

Does minimum age of employment regulation reduce child labor?

The global fight against child labor might be better served by focusing less on existing laws and more on implementation and enforcement

Keywords: child labor, human capital, social protection

ELEVATOR PITCH

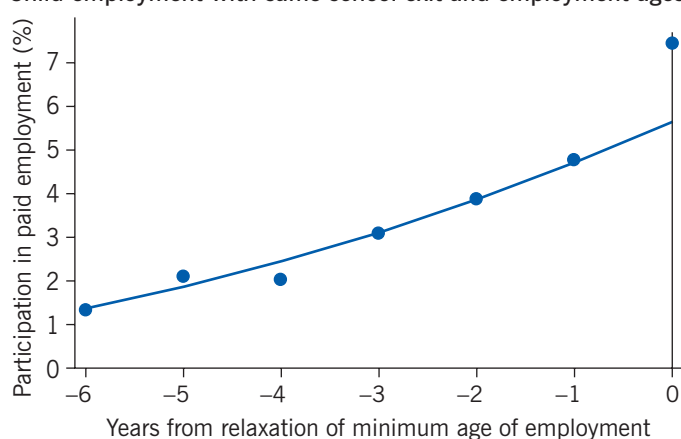
Regulation of the minimum age of employment is the dominant tool used to combat child labor globally. If enforced, these regulations can change the types of work in which children participate, but minimum age regulations are not a useful tool to promote education. Despite their nearly universal adoption, recent research for 59 developing countries finds little evidence that these regulations influence child time allocation in a meaningful way. Going forward, coordinating compulsory schooling laws and minimum age of employment regulations may help maximize the joint influence of these regulations on child time allocation, but these regulations should not be the focus of the global fight against child labor.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ If enforced, minimum age regulation can be a useful tool to change how children work.
- ⊕ Regulation is strongest when coordinated with compulsory schooling laws.
- ⊕ Reductions in child labor can be accomplished with minimal impact on family living standards.
- ⊕ Coerced and forced child laborers, although a small share of working children, may benefit the most from minimum age of employment laws.
- ⊕ Minimum age regulation may establish new societal norms over time and may provide tools for the legal system to go after gross violators.

Child employment with same school exit and employment ages



Source: Based on Figure 3.

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World of Labor

Cons

- ⊖ Minimum age regulation is not a tool to promote education.
- ⊖ Minimum age regulation can separate children from their parents in the labor market, leaving children more vulnerable.
- ⊖ Most child laborers are involved in activities that are outside the scope of minimum age regulation.
- ⊖ There is little evidence that minimum age regulations are being enforced.
- ⊖ The adoption of minimum age regulation appears to be motivated by global political concerns.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Minimum age regulations have the potential to reduce child labor. As currently implemented, however, they do not appear to substantively influence child employment and may lessen political pressure for more meaningful reforms. If enforced, minimum age regulations can be a useful tool to change how children work, but there is little evidence of widespread enforcement. Minimum age regulations are not a tool to promote schooling.