

DATA BRIEF ON CHILD LABOUR

IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



Foreword

Child labour remains one of the most urgent child rights challenges in Eastern and Southern Africa. Today, an estimated 41 million children in our region are engaged in child labour – nearly one third the global total.

The persistence of child labour stands in clear contrast to the commitments set out in Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, Agenda 2040, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The recent Durban Call to Action, adopted in May 2022, called on stakeholders to accelerate action to end child labour. And while the data show progress since 2020, the burden remains high, and millions of children continue to face risks driven by economic pressures, climate impacts and conflict.

These findings underscore the need for stronger, coordinated action rooted in continental frameworks, backed by national policy, and supported by sustained domestic financing that protects families and keeps children in school. Reliable and timely data, such as those presented in this brief, remain essential to guide decisions and monitor progress.

We hope this publication serves as a practical resource for policymakers, practitioners and partners as they work to uphold children's rights and ensure that every child in Eastern and Southern Africa can grow, learn and thrive, free from exploitation.

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Weathersby, a beloved colleague from the International Labour Organization who made significant contributions to child labour statistics and was instrumental in producing the estimates in this publication.

Etleva Kadilli
Regional Director
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In 2015, the world made a promise to end child labour by 2025 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). That timeline has now come to an end. But child labour has not.

While the elimination of child labour remains an unfinished task, both globally and within the region of Eastern and Southern Africa, there is some welcome news. Today, nearly 41 million children are in child labour in the region, down from 49 million four years ago. And the prevalence of child labour in the region has fallen from 26 per cent in 2020 to 20 per cent today. Concerns that child labour levels would rise in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have not materialized around the world, including in this region. That said, recent gains remain fragile, particularly against the backdrop of risks associated with issues such as climate change, conflict, fragility and economic instability.

A dramatic scaling-up of well-known policy imperatives to end child labour are needed. And targeted policies to end child labour must go hand in hand with broader development strategies and be backed by adequate, predictable and sustained financing. To be fully effective, child labour concerns must be systematically mainstreamed into economic and social policy planning – from macroeconomic frameworks to labour market reforms and sectoral strategies – ensuring that public investment reaches families, strengthens social protection systems and keeps children in school.

This data brief provides an overview of child labour patterns and trends within the region of Eastern and Southern Africa. It also describes the evolving profile of children in child labour, outlines the nature of child labour and where it is concentrated, and explores the impact of child labour on schooling.

Statistical definitions

Three main international human and labour rights standards – the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Convention (No. 138) and the universally ratified ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) – set legal boundaries for child labour and provide grounds for national and international actions to end it. In 2008, the 18th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) approved a resolution on child labour statistics that translates these legal standards into statistical terms for measurement purposes.¹ The statistical concepts and definitions underpinning the estimates presented here are consistent with this resolution.

Child labour comprises work that children are too young to perform and/or work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children’s health, safety or morals. In more technical terms, child labour encompasses work performed by children in any type of employment,² with two important exceptions: permitted light work for children within the age range specified for light work;³ and work that is not classified as among the worst forms of child labour, particularly as hazardous work, for children above the general minimum working age. A broader statistical definition includes hazardous unpaid household services, commonly referred to as hazardous household chores.

The **worst forms of child labour** comprise categories set out in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182. These entail all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; child commercial sexual exploitation; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; and work that, by its

nature or circumstances, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Hazardous work refers to work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children’s health, safety or morals. When a country ratifies ILO Convention No. 138 and ILO Convention No. 182, it commits to determining its own hazardous work list. While the list is decided by individual countries after consultation with organizations of employers and workers, the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation, 1999 (No. 190), supplementing ILO Convention No. 182, urges consideration of certain forms of work as hazardous.⁴ For statistical measurement, hazardous work includes that in designated hazardous industries and/or hazardous occupations and/or that entails 43 hours or more per week.

Hazardous work by children is often treated as a proxy category for the worst forms of child labour for two reasons. First, reliable national data on the worst forms of child labour, other than hazardous work, are still difficult to find. Second, children in hazardous work account for the overwhelming majority of those in the worst forms of child labour.

