

Panama

SIGNIFICANT ADVANCEMENT

In 2024, Panama made significant advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government passed Law 458, which provides greater protection for survivors and gives the National Commission Against Trafficking in Persons the authority to align and coordinate procedures among member institutions. The law also makes the distinction between crimes of human trafficking and related crimes like the smuggling of people. The Ministry of Labor and Labor Development, through the Directorate Against Child Labor and Protection of Adolescent Workers, carried out 130 child labor awareness days, reaching over 3,185 managers and employees, providing knowledge on how to identify and report child labor. Further, the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents, and Family continued to implement its Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor program, connecting over 5,000 project participants to social and economic services. However, despite these efforts, children under age 15 in light work are permitted to work up to 36 hours per week, and labor law enforcement agencies lack the financial and human resources necessary to fulfill their mandates. Existing social programs are also insufficient to address the full scope of the child labor problem in the country, particularly for children without identity documents and children living in rural areas.

PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Statistics on Children’s Work and Education			Working Children by Sector, Ages 5-14	
Children	Age	Percent and Population	Sector/Industry	Percent of Population
Working	5 to 14	4.5% (33,594)	Agriculture	71.1%
Hazardous Work by Children	15 to 17	Unavailable	Industry	3.5%
Attending School	5 to 14	95.7%	Services	25.4%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	5.0%		

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.

Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity	
Agriculture	Working in agriculture, including in the production of coffee and melons. Fishing.†
Industry	Construction.†
Services	Domestic work and street work† as vendors,† shoe shiners,† car washers, and collecting recyclables.† Working in waste collection in garbage dumps.†
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Forced labor in domestic work. Commercial sexual exploitation, including in the production of pornography, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Use in illicit activities, including in drug production and drug trafficking.

† 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.

SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

The suggested government actions below would close gaps USDOL has identified in Panama's implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

Area	Suggested Action
Legal Framework	Limit the number of hours for light work of children ages 12 to 15 to no more than 14 hours per week.
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.

Area	Suggested Action
	Publish information on the number of penalties for child labor violations that were imposed and collected.
	Increase the number of labor inspectors from 87 to 138 to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 2.1 million people.
	Collect and make available information on the number of investigations related to the worst forms of child labor.
	Provide additional training for judges on laws related to forced labor, the worst forms of child labor, and human trafficking to ensure that these crimes can be adequately prosecuted.
	Ensure that the number of inspections conducted by labor inspectors is appropriate to ensure the quality and scope of inspections.
	Implement a digital tracking system for civil worst forms of child labor inspections.
Government Policies	Take steps to assign a government agency to implement the National Plan Against Trafficking in Persons and publish information about these efforts on an annual basis.
Social Programs	Eliminate barriers and make education accessible for all children by increasing the availability of schools in rural and remote areas, hiring additional teachers, improving existing infrastructure, and offsetting transportation costs.
	Establish programs and ensure sufficient funding to programs that provide services to human trafficking survivors, including those in high-risk communities.

CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Children from semiautonomous regions (*comarcas*), children without identity documents from neighboring countries, and Afro-Panamanian children are particularly vulnerable to child labor. Children from *comarcas* are especially vulnerable to child labor in the services and tourism-industry sector, including carrying suitcases and acting as guides in the jungle. Cases of commercialized sexual exploitation also occur in some of these communities. NGOs have reported that nearly half of the children found working in urban areas were without proper identity documents.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

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

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Panama has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, Panama's light work framework is not consistent with international standards because children under age 15 performing light work are permitted to work up to 36 hours a week.

Laws and Regulations on Child Labor			
Standard	Age	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	14	✓	Article 70 of the Constitution; Articles 508, 509, and 716 of the Family Code; Articles 117, 119, 122, and 123 of the Labor Code; Articles 202 and 203 of the Penal Code
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	18	✓	Article 510 of the Family Code; Articles 202 and 203 of the Penal Code; Article 4 of Executive Decree No. 19 of 2006; Article 118 of the Labor Code
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		✓	Article 510 of the Family Code; Articles 2-4 of Executive Decree No. 19 of 2006; Article 118 of the Labor Code
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		✓	Articles 207, 456-A, and 456-D 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
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		✓	Articles 206 and 207 of the Penal Code; Articles 4 and 63 of Law 79 on Human Trafficking
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		✓	Articles 180–187, 190, 207, and 456-A of the Penal Code; Article 63 of Law 79 on Human Trafficking
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		✓	Articles 202, 203, 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
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		✓	Article 448 of the Penal Code
Compulsory Education Age	15	✓	Articles 34 and 45 of the Law on Education; Article 489 of the Family Code; Article 95 of the Constitution
Free Public Education		✓	Articles 34 and 41 of the Law on Education; Article 95 of the Constitution

