

## COMMUNICATIONS

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### THE IMPACT OF CHILD LABOR LAWS ON THE KINDS OF JOBS HELD BY YOUNG SCHOOL-LEAVERS

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Federal policy toward youth is divided between programs designed to encourage employment—programs intended to enhance “career education,” “career opportunities,” or “work experience”<sup>1</sup>—and provisions with the misleading name of “child labor laws.” The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which has the stated goal of eliminating “oppressive child labor,” actually governs the employment of teenagers aged 14 through 17. This complex law also contains minimum wage and overtime provisions, and it overlays state laws regulating youth employment.

Since it is difficult to quantify or isolate the effects of legal barriers to youth employment, there has been little empirical work on the subject, despite studies calling for a closer look at child labor laws (for example, [2, p. 32; 8, p. 41; 17, p. 26]). One study, prepared in the mid-1960s, did examine the relationship between such laws and juvenile delinquency (Woodworth [19]). Another relied heavily on interviews with employers to determine their perceptions of, and reactions to, the laws.<sup>2</sup> But neither was published, an indicator of the general lack of attention the subject has received. In contrast, there have been numerous studies of minimum wage laws—studies that have proceeded without attempting to disentangle the effects of child labor laws.

The study reported in this paper deals with the quantification of the impacts of child labor laws by using Census data to identify the shifting of employment toward uncovered sectors.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it points toward the need to

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[Manuscript received July 1978; accepted March 1979.]

- 1 For recent literature on youth employment programs, see Roth and Stromsdorfer [10], McGowan and Cohen [7], and Ferrin and Arbeiter [5].
- 2 National Committee on Employment of Youth [9]. It is somewhat ironic that this committee, which criticizes unwarranted legal restrictions on teenage employment, was formerly called the National Child Labor Committee. The NCLC was the major forum for child labor law advocates in the early 20th century.
- 3 This study is a shorter version of a paper published in [15]. ✓

*The Journal of Human Resources* • *vol. XV* • #3

0022-166X/80/0003-0396 \$01.00/0

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segregate the overall effects of the laws from the effects of minimum wages, maturity, and other factors.

There is always the possibility, of course, that child labor laws are redundant—that they do not change teenage employment behavior significantly from what it would be in the absence of legal restrictions—or that they are ineffective due to inadequate enforcement. If the laws had no measurable impact, there would be no possibility that reforming them could improve the youth employment outlook. The objective of this paper, the statistical detection of the effect of the laws on shifting employment toward uncovered sectors, is to establish the need to attach more importance to the employment effects of the laws. If the laws do shift significant numbers of jobs, then the potential conflict between youth employment programs and barriers to youth employment becomes very real.

In the next section, on historical antecedents, the complexity of the laws will become apparent. The following section deals with our methodology for analysis of the Census data. The empirical results and their implications are discussed in the final sections.

### I. BACKGROUND

From a historical viewpoint, present-day concerns about youth employment appear in stark contrast to the literature of 50 to 100 years ago. The older picture tended to view youth employment as a blight on American society.<sup>4</sup> Child labor reformers were concerned primarily with keeping young people out of the labor market. Of course, initially, reformers were concerned with youngsters at age levels substantially below the mid-teen years. They regarded premature employment as harmful to the health of children and as depriving them of education and proper vocational training.<sup>5</sup> There were other motives as well. For example, concerns were raised about the competition between young people and adults in the labor market and the effects this might have on adult wages.<sup>6</sup>

4 A compendium of historical readings on child labor and related topics can be found in Bremner [1].

5 For example: "Most of the adults employed are themselves graduates of child labor. They went to work at too early an age, received insufficient schooling and no special vocational training, and joined the ranks of the marginal laborers, the last to be hired and the first to be fired" (Fuller [6], p. 64). Also: "... even where the conditions are passably sanitary, the physical effects of this exploiting of children is disastrous in the extreme. Certain groups of undeveloped muscles suffer excessive fatigue, muscular degeneration results, followed by more or less permanent deformation" (Clark [3], p. 27).