Unpaid household services or household chores refer to services that children provide without pay for their own households.⁵ In more technical terms, these tasks constitute a ‘non-economic’ form of production and are excluded from consideration in the United Nations System of National Accounts, the internationally agreed-upon guidelines for measuring national economic activity. For statistical measurement, where household chores are included in the calculation of child labour presented here, it refers to a subset considered as hazardous where work is performed by children below the general minimum working age (below 15) for 21 hours or more per week.

Source: This content has been adapted and extracted from International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, *Child Labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward*, ILO and UNICEF, Geneva and New York, 2025.

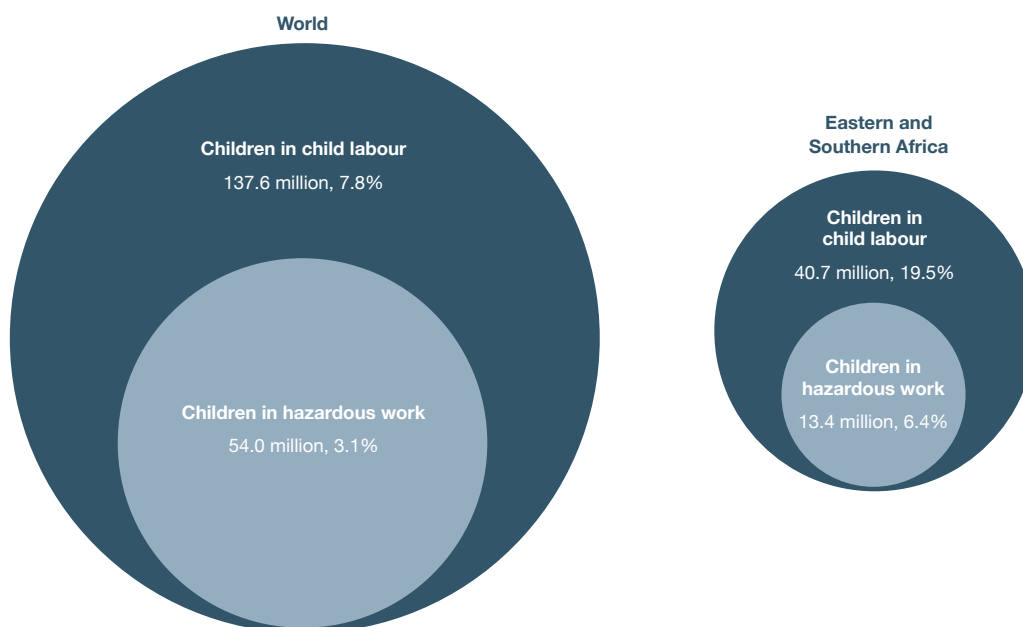


Current levels and trends



One in five children in Eastern and Southern Africa (or around 41 million) are involved in child labour; the region accounts for nearly one third of the global total of children in child labour

