

# SIERRA LEONE

## MODERATE ADVANCEMENT

In 2023, Sierra Leone made moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government enacted the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act of 2023, which institutionalizes inclusive, rights-based access to education for all children, including pregnant girls and children with disabilities, which is key to preventing children's engagement in child labor. With support from international partners, the government also trained border authorities, judges, prosecutors, and police investigators on how to detect, investigate, and prosecute child trafficking and refer victims for services. In addition, it established a national referral mechanism to ensure victims of human trafficking receive social services and created an anti-human trafficking advisory board and committee to set counter-trafficking policy, carry out programs, and track victim referrals. Finally, Sierra Leone conducted a baseline study on child trafficking and child labor in Kambia district and hosted a regional conference on human trafficking with fellow member states of the Economic Community of West African States, where government ministers examined existing practices and explored new ways to combat human trafficking. Although the government made meaningful efforts in all relevant areas during the reporting period, it did not impose any penalties for violations of the worst forms of child labor. In addition, Sierra Leone's light work provisions do not meet international standards because they do not specify the activities and conditions in which light work may be undertaken or limit the number of hours of light work. Sierra Leone also lacks a national policy and social programs to address all worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor in domestic work and mining.



## PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

### Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent of Population
Working	5 to 14	35.1% (Unavailable)
Hazardous Work by Children	15 to 17	Unavailable
Attending School	5 to 14	78.2%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	32.2%

Children in Sierra Leone are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and forced labor in mining. Children also engage in dangerous tasks in quarrying stone and fishing.

### Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity



#### Agriculture

Working in agriculture, including cultivating palm fruit, cocoa, and coffee, and processing harvested produce.

Fishing,<sup>†</sup> including artisanal fishing. Forestry, including working in logging.



#### Industry

Mining,<sup>†</sup> including for diamonds. Quarrying<sup>†</sup> and crushing stone, including granite, and shoveling gravel.

Construction, including housing construction and serving as laborers for contractors. Working in manufacturing.<sup>†</sup>



#### Services

Scavenging scrap metals and recyclable materials from dumpsites. Domestic work and street work, including begging, trading, and selling goods. Portering, including carrying

heavy loads.<sup>†</sup> Working as apprentices, including in auto repair shops and on transportation vehicles, including minibuses and motorbike taxis.



#### Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor<sup>‡</sup>

Forced begging. Forced domestic work. Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking.

Forced labor in street hawking, quarrying, mining (including for alluvial diamonds), rock breaking, agriculture, scavenging for scrap metal, and motorbike taxi driving. Use in illicit activities, including the cultivation and trafficking of drugs.

<sup>†</sup> Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

<sup>‡</sup> 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 Sierra Leone's implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

### Legal Framework

Ensure that the Child Rights Act's light work provisions specify the activities and conditions in which light work may be undertaken and limit the number of hours of light work.

Ensure that hazardous work occupations prohibited for children are comprehensive, including by prohibiting scavenging at dumpsites.

Ensure free basic public education is guaranteed by law for all children in Sierra Leone.

### Enforcement

Increase the number of labor inspectors from 28 to at least 71 to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 2.8 million workers.

Provide labor and criminal law enforcement officials with sufficient funding to adequately enforce labor laws throughout the country, including in the informal sector and the mining sector.

Publish information on labor law enforcement efforts, including the number and type of inspections conducted, the number of violations found, and penalties imposed and collected.

Ensure that unannounced inspections are conducted and cease the practice of informing employers ahead of time.

Establish a complaint mechanism to receive child labor complaints from the public.

Institutionalize training for labor inspectors and criminal law enforcement personnel to ensure that violations are adequately investigated and prosecuted.

Improve criminal law enforcement data collection to better track and prosecute worst forms of child labor crimes, including forced domestic labor, forced begging, and commercial sexual exploitation.

Ensure that the Director of Public Prosecution and the Family Support Unit share data to adequately enforce criminal violations, including child trafficking.

Investigate, prosecute, and when appropriate, convict and sentence religious teachers who exploit children in forced labor.

### Coordination

Ensure that village-level and chiefdom-level Child Welfare Committees are established and operational in all areas.

### Government Policies

Adopt policies to address the worst forms of child labor in relevant sectors, such as mining, quarrying, and commercial sexual exploitation.

### Social Programs

Remove barriers to education by reducing school-related costs, providing transportation to schools in rural areas, increasing the number of teachers and secondary schools, improving facilities for students with disabilities, and eliminating abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence by teachers and other students.

