

# Child labour statistical profile: Latin America and the Caribbean

## PREVALENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

This profile provides statistics on child labour prevalence and characteristics for the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region based on the ILO-UNICEF 2020 Global estimates of child labour.<sup>1</sup> The region is comprised of 31 countries divided into 3 sub-regions: the Caribbean, Central America and South America, defined in accordance with the regional groupings utilised by the ILO Department of Statistics.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> ILO and UNICEF. *Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*, Geneva and New York, 2021.  
<sup>2</sup> ILO Department of Statistics: [Country groupings](#) web page.



**Child labour continues to affect millions of children in the Latin America and Caribbean region.**

The 2020 ILO-UNICEF global estimates show that 8.2 million children – 2.7 million girls and 5.5 million boys – are in child labour, accounting for 6 per cent of all children in the LAC region. Two-thirds of those in child labour – 5.5 million children in absolute terms – are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and moral development.

These figures place the LAC region in the mid-range of world regions in terms of the prevalence of child labour and hazardous work, and well below the world average.

It is worth underscoring that the child labour estimates for the LAC region and for the other world regions predate the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, which has substantially added to the situations of household vulnerability that drive much of the child labour phenomenon. The estimates, therefore, likely understate the actual prevalence of child labour in the LAC region and elsewhere.

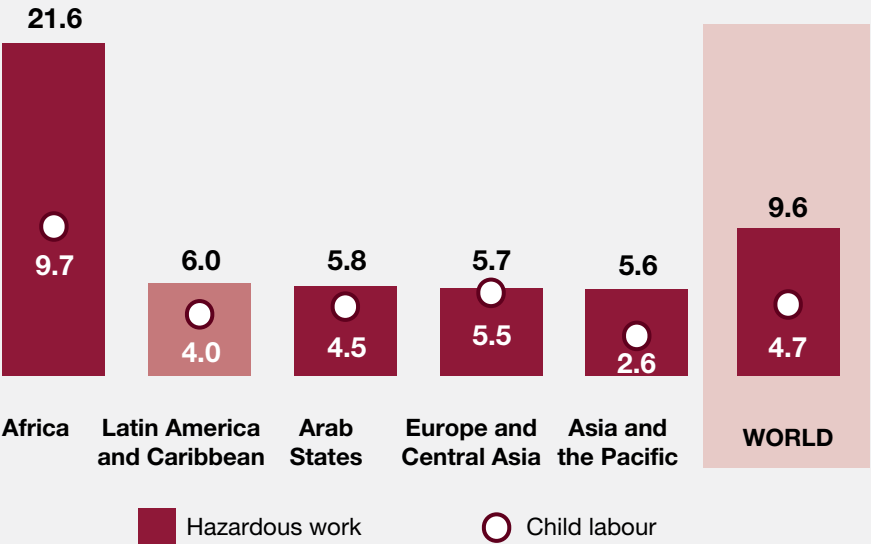
**Involvement in child labour and hazardous work**

**Figure 1** Percentage and number of children in child labour and hazardous work (5-17 years)



**Child labour and hazardous work in world regions**

**Figure 2** Percentage of children in child labour and hazardous work, by world region (5-17 years)



8.2 million children are in child labour

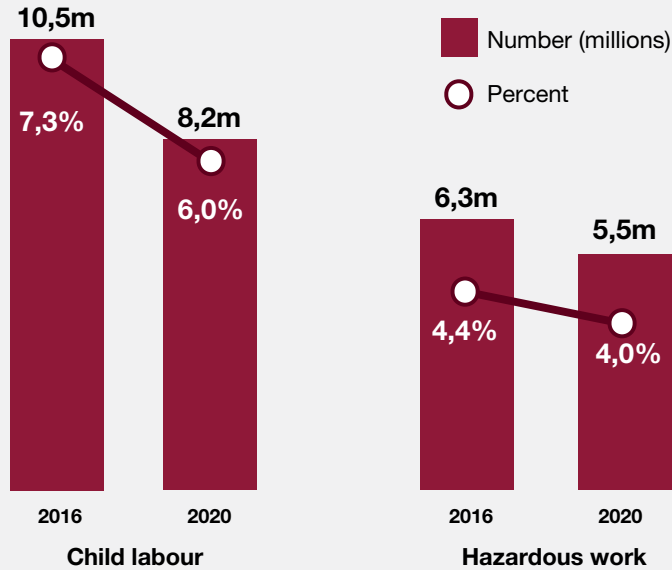


**Child labour and hazardous work declined in the region between 2016 and 2020.**

The number of children in child labour fell by 2.3 million and child labour prevalence by 1.3 percentage points over the 4-year period. The number and prevalence of children in hazardous work followed a similar pattern. While child labour in the region is trending in the right direction, a significant acceleration of progress will be needed in order to arrive as close as possible to zero child labour by the 2025 target date set in Sustainable Development Goals (Target 8.7).