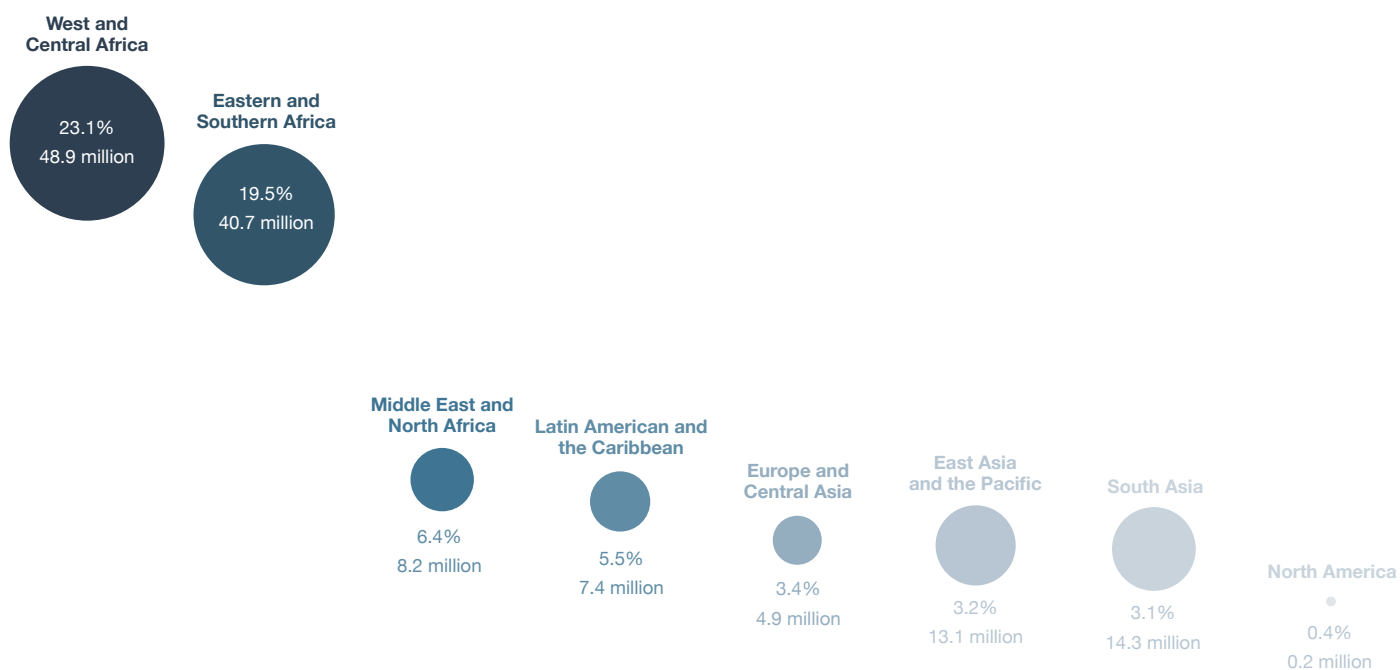
Fig 1. Number and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work



Note: For statistical measurement, hazardous work includes work in designated hazardous industries and/or hazardous occupations and/or work performed for 43 or more hours per week.

Eastern and Southern Africa is the region with the second largest number and second highest prevalence of child labour

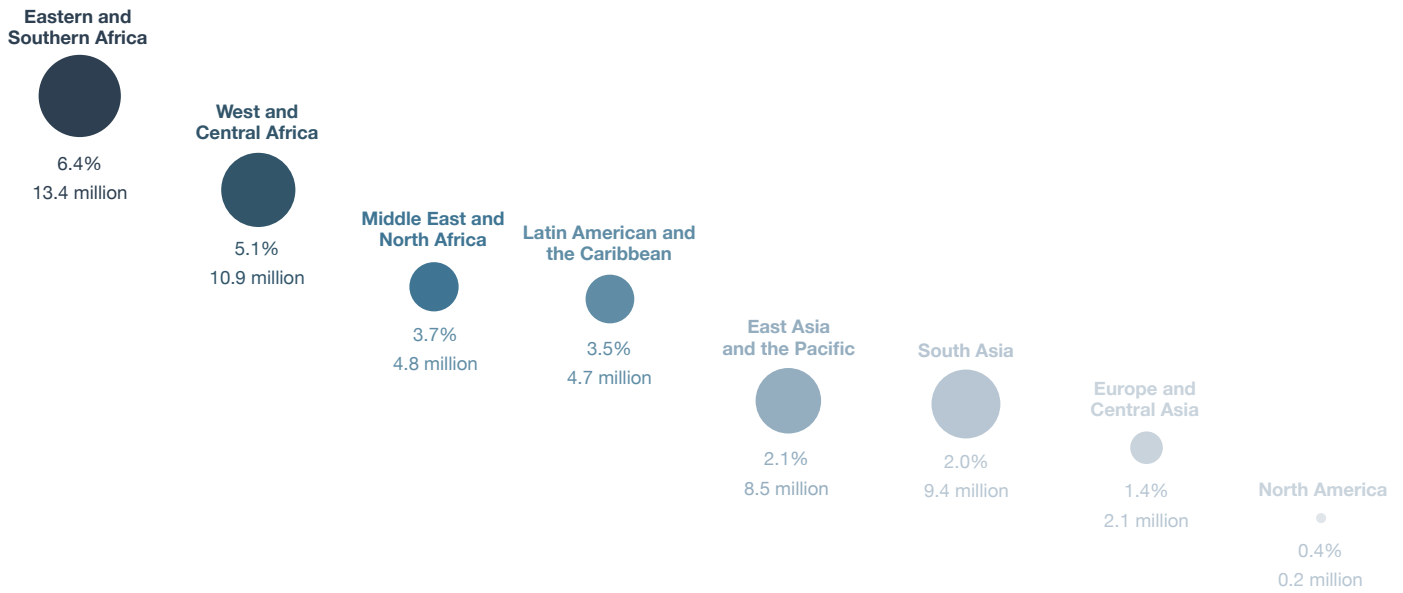
Fig 2. Number and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by UNICEF region