6 Some child labor law advocates argued that child labor would weaken the white race relative to the black, since white children—not black—were working in southern textile mills. See Bremner [1], Vol. II, p. 659.

Child labor reformers were unwilling to rely on parents to supervise the age of entry of their offspring into the labor market or to select the types of jobs which they might hold upon entry. Parents of poor children were viewed by some reformers as ignorant of the benefits of education and the harm of premature work. Others took a less kindly view and viewed parents as exploiters of their own children.

Reformers first sought state and then federal regulation of child labor. Initially, federal regulatory efforts ran afoul of constitutional issues. However, in 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) included child labor within the scope of federal authority.<sup>7</sup> Since that time, child labor has been regulated through an overlapping federal/state system, with the effective regulation always being the stricter of the two sets of rules.

The Department of Labor takes the position that the provisions of the FLSA are basically simple to understand and that any difficulties they create for teenagers in finding employment can be corrected by improved information.<sup>8</sup> One official estimate is that the laws actually restrict 5 percent of the jobs available.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this sanguine view needs reexamination. In the sample of 18–21-year-old high school dropouts discussed below, it was found that 49 percent of the males worked in occupations and industries most likely to be affected by the laws, which suggests a similar order of magnitude for the effects on those under age 18. It is undoubtedly true that child labor laws are merely one of the many causes of the difficulties that youths have in finding work. But the laws are sufficiently complex that in many industries employers may find it advantageous to avoid hiring teenagers at the covered ages.

State child labor laws typically intertwine with other related laws, chiefly school-leaving laws and workers' compensation laws. The federal FLSA relies heavily on the enforcement of "hazardous orders" for 16–17-year-olds issued by the Secretary of Labor which, whatever their intent, appear to the lay reader to make suspect any sort of blue-collar employment at a factory, mine, construction site, utility, or transportation facility. For 14–15-year-olds, such blue-collar employment appears to be virtually banned by the FLSA. In short, the *potential* effect of child labor laws is larger than the attention that has been paid to them suggests. We turn, therefore, to methods of quantifying the effects of the laws.

7 For a history of the legislative effort, see Trattner [11].

8 See "Elisburg Explains the Laws Applying to Summer Jobs for Teenagers," U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, press release, June 12, 1977. The release declares "that there is nothing complicated" about child labor laws. However, its description of the federal law, combined with its warning to employers that they should familiarize themselves with state laws as well, conveys quite the opposite impression.

9 This figure is cited in Wirtz [18], p. 60.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The child labor laws are inherently difficult to quantify since they cannot be reduced to a single number, as can the minimum wage. The fact that they vary from state to state might superficially seem to open the possibility of cross-sectional investigation. But the overlap with the federal FLSA, combined with the fact that the laws have many different facets and modes of enforcement, closes the door on cross-state studies of a general nature.

The analysis which follows takes advantage of one simple aspect of state and federal child labor laws—the age of application. Child labor laws cover youth employment up to age 18. If young people age 18 and older are free from legal restriction, then a comparison of their labor-market behavior with that of younger teenagers should provide some indication of the effect of child labor laws. Such a comparison, of course, must rely on the assumption that the older and younger workers are equally employable—an assumption that can be questioned on several grounds.

First, age 18 coincides roughly with high school graduation. Many graduates go to college, but a significant number do not.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a simple comparison of young people 18 years of age and older with those younger than 18 would ignore the greater availability for employment—especially full-time employment—of graduates. Second, there is a positive statistical correlation between various indexes of “success” in the labor market—wage, occupation, employment stability, etc.—with education. On the average, older individuals will be more educated, and hence more employable, than younger people. A simple comparison of younger and older individuals would ignore the education effect. Third, there are various other factors associated with age that could influence employment behavior. For example, younger people are less likely than older persons to be married or to have dependents. And there may be a less tangible maturity effect that makes older workers more productive than younger workers in the eyes of employers. Simple comparisons tend to overlook maturity effects.