**Regional child labour trends**

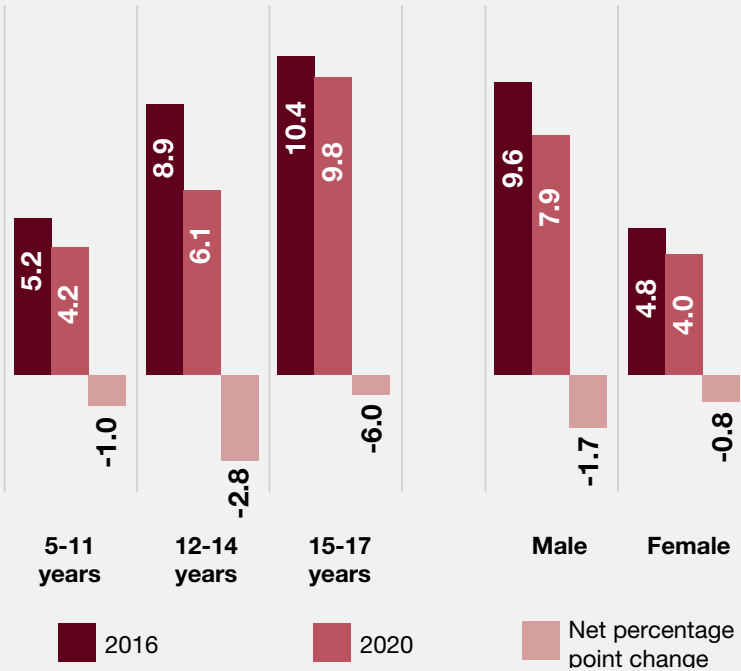
**Figure 3** Percentage and number of children in child labour and hazardous work in LAC region (2016 and 2020)



**The decline in child labour extended to all age groups and to both boys and girls.** While progress was broad-based, aggregate figures mask differences in the pace of progress across age ranges. Prevalence fell by about one-third among children aged 12-14 years and by about one-fifth for children aged 5-11 years, but was more limited for children aged 15-17 years. The percentage point decline in child labour prevalence was greater for boys than for girls and the gender gap in prevalence therefore narrowed somewhat over the 2016 to 2020 period (see also below).

**Age- and gender-specific child labour trends**

**Figure 4** Percentage of children in child labour, by age groupe and sex (2016 and 2020)

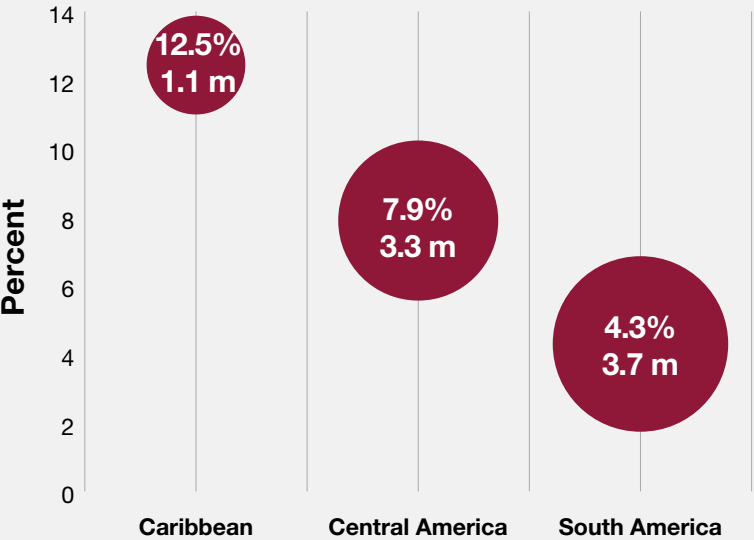




**Region-wide estimates disguise substantial differences in child labour prevalence and numbers within the region.** The Caribbean sub-region stands out as having by far the highest prevalence. Nearly 13 per cent of all Caribbean children are in child labour, compared to 8 per cent of children in Central America and 4 per cent in South America. Many more children however live in South America and Central America, and the sub-regional child labour rankings are therefore reversed when expressed in absolute terms.

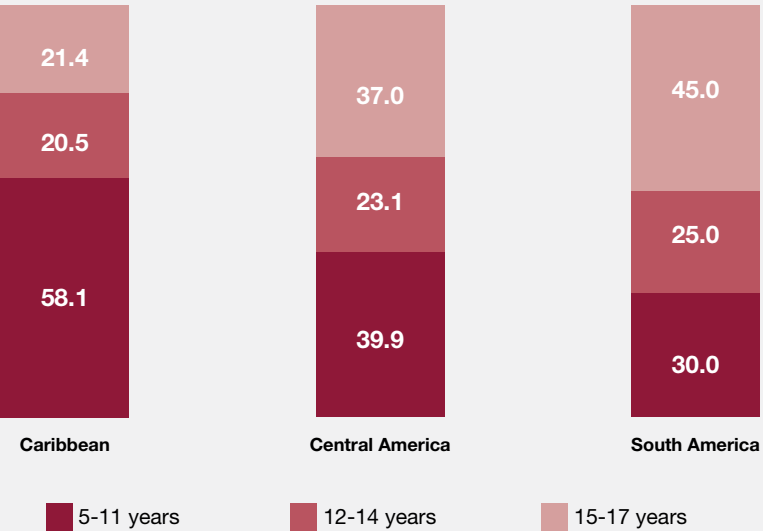
**Intra-regional differences in child labour**

**Figure 5 (a)** Percentage and number of children in child labour, by sub-region<sup>a</sup>



Note: (a) Circle size is proportionate to number of children in child labour.