Notes: This figure shows regional groupings according to UNICEF's regional classification. See Technical notes for details.

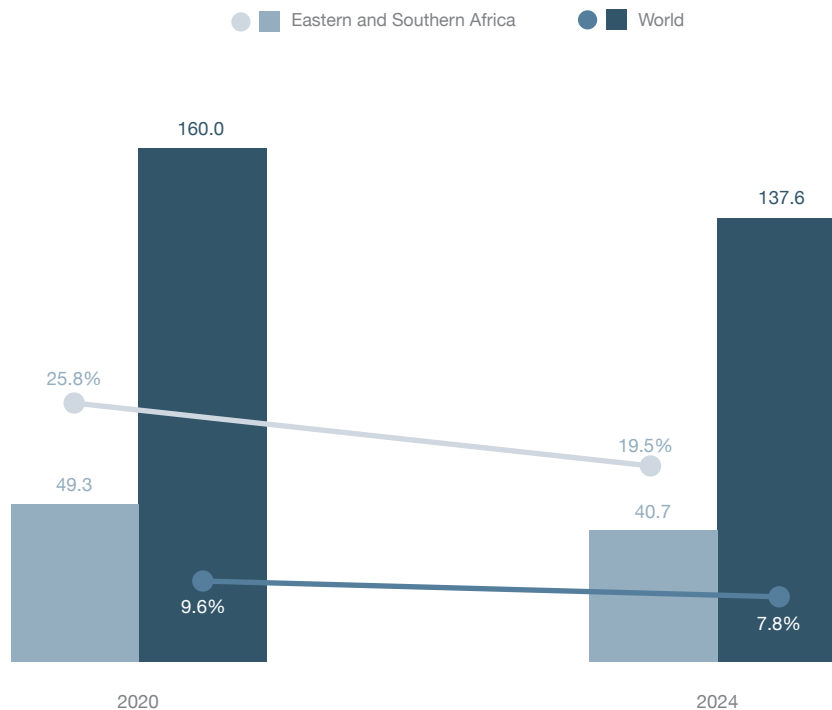
The region has the largest number and highest prevalence of children engaged in hazardous work

Fig 3. Number and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in hazardous work, by UNICEF region



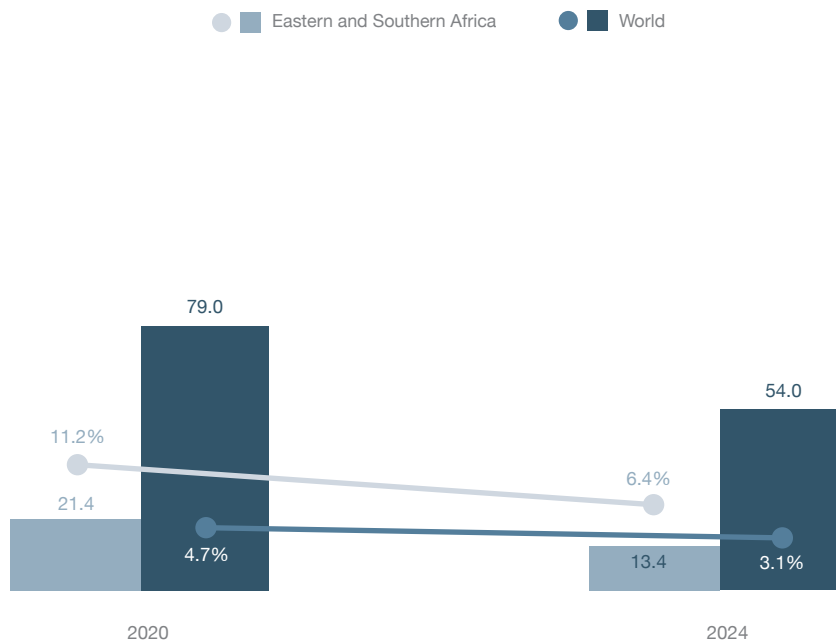
Eastern and Southern Africa has seen some progress against child labour over the last four years with prevalence declining from 26 per cent in 2020 to 20 per cent in 2024

