources and a lack of enforcement data made available.

**Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor**

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Training for Criminal Investigators Provided	Yes (10)	Unknown (8)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (10)	Unknown (8)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (10)	Unknown (8)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (10)	Unknown (8)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (10)	Unknown (8)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Yes (10)	Yes (8)

The government did not provide information on the number of investigations and prosecutions, or the amount of funding provided for investigations for inclusion in this report. The Public Prosecutor's Office contains regional prosecutor offices that oversee indigenous issues in the country's *comarcas*; however, their effectiveness is hampered by the office's lack of fuel, boats, canoes, outboard motors, and four-wheel drive vehicles. (8) The Trafficking in Persons Commission and the Organized Crime Special Prosecutor's Office have both indicated that it is difficult to prosecute trafficking in persons cases, partially because judges lack knowledge of relevant laws. (40) The government also reported a number of cases in which companies sanctioned for violating child labor laws have not paid their required fines. (8,35)

#### IV. COORDINATION OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established a key mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8).

**Table 8. Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor**

Coordinating Body	Role & Activities
Committee for the Eradication of Child Labor and the Protection of Adolescent Workers (CETIPPAT)	Public-private institution led by the First Lady of Panama and includes MITRADEL, the ministries of Education, Health, and Agriculture, and representatives from civil society and organizations of workers and employers. (10,12,41) Conducts various efforts to address child labor, including national child labor surveys. (42,43) During the reporting period, the committee created new sub-committees for the provinces of Chiriquí, Herrera, Panama East, and Panama West. In addition to these new sub-committees, it adopted two new technical procedures to guide the safety and prevention of hazardous work that pertain to car wash and grocery store workers. (8) These technical procedures cover a number of different aspects of the job such as storing equipment and packing and transporting goods. (35)

#### V. GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 9). However, policy gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including a lack of implementation.

**Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor**

Policy	Description & Activities
Direct Government Action Program for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor	Provides a network of social and economic services to child workers and children at risk of child labor, including food and scholarships, support for sports activities, and social monitoring. (10,12) Led by MITRADEL and implemented through the Institute for Training and Utilization of Human Resources. (10) Replaced the Roadmap Towards the Elimination of Child Labor (2016–2019) in 2020. (4) In 2022, MITRADEL's child labor division registered 800 students nationally in the Direct Government Action Program for the 2023 school year. (8)
National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents	Seeks to prevent and eliminate the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, including by providing services to survivors, strengthening the National Commission for the Prevention of Crimes of Sexual Exploitation (CONAPREDES), and raising awareness. Implemented by CONAPREDES, with support from the Public Ministry. (10,41,44) Research was unable to determine whether activities were taken to implement this strategy during the reporting period.
National Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (2012–2022)	Addresses human trafficking through prevention, victim assistance, and international cooperation. Includes provisions to protect child victims of human trafficking. (10,39,45) During the reporting period, the Government of Panama, through the Trafficking in Persons Commission, finished a new 5-year National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (2022–2027), soon to be published. (18,46) The new plan includes lines of action such as developing new strategic alliances between government agencies to conduct joint labor inspections, building the first temporary shelter for the exclusive care of human trafficking survivors, and implementing new training strategies for the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Judiciary. (46) The plan is currently under the review of the Ministry of Security's legal office before obtaining presidential approval. (38)

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### VI. SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHILD LABOR

In 2022, 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 their ability to reach the most vulnerable populations.

**Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor**

Program	Description & Activities
SENNIAF Programs†	Provides services to children engaged in the worst forms of child labor. (8,11) The Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor program identifies children engaged in the worst forms of child labor, removes them from exploitative situations, and connects them to a network of social and economic services offered by the government. Maintains a case processing system to efficiently manage reports and help reduce report processing times. (11) The Prevention and Care for Child and Adolescent Victims of Sexual Violence program identifies children engaged in commercial sexual exploitation, removes them from exploitative situations, and provides them with social services. Conducts training workshops nationwide for professionals providing direct care to child and adolescent survivors of sexual violence. (47) SENNIAC continued its existing social programs in rural and urban areas, as well as maintaining a network of government services to address the needs of children and offering guidance to parents during the reporting period. (8)
Network of Opportunities†	Ministry of Social Development (MIDES) program that provides families in extreme poverty with cash transfers that are conditioned on their children's participation in health and education services and the acquisition of a birth certificate. Offers training to project participants to improve income-generating opportunities. (8,10) MIDES continued the Network of Opportunities program without significant changes during the reporting period. (8)
El Plan Colmena†	Seeks to reduce poverty and inequality via a multisectoral strategy that includes local governments, public institutions, the private sector, civil society, and community leaders to promote development and address vulnerability. (8) Through these actors, the plan prioritizes 12 areas of intervention including comprehensive childhood care, improved nutrition, access to clean water and basic sanitation, health, education, and the development of productive capacities to ensure the sustainability of communities. (42) The program is also responsible for the creation of the "Child Labor Free Districts" strategy, in which MITRADEL engages with local municipal governments to identify cases of child labor. (8) During the reporting period, the government held several meetings to discuss progress in expanding the plan into the provinces of Panama Oeste, Panamá, Los Santos, Veraguas and Colón. (48)