**Figure 5 (b)** Age distribution of the children in child labour, by sub-region (percentage)



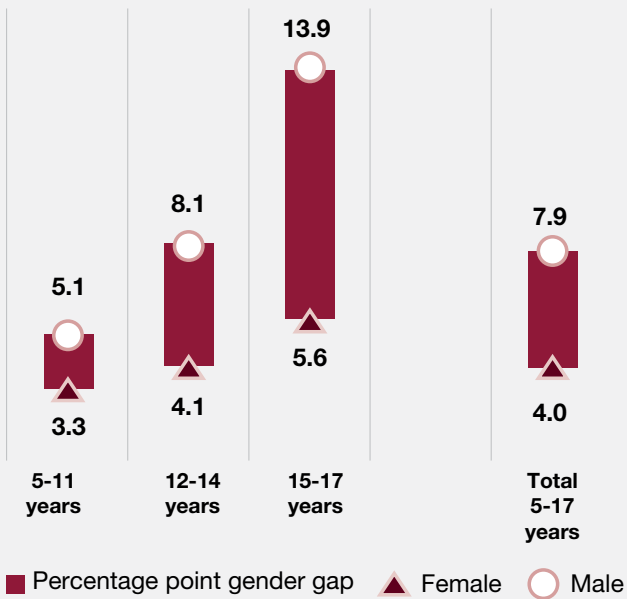
The three regions also differ significantly in terms of the age composition of child labour. Younger 5-11 year-old children make up the greatest share of child labour (58 per cent) in the Caribbean, but the age composition of the child labour population becomes progressively older moving to Central America and finally to South America. For the last, children aged 5-11 years account for 30 per cent of all child labour while older 15-17 year-old children account for 45 per cent.

Nearly **13%**  
of all Caribbean children  
are in child labour

**Child labour prevalence is higher for boys than for girls in the region.** For the overall 5-17 years age group, the share of boys in child labour is roughly twice that of girls. The gender gaps grows slightly more pronounced with age – child labour prevalence is one and a half times higher for boys compared to girls among 5-11 year olds but is two and a half times higher among 15-17 year-olds.

**Age and gender profile of child labour**

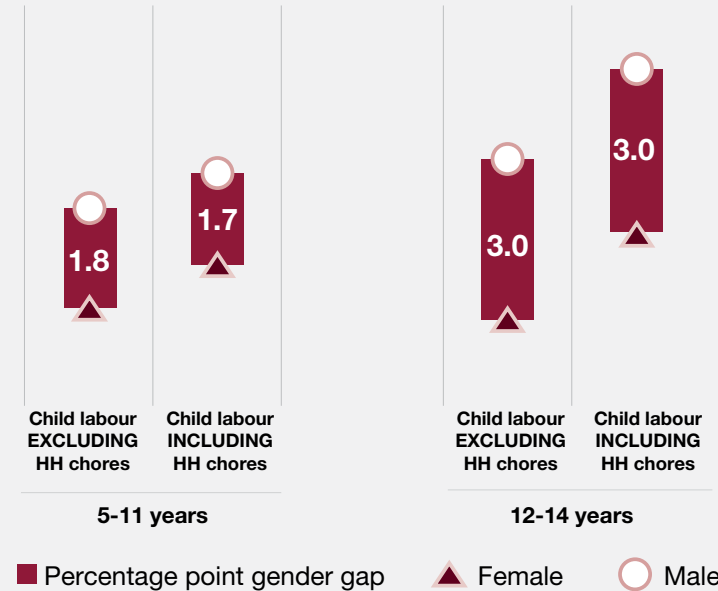
**Figure 6** Percentage of children in child labour, by age group and sex



It is worth recalling in interpreting these numbers that they do not reflect children's involvement in household chores in their own homes. Expanding the definition of child labour to include involvement in household chores for 21 hours or more per week, the hours threshold adopted for international reporting on Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>3</sup> child labour prevalence increases for both sexes. This result underscores the importance of systematically collecting data on household chores as part of national statistical programmes on child labour.<sup>4</sup>

**Child labour and household chores**

**Figure 7** Percentage of children in child labour (including and excluding household chores performed for 21 hours or more per week), by sex and age group



Notes: Household chores refer to services children provide without pay for their own households. These include caring for household members, cleaning and minor household repairs, cooking and serving meals, washing and ironing clothes, and transporting or accompanying family members to and from work and school. For statistical measurement, where household chores are included in the calculation of child labour, hazardous household chores refer to those performed by children below the general minimum working age for 21 hours or more per week.

<sup>3</sup> Two indicators are used for measuring child labour for the purpose of reporting on Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the first based on the SNA production boundary (Indicator 8.7.1) and the second on the general production boundary (Indicator 8.7.2). The weekly hours threshold for household chores of 21 hours is consistent with that used for Indicator 8.7.2.