Despite these difficulties, it is possible to select a sample of young people which provides at least partial standardization for these age-related influences. For this study, a sample of employed urban school dropouts (those with less than a high school education and not attending school) living in the western states was selected from the 1970 *Census of Population*.<sup>11</sup> Using

10 Some indication of this can be found in the following statistics on enrollment rates. In 1975, 89.0 percent of all 16–17-year-olds were enrolled in school, while only 46.9 percent of 18–19-year-olds were so enrolled. About one-third of high school graduates can be expected to complete college four years after high school graduation. Source: [13], pp. 120, 140.

11 The sample was extracted from the computer tapes for the Public Use Sample. For details, see [12]. The Census regions included are West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific. A

a sample of dropouts helps to avoid two of the problems mentioned above. Nonenrolled dropouts are potentially available for full-time work since they are not otherwise occupied in school. This will be true whether they are younger or older than 18 years. Also, nonenrolled dropouts, by definition, are not increasing their educational attainment. Hence, older dropouts will have less of an educational advantage than would be found in a comparable selection of enrolled students and graduates. It is more difficult to deal with the maturity effect. However, in the following analysis, some evidence on its importance is provided. A way of partially dealing with maturity is to truncate the upper age limit of the sample at a relatively young age. For this reason, the sample was confined to 14–21-year-olds.

In all, 2724 individuals in the school-leaver sample were employed at the time of the Census. Using this employed subsample, it is possible to investigate whether a child labor law effect on employment *composition* is supported by the data. Specifically, a reading of child labor laws suggests that these regulations will have their greatest employment-limiting effect in the blue-collar occupations (other than unpaid family workers) in mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation, and public utilities.<sup>12</sup> If that is the case, then the proportion of the employment subsample working in blue-collar jobs in these industries ought to be significantly less for 14–17-year-olds than for the 18–21-year-olds. The former group is within the range covered by child labor laws; the latter is not. For convenience, blue-collar employment in the above-mentioned industries is denoted “covered” employment in the analysis that follows.

The definition of covered employment is based on impressions from an actual reading of child labor laws. Some readers may prefer a less impressionistic definition. Since child labor laws are designed in part to protect the safety of teenage workers, an alternative approach is to define the restricted sector in terms of industrial hazards. Specifically, if the laws are well designed and enforced, employment in industries with above-average work-injury rates should be the most restricted. Accordingly, “hazardous” employment was defined as blue-collar work in industries with

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comparison of the western sample with published Census data for the entire urban United States suggests that no substantial demographic distortions are introduced by using the western region. However, nonwhite school-leavers are somewhat underrepresented in the West compared with the entire country (17.4 versus 23.9 percent). It is possible that state child labor laws are generally more lax with regard to agricultural employment than for other forms of employment.

12 Blue-collar employment is defined as including the following Census occupation classes: craftsmen and kindred workers, operatives, laborers, and farmers. Unpaid family workers are generally less restricted in employment by child labor laws than are other workers.

above-average work-injury rates.<sup>13</sup> The basic methodology, therefore, consists of comparing the ratios of covered (hazardous) employment to total employment at ages above and below 18 years.

The enforcement of child labor laws undoubtedly differs across states; in our comparison of individuals 18–21 with those 14–17, spatial variations in enforcement will allow those in the younger age group to appear in covered or hazardous sectors. There are other reasons for the appearance of 14–17-year-olds in the covered sector: chiefly, that our determination of “covered” jobs is not coterminous with the actual scope of the laws. But imperfections in measurement should not preclude the search for an effect of the laws. In fact, the appearance of a statistically significant effect indicates that enforcement of the laws is not without effect and that the impact of the laws on youth employment deserves more serious consideration.

### III. RESULTS

Table 1 displays the ratio of employment in the covered and hazardous sectors to total employment. For example, 32.3 percent of the 399 employed males aged 14–17 were in the covered sectors. The older age cohort generally had a larger proportion employed in the covered and hazardous sectors, but the increase in the ratio is not always statistically significant. To test for significance, we used a test statistic that is equal to the difference in sample proportions (the proportion for the older group less the proportion for the younger group) divided by the standard error of the difference.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the cells in Table 1 contain small samples, whereas the significance test applies only for large samples. However, most cells contain at least 50 individuals, a point considered by most authorities to be the cutoff for reasonable accuracy of the test. When the cells with more than 50 individuals are observed, it will be found that most have strongly significant differences which indicate that child labor laws affect the composition of youth employment.