[†] Country has no standing military

During the reporting period, the Government passed Law 458, which amends Law 79 on trafficking in persons. The new law provides greater protection for survivors and gives the National Commission Against Trafficking in Persons the authority to align and coordinate procedures among member institutions. The law also makes the distinction between crimes of human trafficking and related crimes like the smuggling of children.

Although the Constitution, Family Code, and Labor Code set the minimum age for employment at age 14, the light work framework is not consistent with international standards because children under age 15 performing light work are permitted to work up to 36 hours per week.

ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

In 2024, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Panama took actions to address child labor. However, insufficient financial resource allocation and a lack of enforcement data hindered enforcement efforts.

Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Ministry of Labor and Labor Development: Enforces child labor laws through two directorates with direct authority over child labor matters: the Directorate Against Child Labor and Protection of Adolescent Workers (DIRETIPAT), and the Labor Inspection Directorate. DIRETIPAT is responsible for overseeing compliance with laws related to working children, planning and executing public policies, and carrying out education programs on child labor for employers, parents, and children. DIRETIPAT 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. The Labor Inspection Directorate enforces the Labor Code in areas in which children may be working, particularly in the formal sector.

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.

Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts

Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Yes
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes
Has a Complaint Mechanism	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	Unknown
Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes

In 2024, **87** labor inspectors conducted **1,795** worksite inspections, finding **14** child labor violations. Although the number of investigations into suspected cases of the worst forms of child labor is **unknown**, the government initiated **102** prosecutions and convicted **12** perpetrators.

COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Panama established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor.

Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

Committee for the Eradication of Child Labor and the Protection of Adolescent Workers (CETIPPAT): Public-private institution led by the First Lady of Panama that includes the Ministries of Labor, Education, Health, and Agriculture, and representatives from civil society and organizations of workers and employers. The committee conducts various efforts to address child labor, including national child labor surveys. During the reporting period, CETIPPAT continued to convene to coordinate actions and strategies to eliminate child labor.

Panama established policies related to child labor. However, research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement its National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons.

Key Policies Related to Child Labor

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 monitoring areas in which children are at risk of child labor to ensure that they attend school. Led by the Ministry of Labor and implemented through the Institute for Training and Utilization of Human Resources. During the reporting period, the government followed up with more than 100 children who participated in the Direct Government Action Program, with the aim of recruiting project participants for 2025. The government also distributed over 62 scholarships to children in the province of Panama Oeste, allowing them to continue their studies.

Key Policies Related to Child Labor

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. During the reporting period, CONAPREDES held a series of technical consultation workshops in five provinces to develop Panama's National Plan for the Prevention of Crimes of Sexual Exploitation 2024–2028, with 148 participants from government institutions and civil society. The government also created a second draft of the Code of Conduct for the Tourism Sector as part of the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents. The code of conduct reaffirms the tourism sector's responsibility to set up corporate policies against sexual exploitation and to introduce zero-tolerance clauses in contracts with suppliers.

National Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (2022–2027): Addresses human trafficking through prevention, victim assistance, and international cooperation. Includes provisions to protect child victims of human trafficking. Although the government continued to fund the national action plan, research was unable to determine if activities were carried out during the reporting period.

Panama funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate because they lack the ability to reach the most vulnerable populations, including native and Afro-Panamanian children.

Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

SENNIAF Programs:[‡] Provide services to children engaged in the worst forms of child labor. 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. Maintains a case processing system to efficiently manage reports and help reduce report processing times. 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. The Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor program continued in 2024, providing services to over 5,000 project participants.

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. 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. In 2024, the government approved the Methodological Manual for the Implementation of the Colmena Plan. The manual establishes a new strategy for identifying and prioritizing vulnerable communities.

Network of Opportunities:[‡] Ministry of Social Development 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. During the reporting period, the government reached over 370,000 project participants with its cash transfer program.

[‡] Program is funded by the Government of Panama.

For references, please visit dol.gov/ChildLaborReports