Fig 4. Number (in millions) and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa and the world

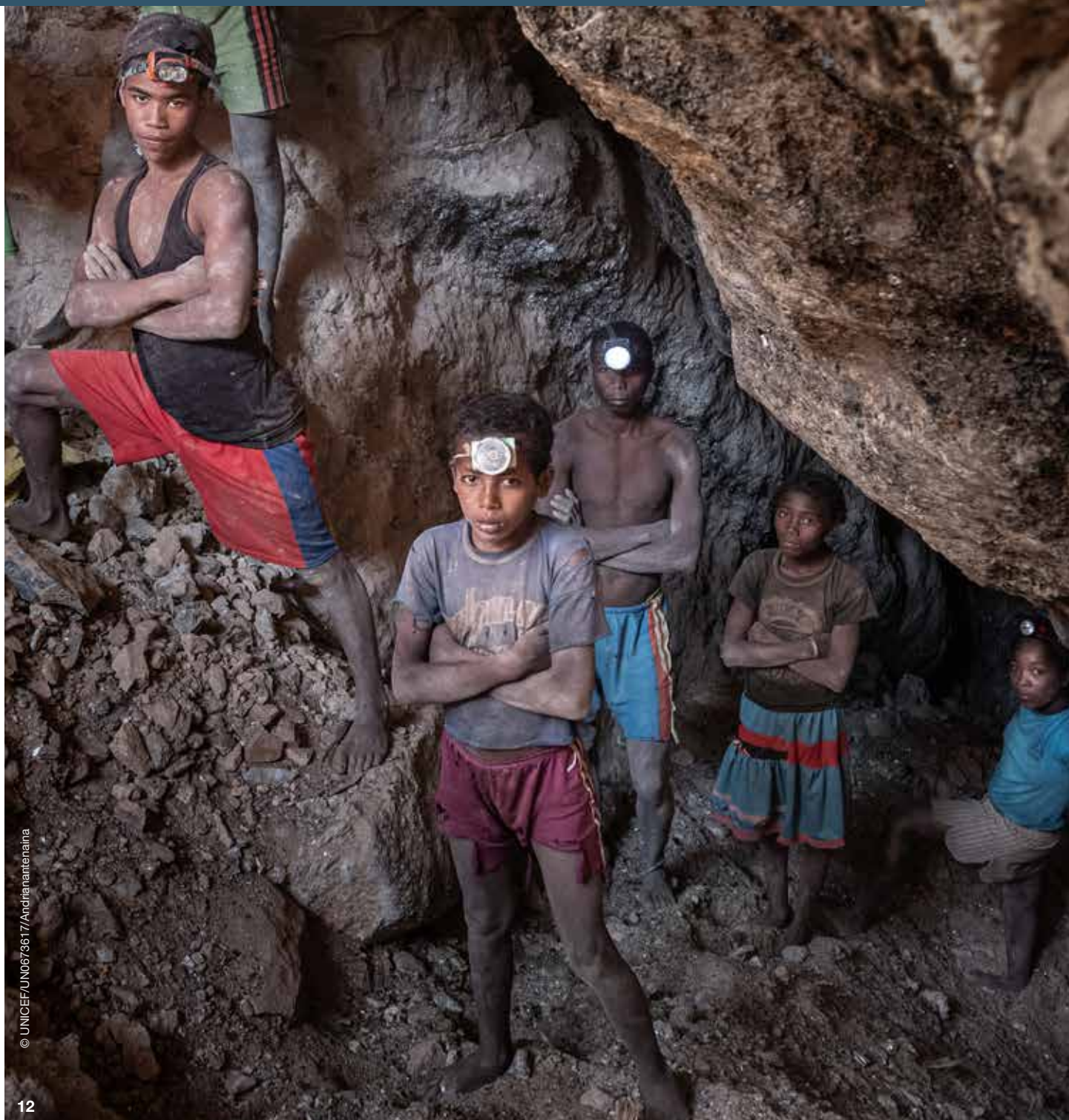


Regional progress against hazardous work is also evident with a 43 per cent relative decline in prevalence and a 37 per cent drop in absolute numbers since 2020

Fig 5. Number (in millions) and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in