Increase the availability of and funding for shelters and safe houses for survivors of forced labor and children removed from street work.

Institute programs to address child labor in agriculture, domestic work, and street work.

Create public outreach and education campaigns to provide youth and their families with more information on their rights, responsibilities, and risks in relation to *men pikin* arrangements.



## CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Children in *men pikin* arrangements face heightened risk of labor exploitation in Sierra Leone. *Men pikin* is a Krio term for foster care, where family members send children to relatives in urban areas with promises of better educational opportunities. However, some children are instead subjected to forced labor by their host families. Unhoused children and children living with disabilities also face increased risk of exploitation in street begging. In addition, children sent to Koranic schools face heightened risks of labor trafficking.



## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Over the past several years, the government has implemented significant initiatives to make education free through secondary school and improve access for girls and children with disabilities. While primary enrollment has increased, barriers to access remain, including indirect costs (food, uniforms, supplies), illegitimate fees charged by schools, a lack of qualified teachers and secondary schools, insufficient transportation for rural students, a lack of adequate facilities and teachers for children with disabilities, and violence (both physical and sexual) by teachers and other students.






## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Sierra Leone has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, Sierra Leone's laws do not meet international standards on light work, the identification of all relevant hazardous activities, or the guarantee of free basic public education.

Child Labor Laws and Regulations	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work, <b>15 Years</b>		Sections 125, 129, and 131 of the Child Rights Act
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work, <b>18 Years</b>		Sections 126, 128, and 131 of the Child Rights Act; Section 175 of the Mines and Minerals Development Act
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		Sections 128 and 131 of the Child Rights Act
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		Sections 1 and 12–14 of the 2022 Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act; Section 19 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		Sections 1, 12–14, and 17–19 of the 2022 Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		Sections 1, 12–14, and 17–19 of the 2022 Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act; Sections 26–34 of the 2012 Sexual Offenses Act
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		Sections 7 and 13 of the National Drugs Control Act
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment, <b>18 Years</b>		Section 28 of the Child Rights Act
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military		Section 28 of the Child Rights Act

**Legal Framework for Child Labor (Cont.)**

Child Labor Laws and Regulations	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		Sections 1 and 12 of the 2022 Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act
Compulsory Education Age, <b>15 Years</b>		Section 125 of the Child Rights Act
Free Public Education		Sections 19(5)(d), 22(2), and 24 of The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act

\* Country has no conscription

In 2023, the government enacted a new Mines and Minerals Development Act, which repealed and replaced the Mines and Minerals Act of 2009. The new law provides for stronger penalties for the use of child labor than the previous law and the Child Rights Act. The government also enacted educational reforms during the reporting period with The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act of 2023. The new law aims to institutionalize inclusive, rights-based access to education for all children, including pregnant girls and children with disabilities, and prohibits discrimination, harassment, corporal punishment, and verbal and sexual abuse in schools. However, it does not explicitly guarantee free public education as it permits schools to charge fees to students. On the labor front, though the Child Rights Act sets the minimum age for light work at age 13, it does not limit the number of hours per week for light work, determine the activities in which light work may be permitted, or specify the conditions in which light work may be undertaken, which is not in compliance with international standards. In addition, although the Child Rights Act identifies hazardous work prohibited for children, it does not cover scavenging for recyclable materials at dumpsites, an activity for which there is evidence that children in Sierra Leone are exposed to hazardous medical waste. The government enacted a new Employment Act in May 2023, but it simply reaffirmed preexisting articles on child labor.



**ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR**

In 2023, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Sierra Leone took actions to address child labor. However, insufficient human and financial resource allocation hindered enforcement efforts.

**Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement**

**Ministry of Employment, Labour and Social Security (MELSS):** Through its Child Labor Unit, formulates, implements, and monitors compliance with child labor regulations. Enforces labor laws in the formal sector via its District Labor Officers. Local-level District Councils handle enforcement of child labor laws in the informal sector. Insufficient human resources, lack of funding for fuel and other supplies, and in some provinces lack of office space hindered its efforts to enforce child labor laws.

**Sierra Leone Police:** Investigate child labor crimes through their Family Support Unit. Through the Transnational Organized Crime Unit, enforce human trafficking laws and provide statistical data and general information on cases of human trafficking. Refer cases for legal advice and prosecution to the Ministry of Justice's Director of Public Prosecution. Work with the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs to identify cases and coordinate services for victims. However, suspected child labor violations are mostly reported as either transnational child trafficking or domestic child abuse, and Sierra Leone Police statistics do not distinguish child labor crimes from child abuse violations, which limits the government's ability to track and prosecute child labor crimes.

### Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts

Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes	Has a Complaint Mechanism	No
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes	Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	N/A
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Yes	Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes	Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	N/A

In 2023, **28** labor inspectors conducted **600** worksite inspections, finding **0** child labor violations. The government also conducted **32** investigations into suspected worst forms of child labor crimes, but initiated **0** prosecutions and convicted **0** perpetrators.



### COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

<p><b>Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor</b></p> <p>Sierra Leone established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor at the national level. However, gaps remain in coordination at the village and chiefdom levels.</p>	<p><b>National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labor:</b> Coordinates efforts to address child labor. Led by MELSS, with representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs, the National Commission for Children, the Sierra Leone Police Family Support Unit, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, international organizations, and civil society organizations. Meets quarterly to advise on policies related to child labor. In 2023, the steering committee advised the government to empower the National Commission for Children to receive complaints about child labor exploitation, to investigate allegations, and to refer cases to courts for prosecution.</p>
<p><b>Key Policies Related to Child Labor</b></p> <p>Sierra Leone established policies related to child labor. However, these policies do not cover all worst forms of child labor in the country, including in mining, quarrying, and commercial sexual exploitation.</p>	<p><b>National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2021–2023):</b> Promoted cooperation between civil society organizations, international organizations, and government agencies to address human trafficking. Established strategic objectives to ensure the thorough investigation of trafficking cases. In April 2023, Sierra Leone hosted a regional conference on human trafficking with fellow member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where government ministers examined existing practices, explored new ways to combat human trafficking, and sought to improve harmonization and coordination of efforts across the region.</p> <p><b>National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools:</b> Ensures that schools throughout Sierra Leone are accessible to all children, especially those typically marginalized or excluded, including children with disabilities, children from low-income families, children in rural and underserved areas, and girls who are currently pregnant or already parents and in school. The government’s implementation plan for the policy runs through 2026.</p>
<p>‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor.</p>	<p><b>National Migration Policy:</b> Aims to protect the rights of migrants, with specific reference to trafficking survivors, asylum seekers, and children. Also seeks to increase public awareness of human trafficking and build the capacity of law enforcement personnel to detect and prevent trafficking, especially child trafficking. Established by the government with support from the EU, the Africa Regional Migration Program implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United States Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. During the reporting period, the government worked with IOM to train border authorities on human trafficking detection and victim referral, and to provide psychosocial counselling and vulnerability screening to over 300 returnees.</p>

**Coordination, Policies, and Programs (Cont.)**

**Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor**

Sierra Leone funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address child labor in all sectors and in all states where child labor has been identified, including agriculture, domestic work, and street vending.

*† Program is funded by the Government of Sierra Leone.  
‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor.*

**Child Trafficking Shelters:**<sup>†</sup> Provide accommodation and care to survivors of forced labor and human trafficking, including mental health services, trauma-informed care, family tracing, and reintegration assistance. During the reporting period, World Hope International provided shelter services to trafficking survivors referred under the National Referral Mechanism, which went into effect in February 2023.

**Free Quality School Education:**<sup>‡</sup> A Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education program intended to cover the costs of school tuition and fees and provide meals, textbooks, and some teaching materials in remote communities. Allocates over 20 percent of the country's budget to education. During the reporting period, primary enrollment and completion rates increased. With the support of UNICEF, the government also trained pre-primary and early-grade teachers. However, the subsidies paid to government and government-assisted schools through this program reportedly do not cover all costs, and some families are still required to pay fees.

**U.S. Government-Funded Projects:** Department of State Program to End Modern Slavery funded a study to research the prevalence, methods, and impacts of child trafficking and child labor in Kono, Kenema, Kailahun, and Kambia districts of Sierra Leone. The Kambia research, published during the reporting period by the Center on Human Trafficking Research and Outreach at the University of Georgia in conjunction with the African Programming and Research Initiative to End Slavery, established a baseline prevalence of child trafficking and child labor in the districts and identified gaps in policies and services aimed at preventing and addressing child trafficking in the country.

For information about USDOL's projects to address child labor around the world, visit [dol.gov/ILABprojects](https://dol.gov/ILABprojects)  
For references, please visit [dol.gov/ChildLaborReports](https://dol.gov/ChildLaborReports)