Table 1 displays the employment ratios in covered and hazardous employment broken down by age, sex, and other demographic character-

13 Industries were classified by roughly 3-digit SIC level on the basis of recordable occupational injury and illness incidence rates for 1973. (In a few cases where data were missing, 1972 rates were used.) The mean rate for the private sector in 1973 was 11 cases per 100 full-time-equivalent employees. Source: [14], pp. 425–32.

14 This test statistic has an approximately normal distribution for large samples, so the significance test employs the usual critical value for a two-tail significance test at the 95 percent level of confidence. A one-tailed test might be more appropriate and would yield a critical value of 1.65.

TABLE 1  
EMPLOYMENT COMPOSITION OF EMPLOYED SCHOOL-LEAVERS:  
BY AGE

Sector	Males			Females		
	14-17 Years	18-21 Years	Test Statistic	14-17 Years	18-21 Years	Test Statistic
	<i>Total Sample</i>					
Sample size	399	1327	—	238	760	—
Covered (%)	32.3	49.1	6.16	13.5	23.7	3.79
Hazardous (%)	42.4	52.9	3.73	12.6	19.5	2.65
	<i>Whites</i>					
Sample size	353	1118	—	198	642	—
Covered (%)	32.0	49.3	5.96	12.1	24.8	4.40
Hazardous (%)	43.1	53.1	3.32	11.6	19.6	2.90
	<i>Nonwhites</i>					
Sample size	46	209	—	40	118	—
Covered (%)	34.8	47.8	1.67	20.0	17.8	-.30
Hazardous (%)	37.0	51.7	1.86	17.5	18.6	.16
	<i>White Blue-Collar Workers<sup>a</sup></i>					
Sample size	224	863	—	37	190	—
Covered (%)	39.7	57.4	4.81	48.6	72.1	2.66
Hazardous (%)	57.1	62.1	1.35	37.8	52.1	1.63
	<i>Nonwhite Blue-Collar Workers<sup>a</sup></i>					
Sample size	24	139	—	14	27	—
Covered (%)	37.5	65.5	2.62	50.0	74.1	1.53
Hazardous (%)	45.8	70.5	2.27	42.9	70.4	1.73
	<i>Single<sup>b</sup></i>					
Sample size	342	784	—	192	446	—
Covered (%)	31.0	45.2	4.62	14.1	21.7	2.42
Hazardous (%)	41.2	40.0	-.36	13.0	18.2	1.69
	<i>Married—Spouse Present</i>					
Sample size	57	543	—	46	314	—
Covered (%)	40.4	54.7	2.10	10.9	26.4	2.98
Hazardous (%)	49.1	59.9	1.54	10.9	21.3	2.04

Source: See text.

a See fn. 12 of text for occupations included.

b Includes never married as well as divorced, widowed, and separated.

istics. In almost all cases, these ratios are higher for 18-21-year-olds than for 14-17-year-olds. Moreover, where sample size is not a limiting factor, the differences between the ratios for males tend to be somewhat larger than

those for females. Women are less likely to hold blue-collar jobs in heavy industry at any age, so these findings are not unexpected.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1 also provides some evidence on the maturity effects. As was previously noted, comparisons of younger and older workers might be influenced by differences in maturity that could compromise the interpretation of the comparisons. One element of maturity is the tendency to be married. Marriage, with spouse present, definitely influences labor-force participation—generally upward for males and downward for females. However, even when the sample is broken down into single individuals and married individuals, the gaps in the covered and hazardous employment ratios between the age groups remain. If marriage is important in determining employment ratios—and it does seem to boost employment ratios in the restricted sectors for males—it is still not sufficient to eliminate the marked differences between older and younger persons in the school-leaver sample. Thus, the ratios in Table 1 support the hypotheses that child labor laws twist employment away from the covered sectors.