<sup>4</sup> Resolution IV of the 20<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians (paras. 36 and 37), provides guidance on defining and measuring household chores.



**Child labour is much more common among children living in rural areas.** For the 5-17 years age group as a whole, the prevalence of child labour in rural areas is more than three times that of urban areas. This rural-urban gap persists across all age ranges, but is slightly less pronounced among older, 15-17 year-old children in child labour, a reflection of the diminishing importance of child labour in agriculture as children enter into this age range (see below).

There are more children living in urban than in rural areas in the LAC region, and the rural-urban gap in child labour is therefore less pronounced when expressed in absolute terms. Indeed, the number of 15-17 year-olds in child labour is actually higher in urban compared to rural areas.

Child labour and residence

Figure 8 (a) Percentage of children in child labour, by residence

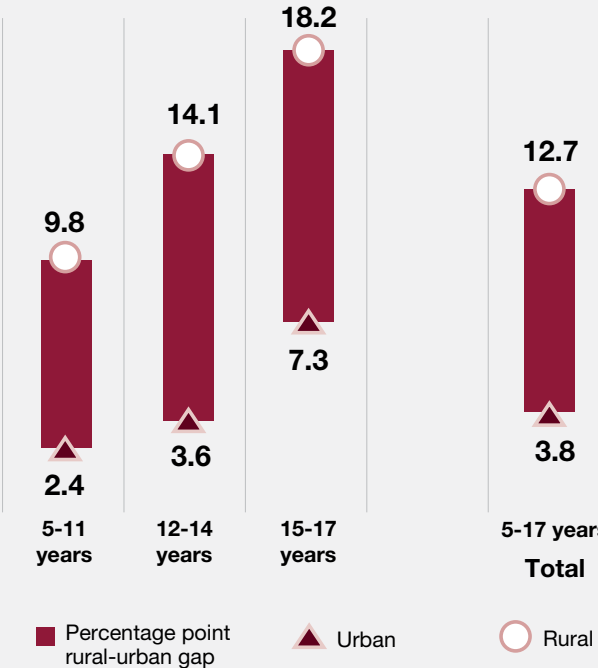
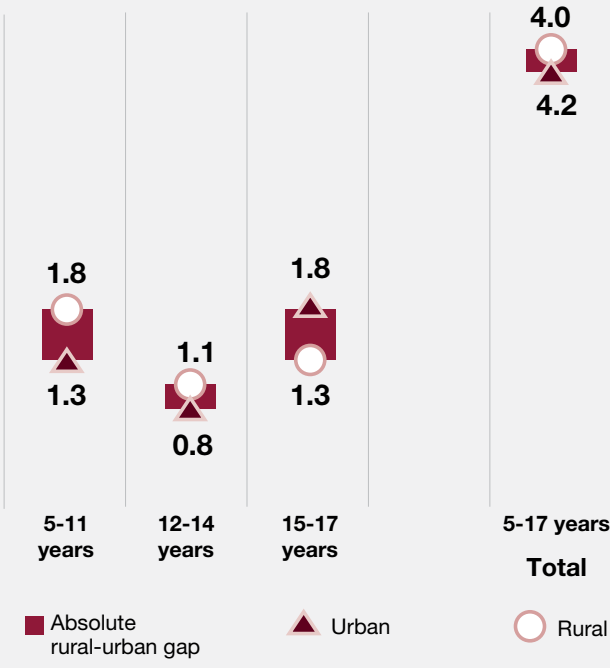


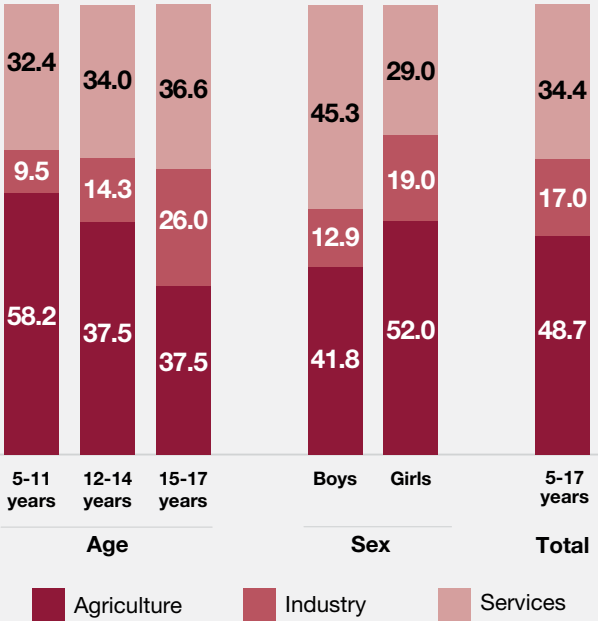
Figure 8 (b) Number of children in child labour, by residence (in millions)



**Agriculture accounts for the largest share of children in child labour.** For the 5-17 age group as a whole, nearly half of all children in child labour are found in agriculture, which consists primarily of family subsistence and smallholder farming, but also includes commercial plantations, capture fisheries, aquaculture and fish processing. Thirty-four percent work in services and the remaining 17 per cent in industry. These aggregate figures mask important differences in the composition of child labour by age and sex. Agricultural child labour predominates for younger children in child labour, underscoring the role of agricultural work as entry point into child labour. The relative importance of child labour in agriculture declines, and the relative importance of industry and services rises, moving to the 12-14 and then 15-17 age groups. Gender considerations appear relevant in determining the kind of child labour performed: girls are relatively less likely than boys to work in agriculture and industry, while the opposite pattern prevails for child labour in services.

