

A report to the Ranking Member of the Committee on Education and Workforce, House of Representatives

For more information, contact: Thomas Costa at costat@gao.gov

What GAO Found

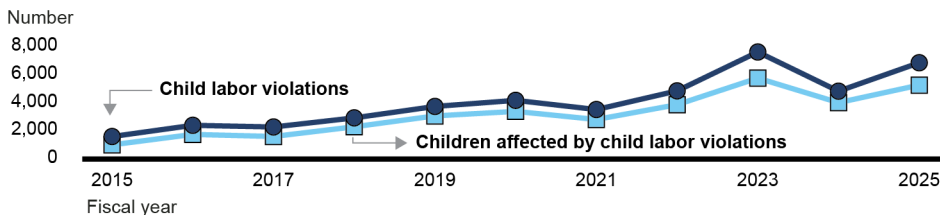
An estimated 2.8 million children worked in the U.S. in 2023, according to GAO's analysis. The Department of Labor (DOL) publishes statistical data that provide information on working children's fatalities, injuries, and illnesses. These data are used to develop workplace safety strategies and policies, but data limitations and discontinued data sets have contributed to information gaps. For example:

- In DOL's dataset on workplace fatalities, some data on the cause of death or industry in which the child worked are not publicly available.
- DOL changed how it collects data on working children's injuries and illnesses, so data since 2021 cannot be compared to earlier years.
- Between 2015 and 2023, one DOL survey and two other federal datasets that contained child labor injury data ended.

By mitigating child labor data gaps, DOL would be better positioned to identify and respond to dangerous working conditions for children.

Since fiscal year 2015, the number of annual child labor violations that DOL cited and the number of children affected by their employers' violations has generally increased, according to GAO's analysis (see figure). Examples of violations include children working later than allowed or doing hazardous work such as operating meat processing machines.

Cited Child Labor Violations and Children Affected, Fiscal Years 2015–2025



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) data from its Wage Hour Investigative Support and Reporting Database (WHISARD). | GAO-26-107722

DOL recently launched an initiative to enhance its enforcement of child labor laws, but it faces some challenges. For example:

- DOL regional and district officials expressed concern with the data DOL recommended for targeting egregious child labor violations, including that the data were not detailed enough to provide useful investigation leads. DOL does not have a process to identify and evaluate additional data sources.
- DOL officials described persistent knowledge gaps among employers and the public on child labor laws. DOL implemented a communications strategy to raise awareness, but taking steps to measure and assess its outreach would help DOL understand whether its efforts are achieving its goals.

In 2023 and 2024, DOL's interagency collaboration on child labor did not fully follow leading collaboration practices, according to GAO's analysis. Although DOL works with other agencies to protect children, it discontinued its interagency task force in 2025. Strengthening future collaboration and ensuring key information is shared could enhance DOL's efforts to protect working children.

Why GAO Did This Study

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 included provisions to protect the safety and health of working children under 18. Almost 90 years later, DOL continues to find numerous child labor law violations.

GAO was asked to review child labor data and enforcement. Among other things, this report addresses (1) information gaps in data about fatalities, injuries, and illnesses among working children; (2) trends in child labor violations; (3) recent changes DOL has made in its child labor enforcement practices, and how DOL has addressed related challenges; and (4) the extent to which DOL has collaborated with other federal agencies on child labor.

GAO analyzed federal data on working children from 2023; child labor fatalities, injuries, and illnesses since 2013; and cited child labor violations from 2015 to 2025 (the most recent data available). GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and agency documentation on enforcement and collaboration. To gather information on enforcement and challenges, GAO interviewed officials at DOL's Wage and Hour Division, including at five regional and six district offices selected to capture a variety of enforcement experiences. GAO also analyzed information from DOL and seven other agencies on child labor collaboration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to DOL, including that DOL mitigate child labor data gaps, develop a process to evaluate data for targeting investigations, and assess its employer outreach. DOL generally disagreed with the data gaps recommendation, neither agreed nor disagreed with the outreach recommendation, and agreed with the three other recommendations. GAO maintains DOL should fully implement its recommendations.