There are other aspects to maturity aside from the propensity to marry. Whatever maturity entails, however, it is unlikely to be a quality that is bestowed at an individual's 18th birthday. It seems more reasonable to assume that maturity accrues gradually. If this is so, a better understanding of the maturity effect might be obtained from a more detailed age breakdown than is available on Table 1.

Two problems arise when detailed age groupings are used. First, the sample size in any cell is reduced, decreasing the precision of the estimates. Second, child labor laws apply differently to 14–15-year-olds compared with 16–17-year-olds, thus distorting the comparison of these two age groups. Both of these considerations imply that special attention should be paid to a comparison of 18–19-year-olds with 20–21-year-olds. The sample size is larger at these age levels, and neither age bracket is covered by child labor laws.

Table 2 shows that for both white and nonwhite males there is no significant shift in employment composition toward restricted work between ages 18–19 and 20–21. If maturity, in fact, pushed employment toward restricted sectors at these ages, a significant shift would be anticipated. But none is found. Thus, it appears that increased maturity does not push males into restricted employment at age levels close to 18 years. In contrast, the gap between age brackets 16–17 and 18–19 is always significant, and it is always in the direction that analysis of child labor laws predicts.

For females, the pattern is less clear. Nonwhite females show no

<sup>15</sup> In results not presented, little difference was found when the results were disaggregated by city size.



TABLE 2  
EMPLOYMENT COMPARISON BY DETAILED AGE, RACE, AND SEX:  
ALL WORKERS

	14-15 Years	16-17 Years	18-19 Years	20-21 Years
White males (number)	80	273	530	588
Covered (%)	20.0	26.7 (1.29)	42.6 (4.63)	45.7 (1.04)
Hazardous (%)	22.5	40.3 (3.22)	48.1 (2.12)	47.9 (-.10)
Nonwhite males (number)	15	31	94	115
Covered (%)	26.7	16.1 (-.80)	40.4 (2.92)	46.1 (.83)
Hazardous (%)	33.3	19.4 (-.99)	42.6 (2.65)	50.4 (1.13)
White females (number)	47	151	288	354
Covered (%)	6.4	13.9 (1.64)	20.1 (1.69)	28.5 (2.50)
Hazardous (%)	14.9	10.6 (-.75)	18.1 (2.22)	20.1 (.64)
Nonwhite females (number)	10	30	39	79
Covered (%)	30.0	16.7 (-.83)	20.5 (.40)	16.4 (-.53)
Hazardous (%)	20.0	16.7 (-.23)	23.1 (.67)	16.4 (-.84)
Total males (number)	95	304	624	703
Covered (%)	21.1	25.7 (.94)	42.3 (5.20)	45.8 (1.28)
Hazardous (%)	24.2	38.2 (2.69)	47.3 (2.65)	48.2 (.33)
Total females (number)	57	181	327	433
Covered (%)	10.5	14.4 (.81)	20.2 (1.69)	26.3 (1.99)
Hazardous (%)	15.8	11.6 (-.78)	18.7 (2.21)	20.1 (.48)

Source: See text.

Note: Statistic in parentheses is a test statistic comparing the figure above with the figure in the column to the left. See text fn. 14.

evidence of a shift effect in Table 1. Hence, there is no point in searching Table 2 for a maturity explanation of a nonexistent effect. Any examination of the issue must necessarily be confined to white females. For whites, some evidence of a maturity effect—a significant gap between 18–19 and 20–21—does appear when the covered employment definition is used, but it fails to appear when the hazardous definition is followed. Perhaps the ambiguity of the female results is to be expected. Women at all ages are generally less likely to work in the types of jobs most covered by child labor laws. Thus, employment opportunities for female teenagers are less likely to be affected by such laws than those for males. Of course, in the future, as women move into traditionally “male” jobs, the effect of the laws on females could become more important.