Child labour and branch of economic activity

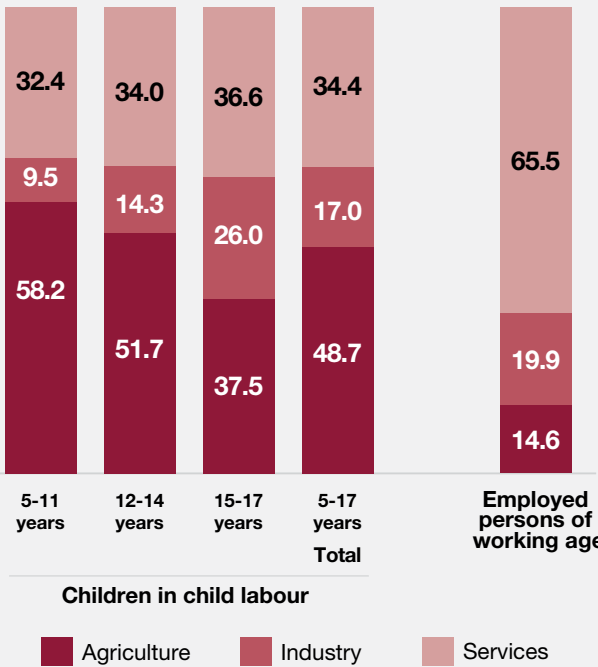
Figure 9 Percentage distribution of children in child labour, by branch of economic activity, age groups and sex



**The sectoral breakdown of child labour differs considerably from that of working-aged employed persons.** In other words, the sectoral breakdown of child labour is not merely a reflection of broader employment patterns. Overall, children in child labour are significantly over-represented in agriculture sector and under-represented in the services sector in comparison to employed persons of working age. This pattern is especially pronounced in the case of younger, 5-11 and 12-14 year-olds in child labour. The relatively greater importance of agriculture in child labour is not surprising, as the informal, low-skill and low-technology production that characterises much of the agriculture sector is more conducive to the involvement of children, providing them with an entry point into the labour force.

Sectoral composition of child labour and working-aged employment

Figure 10 Percentage distribution of children in child labour and employed persons of working age, by branch of economic activity and age group

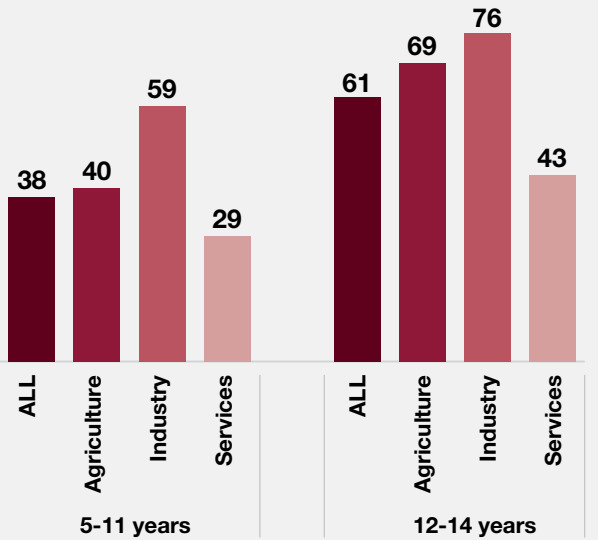


Note: (a) Data for employed persons of working age from International Labour Organization, "Employment by sex and economic activity – ILO modelled estimates," ILOSTAT.

**A significant share of child labour is hazardous in nature.** Thirty-eight percent of all 5-11 year-olds in child labour, and 61 per cent all 12-14 year-olds in child labour, are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and moral development. While there are no possible exceptions for hazardous work – all children must be protected from hazardous child labour – the group of young children facing hazardous work conditions directly endangering their health, safety, and moral development is of special concern. Not surprisingly, the degree of hazardousness is not uniform across child labour in different branches of economic activity. Child labour in industry is most likely to be hazardous for both the 5-11 and 12-14 age groups. Industry comprises work in construction, mining and manufacturing. It is more concentrated in urban areas and, as noted above, more likely to be undertaken by boys. However, the degree of hazardousness is also high in other sectors, especially for 12-14 year-olds.

