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2021: International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour

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In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Resolution that declared 2021 as the “International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour”.¹ The Resolution is aligned with the Sustainable Development Agenda (2015-2030), which recognizes extreme poverty as the greatest global challenge and its eradication as an essential requirement for achieving all three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental –, and comprises a set of comprehensive and transformational objectives and targets. Target 8.7 establishes the commitment to eradicate all forms of child labour by 2025.²

Child labour is any form of work which deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that harms their physical and mental development. The International Labour Organization (ILO) considers that children are those aged under 18 years old, and lists four categories of the worst forms of child labour (Figure 1).³

	a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
	b) use, procuring or offering children for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances;
	c) use, procuring or offering children to carry out illegal activities, in particular the production and trafficking of drugs, as defined in relevant international treaties; and
	d) work which by its nature or the conditions in which it is performed is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Sources:
https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/ILO_C_182.pdf
http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2019-2022/2019/Decreto/D10088.htm#art5

Figure 1 – The worst forms of child labour, according to the International Labour Organization

The definition of child labour varies according to each country’s legal framework. In Brazil, children are not allowed to work before they are 14 years old. Between 14 and 24 years of age, being hired as an apprentice is permitted.^{4,5} Adolescents aged 16 and 17 years old are allowed to work, provided they do not work at night or in unhealthy, hazardous or onerous activities defined on the national list of the worst forms of child labour.⁶

Worldwide, according to ILO, in 2016 there were 152 million children working, with greater prevalence in Africa (19.6%), followed by the Americas (5.3%).⁷ In Brazil, according to the results of the National Continuous Household Sample Survey – Child and Adolescent Labour, conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in 2019 there were 1.8 million children and adolescents aged between 5 and 17 years old in situations of child labour, 706,000 of whom were working in the worst forms of child labour. Of the total population performing child labour, 53.7% were 16 and 17 years old, 25.0% were between 14 and 15 years old and 21.3% were aged 5 to 13 years old. The majority were male (66.4%) and were of black or brown skin colour (66.1%).⁸

Between 2016 and 2019, child labour prevalence dropped from 5.3% to 4.6% in Brazil.⁸ Notwithstanding, child labour continues to be one of the country’s most serious problems, and its falling trend may be interrupted with the advent of COVID-19. Interruption of school activities, resulting from the distancing measures needed to address the pandemic, and increased poverty, are factors that contribute to the growth in child labour. International agencies, such as ILO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have alerted as to this situation.⁹

Health surveillance has an important role in addressing child labour. Surveillance systems that provide information about the profile of children and adolescents who work, where they are located, as well as the types of injuries and diseases that occur in this population, are essential for targeting and evaluating prevention efforts.¹⁰ As such, the need exists to enhance national health information systems, so that they have adequate coverage, quality and timeliness for notifying health conditions related to child labour, including accidents, violence and death.

With the aim of drawing attention to the problem and highlighting the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, *Epidemiology and Health Services: journal of the Brazilian National Health System* has stamped on the cover of Volume 30 (2021) the colours of one of the pinwheel's blades, the symbol of the fight to eradicate child labour globally.

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