In summary, the data analysis is supportive of an employment-shift effect on male school-leavers caused by child labor laws, but is ambiguous for females. Some youngsters under age 18 are apparently restricted in their choice of jobs. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that, overall, all school-leaver employment is depressed. However, there is a possibility that the complication of the job search by child labor laws has an employment-limiting effect. The need for further research on the overall employment effect will be discussed in the next section.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS

It is possible that the impact of minimum wage laws on teenage employment that some researchers claim to find is, in fact, an interaction effect between minimum wage and child labor laws. Child labor laws tend to crowd employment into certain unrestricted sectors. This, in turn, may depress wages in those sectors to the point where they hit the minimum wage floor. Under these circumstances, the total volume of employment would be limited. The findings of this study suggest the need to estimate the overall employment effect of the child labor laws and to segregate this effect from the minimum wage laws.

The sample described above consisted solely of school-leavers. It cannot be used to estimate directly the effects of child labor laws on all teenagers, including those enrolled in school. In fact, enrolled teenagers are less likely to be available for full-time work than are school-leavers. Thus, they are less likely to be employable—at least during the school year—in some of the heavy industries included in the covered (hazardous) sectors. Of course, some enrolled teenagers may stay in school simply because job opportunities are limited.<sup>16</sup> The evidence presented above suggests that the

<sup>16</sup> One study found that white males seemed to have to a greater propensity to remain in school when local employment rates were high. See Edwards [4].

labor-market difficulties of school-leavers cannot be analyzed without reference to child labor and related laws.

Employment restrictions in child labor laws and associated compulsory school-attendance laws should also be of interest to criminologists and specialists in juvenile delinquency. Sociologists have emphasized the important effect of peer relationships on delinquency and failure in school. If employment opportunities are cut off, peers may well turn out to be juvenile delinquents themselves. On the other hand, an employed youth will have an alternative reference group—those at the workplace.<sup>17</sup>

An overall assessment of child labor laws is beyond the scope of this paper. However, some observations can be made. With the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970, which sets safety standards for all workplaces, the rationale for separate child labor laws based on hazardous conditions became suspect. The use of hazardous orders to regulate teenage employment needs to be reexamined.

On the other hand, there is some basis for the fear of child labor law advocates that early entry into the labor market could lock teenagers into undesirable jobs. It is well known that, *on average*, high school dropouts do less well than graduates in the labor market. In particular, they tend to end up in lower-paying occupations. Despite the popular conception of youth as a period of great mobility in the labor market, many youths do not change occupations easily. The Census indicated that of young males 18–25 in 1965 who were employed in that year and in 1970, about 42 percent were in the same occupation in both years.<sup>18</sup>

While a lock-in effect is a definite possibility for high school leavers, it still must be recognized that there is considerable overlap in income distribution between dropouts and graduates. Moreover, while child labor laws undoubtedly create an incentive to stay in school, they do so by penalizing those who ignore the incentive and drop out anyway. As such, the laws seem regressive. Alternatively, more positive incentives to stay in school may be created and would be preferable.

Modification of child labor laws is a difficult undertaking because of the joint federal/state jurisdiction. The process could be eased were the Congress to assert sole jurisdiction over child labor in the Fair Labor

17 Evidence on the relationship between peer group and delinquency is reported by Hyman Rodman and Paul Grams, "Juvenile Delinquency and the Family," in [16], pp. 188–221.

18 The 42 percent figure is from a sample of males (school-leavers and high school graduates with no college) in the western region, drawn by the authors from the Public Use Sample tapes. The sample revealed, moreover, that during the five-year period, school-leavers exhibited somewhat less upward mobility out of typically low-wage occupations than did graduates. So graduation brings both a better average starting occupation and a greater probability of moving out of less desirable occupations. A total of 102 Census occupation titles were used for this computation.

Standards Act. But the authors are under no illusion that such a step would come easily. Moreover, reform of child labor laws would not "solve" the youth employment problem. At best, a modest improvement in employment prospects would result. However, the prospect of government programs to create jobs for teenagers operating in the face of other programs designed to limit jobs is unsettling. Improving the job market for teenagers will require a package of policies in which reform of child labor laws should be included.

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