Hazardous work and branch of economic activity

Figure 11 Percentage of child labour constituting hazardous work, by branch of economic activity (5-14 years)

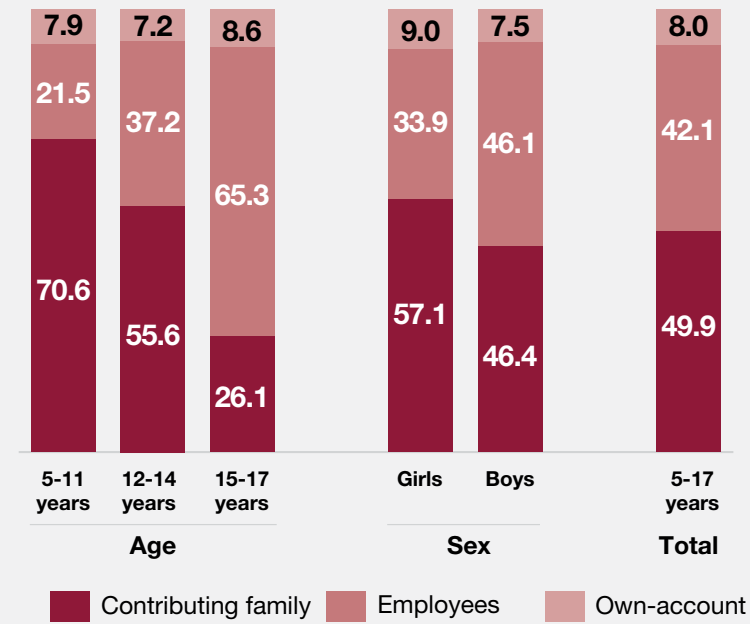




**Child labour consists in large part in unpaid work within the family unit.** Overall, half of all children in child labour work for their own families, while 42 per cent work as employees for third parties and the remaining 8 per cent work for their own account. Again, however, aggregate figures mask important differences by age and sex. The relative importance of family work declines sharply with age while the relative importance of work as employees moves in the opposite direction. This reflects broader patterns that see children moving out of informal (primarily family-based) agriculture and into more formal work arrangements as employees as they grow older. The breakdown by sex provides further evidence of gender considerations in types of work assigned to children. Girls in child labour are considerably more likely than boys to work for their own families, while the opposite pattern prevails for work as employees.

**Child labour and status in employment**

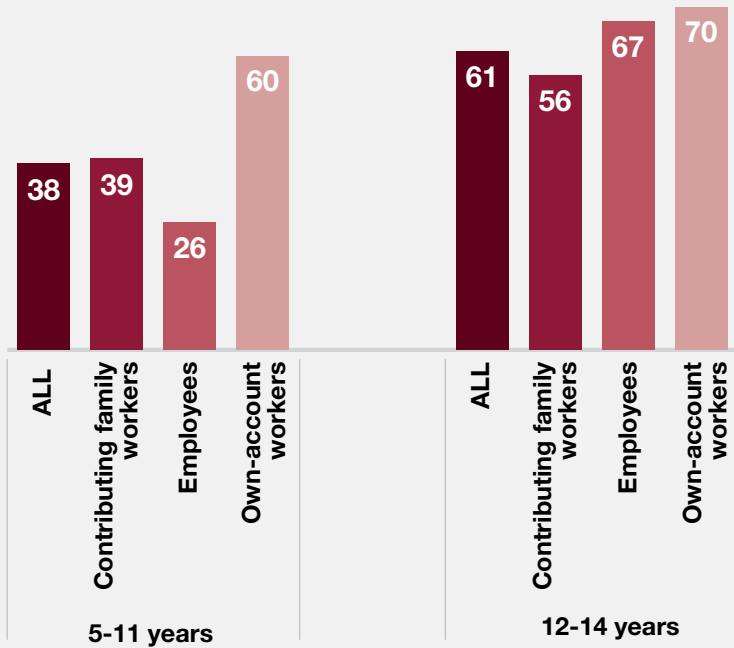
**Figure 12** Percentage distribution of children in child labour, by status at work, age group and sex



**The degree of hazardousness also varies somewhat across different status in employment categories.** This is especially the case for 5-11 year-olds, for whom own account work is significantly more likely to be hazardous than child labour in other categories – 60 per cent of all 5-11 year-olds in own-account work are in hazardous work. However, this disaggregation again illustrates that the degree of hazardousness is high across all forms of child labour performed by children, including work undertaken within the family unit.