For information about USDOL's projects to address child labor around the world, visit <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/ilab-project-page-search>

† Program is funded by the Government of Panama.

During the reporting period, MITRADEL, in conjunction with the National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP) launched the new initiative called Let's Stop Child Labor (*Dejemos en Cero al Trabajo Infantil*). The new initiative creates a network of private sector companies with the aim of eradicating child labor. (49) This network provides a training plan, a space to share international and national experiences, project coordination support with other companies, and coordination of MITRADEL's joint program for the employability of adolescents of legal working age. The project is supported by the Responsible Business Conduct in Latin America and the Caribbean, funded by the European Union, and executed by the ILO. (49) MITRADEL has also continued its work with NGO Casa Esperanza to provide care for 250 children and adolescents. (8)

Although the Government of Panama has expanded programs that reach children in rural areas and from indigenous and Afro-Panamanian communities, reports indicate that the scope of these programs is insufficient. (8) Despite policy efforts, the National Anti-Trafficking Commission acknowledges that funding and availability of services for human trafficking survivors remain insufficient to address the full scope of the problem. Furthermore, although survivors of child trafficking are able to receive services from local NGOs, Panama lacks programs to specifically address the needs of this population. (50) Government officials have also noted that despite funds dedicated to the prevention of crimes against children, Panama lacks a specific mechanism to direct funds toward child sexual abuse survivors. (51,52)

In the past, there were widespread allegations of abuse against children in SENNIAC facilities, specifically shelters, which were later verified through an independent investigation. Child trafficking survivors in Panama are referred by the government to SENNIAC to receive services, including shelter, which are administered by NGOs and religious organizations. (17) Yet children in these facilities are vulnerable to recruitment by human traffickers. Reports also indicate that SENNIAC's budget is insufficient to support restructuring or other largescale efforts needed to reduce children's risk of suffering abuse in these facilities, which heightens their vulnerability to exploitation. (17)



## 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 Panama (Table 11).

**Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor**

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Legal Framework	Ensure that the law protects children from hazardous work by establishing a minimum age of 18 for all children or by ensuring that children receive adequate training in the type of work being done and that the health, safety, and morals of children are protected in accordance with international standards if children aged 16 or 17 are allowed to perform hazardous work.	2013 – 2022
	Establish regulations that define the types of activities that children ages 12 to 14 can undertake as light work.	2009 – 2022
	Raise the minimum age for work from 14 to 15 to align with the compulsory education age.	2019 – 2022
Enforcement	Allocate sufficient funding for resources such as telephones, laptops, and vehicles so that the labor inspectorate can meet its commitments for coordination, implementation, and monitoring related to child labor.	2014 – 2022
	Further increase the number of inspectors in the labor inspectorate to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 1.9 million people.	2022
	Collect and make available information on the number of investigations, violations found, prosecutions initiated, convictions obtained, and penalties imposed and collected related to the worst forms of child labor.	2018 – 2022
	Ensure that judges are sufficiently trained on laws related to forced labor, the worst forms of child labor, and human trafficking to ensure that these crimes can be effectively prosecuted.	2021 – 2022
	Ensure the number of inspections conducted by labor inspectors is appropriate to ensure the quality and scope of inspections.	2022
Government Policies	Take steps to implement key policies related to child labor and publish information about these efforts on an annual basis.	2020 – 2022
Social Programs	Enhance efforts to eliminate barriers and make education accessible for all children, including children from rural areas and indigenous and Afro-Panamanian communities, by expanding existing programs to cover transportation and infrastructure for children with disabilities.	2014 – 2022
	Establish programs and ensure sufficient funding to address the needs of human trafficking survivors, including programs that provide services to child survivors of human trafficking and sexual abuse.	2018 – 2022

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