**Hazardous work and status in employment**

**Figure 13** Percentage of child labour constituting hazardous work, by status in employment (5-14 years)



**Children in hazardous work are much less likely to attend school**

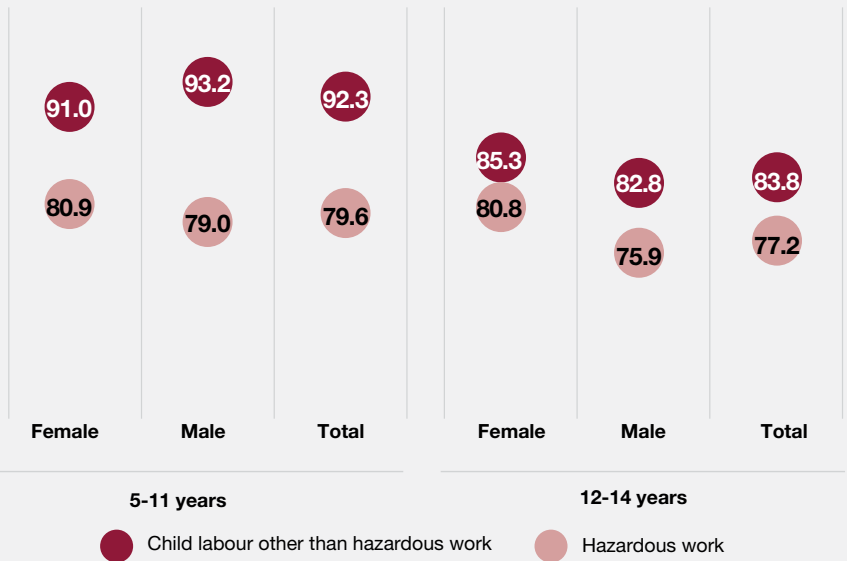


**Children in hazardous work are much less likely to attend school.** While all children in child labour are disadvantaged in terms of their ability to attend school, this is particularly the case for children in hazardous work. Among children in the age groups most closely aligned with compulsory schooling, i.e., 5-11 and 12-14 year-olds, 80 per cent and 77 per cent, respectively, of children in hazardous work attend school, well below the attendance rates of children in non-hazardous child labour, who in turn lag behind the

attendance rates of children not in child labour (not shown). It is worth underscoring that the education disadvantage associated with child labour is not limited to lower school attendance. Among the children in child labour that manage to also attend school, the hours and energy required by their work can interfere with their ability to fully benefit from their classroom time and to find time for study outside the classroom, in turn compromising their educational performance.

**Child labour and school attendance**

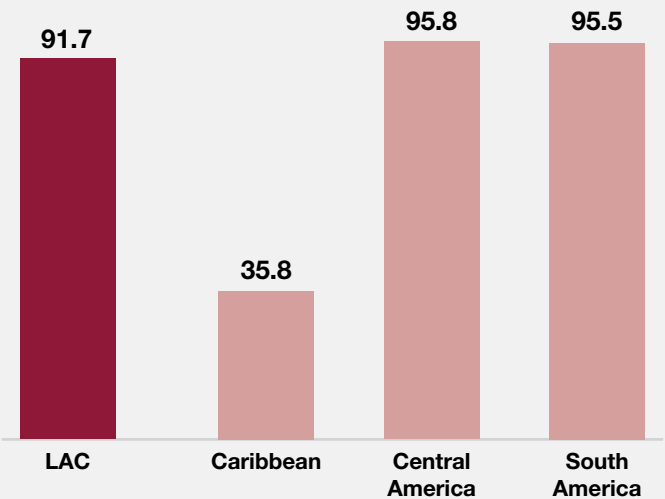
**Figure 14** School attendance rates, by involvement in child labour and hazardous work (5-14 years)



**The timely collection of child labour data remains an important challenge in the Caribbean sub-region.** Representative data for the period from 2016 to 2020 is available for 92 per cent of the total child population in the Latin America and the Caribbean region. But this overall coverage level masks much lower coverage in the Caribbean sub-region, where data is available for only about one-third of the child population. Limited data on child labour hampers the development and targeting of child labour policies and constitutes a major obstacle to monitoring progress against child labour. Greater investment in child labour data collection therefore constitutes an important priority in the Caribbean. It is also important to note that the statistics presented in this Brief for all three sub-regions may not fully capture children in worst forms of child labour other than hazardous (i.e., slavery or practices similar to slavery, commercial sexual exploitation of children and illicit activities), owing to the methodological challenges in measuring these frequently-hidden and elusive forms of child labour. Additional investment in the region is also needed in improving statistics on worst forms other than hazardous.

**Coverage of child labour data**

**Figure 15** Percentage of child population for which representative data are available for the 2016 to 2020 period, by sub-region





Statistical tables

			TOTAL								BOYS								GIRLS							
			5-11 years		12-14 years		15-17 years		5-17 years		5-11 years		12-14 years		15-17 years		5-17 years		5-11 years		12-14 years		15-17 years		5-17 years	
			%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
CHILD LABOUR	Total	2020	4.2	3,087	6.1	1,927	9.8	3,141	6.0	8,155	5.1	1,905	8.1	1,300	13.9	2,256	7.9	5,461	3.3	1,182	4.1	627	5.6	885	4.0	2,694
	Residence	Urban	2.4	1,321	3.6	848	7.3	1,802	3.8	3,971	3.0	853	4.8	579	10.1	1,246	5.1	2,678	1.7	468	2.3	269	4.6	556	2.5	1,293
		Rural	9.8	1,766	14.1	1,079	18.2	1,339	12.7	4,184	11.5	1,053	18.3	720	26.2	1,010	16.4	2,783	8.1	714	9.7	359	9.3	329	8.8	1,401
	Sub-region	Caribbean	13.5	643	11.2	226	11.8	237	12.5	1,107	15.5	378	13.5	140	14.1	144	14.7	662	11.3	265	8.7	87	9.4	93	10.3	445
		Central America	5.9	1,330	8.0	770	12.7	1,233	7.9	3,333	7.2	828	11.7	574	19.3	952	11.0	2,354	4.5	502	4.2	197	5.9	281	4.8	979
		South America	2.4	1,114	4.7	930	8.3	1,671	4.3	3,715	3.0	699	5.8	586	11.3	1,159	5.6	2,445	1.9	415	3.5	344	5.1	511	3.0	1,270
	School attendance	Child labour other than hazardous work	92.3	1,764	83.8	631	-	-	89.9	2,395	93.2	1,022	82.8	366	-	-	90.2	1,387	91.0	743	85.3	265	-	-	89.5	1,008
	Children in child labour by sector of economic activity	Agriculture	58.2	1,795	51.7	996	37.5	1,177	48.7	3,968	60.3	1,149	58.4	760	41.4	934	52.0	2,842	54.7	647	37.7	236	27.5	243	41.8	1,126
		Industry	9.5	292	14.3	275	26.0	815	17.0	1,383	11.9	227	14.0	182	27.8	627	19.0	1,036	5.5	65	14.9	93	21.3	189	12.9	347
		Services	32.4	999	34.0	656	36.6	1,149	34.4	2,804	27.8	529	27.5	358	30.8	696	29.0	1,583	39.8	470	47.5	298	51.2	454	45.3	1,221
	Children in child labour by status in employment	Employees	21.5	664	37.2	717	65.3	2,051	42.1	3,432	23.9	456	39.8	517	68.6	1,547	46.1	2,520	17.6	208	31.9	200	56.9	504	33.9	912
		Own-account workers	7.9	242	7.2	140	8.6	270	8.0	652	7.2	138	6.5	84	8.3	187	7.5	409	8.8	105	8.8	55	9.4	83	9.0	243
Contributing family workers		70.6	2,180	55.6	1,071	26.1	821	49.9	4,071	68.8	1,311	53.8	699	23.2	523	46.4	2,532	73.5	869	59.3	372	33.7	298	57.1	1,539	
SDG child labour indicators	SDG 8.7.1.1	4.2	3,087	4.5	1,426	4.2	1,332	4.3	5,845	5.1	1,905	6.0	959	6.0	976	5.5	3,840	3.3	1,182	3.0	467	2.3	356	3.0	2,005	
	SDG 8.7.1.2	4.9	3,577	6.2	1,935	4.2	1,332	5.0	6,843	5.7	2,134	7.6	1,223	6.0	976	6.2	4,333	4.0	1,442	4.6	712	2.3	356	3.8	2,510	
HAZARDOUS WORK	Total	2020	0.8	430	2.0	477	7.3	1,802	2.6	2,710	2.2	809	5.4	858	13.9	2,256	5.7	3,923	1.0	365	2.1	317	5.6	885	2.3	1,567
	Residence	Urban	4.1	744	9.1	698	18.2	1,339	8.4	2,781	1.1	315	3.0	363	10.1	1,246	3.7	1,924	0.4	115	1.0	114	4.6	556	1.5	786
		Rural	4.6	220	6.6	134	11.8	237	6.7	591	5.4	494	12.6	495	26.2	1,010	11.8	1,999	2.9	250	5.4	202	9.3	329	4.9	782
	Sub-region	Caribbean	2.0	461	5.3	509	12.7	1,233	5.2	2,203	6.1	148	8.6	89	14.1	144	8.5	382	3.1	72	4.5	45	9.4	93	4.9	210
		Central America	1.1	494	2.7	532	8.3	1,671	3.2	2,696	2.9	335	8.3	408	19.3	952	7.9	1,695	1.1	126	2.1	100	5.9	281	2.5	508
		South America	79.6	935	77.2	907	57.3	1,800	66.3	3,642	1.4	326	3.6	361	11.3	1,159	4.2	1,846	0.8	167	1.8	171	5.1	511	2.0	850
	School attendance	Children in hazardous work	60.5	710	58.1	683	37.5	1,177	46.8	2,570	79.0	640	75.9	651	55.6	1,254	64.9	2,545	80.9	296	80.8	256	61.7	546	70.0	1,097
	Children in hazardous work by sector of economic activity	Agriculture	14.7	173	17.9	210	26.0	815	21.8	1,199	62.4	505	62.7	538	41.4	934	50.4	1,976	56.1	205	46.0	146	27.5	243	37.9	594
		Industry	24.8	291	24.0	281	36.6	1,149	31.4	1,722	15.3	124	16.4	141	27.8	627	22.7	892	13.5	49	21.8	69	21.3	189	19.6	307
		Services	14.7	173	40.8	479	65.3	2,051	49.2	2,703	22.3	180	20.9	179	30.8	696	26.9	1,055	30.4	111	32.2	102	51.2	454	42.5	667
	Children in hazardous work by status in employment	Employees	12.4	146	8.3	97	8.6	270	9.3	513	16.8	136	44.7	384	68.6	1,547	52.7	2,066	10.1	37	30.2	96	56.9	504	40.6	637
		Own-account workers	72.9	856	50.9	598	26.1	821	41.4	2,275	12.5	101	6.3	54	8.3	187	8.7	342	12.3	45	13.5	43	9.4	83	10.9	171
Contributing family workers		72.9	856	50.9	598	26.1	821	41.4	2,275	70.7	572	49.0	420	23.2	523	38.6	1,515	77.6	284	56.2	178	33.7	298	48.5	760	



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