hazardous work in Eastern and Southern Africa and the world

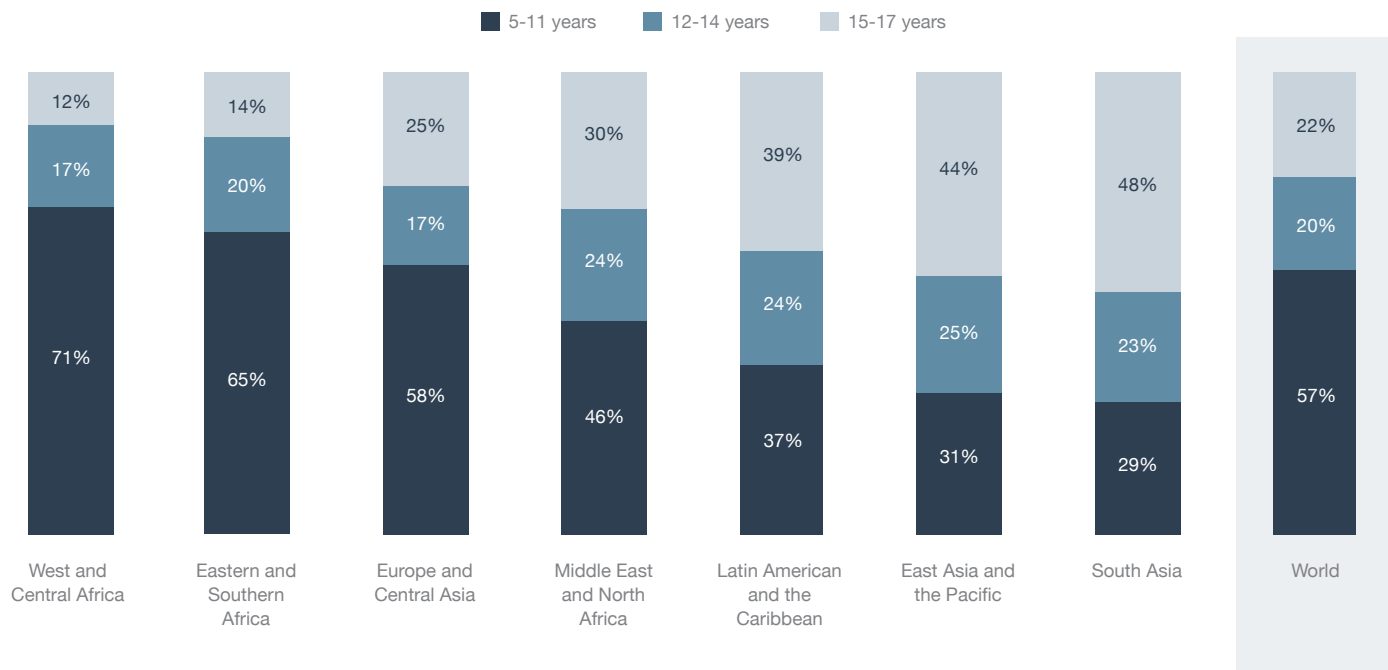


Profile of children in child labour and hazardous work



In Eastern and Southern Africa, two thirds of children in child labour are under age 12; this age profile differs from what is seen in other regions outside of Africa

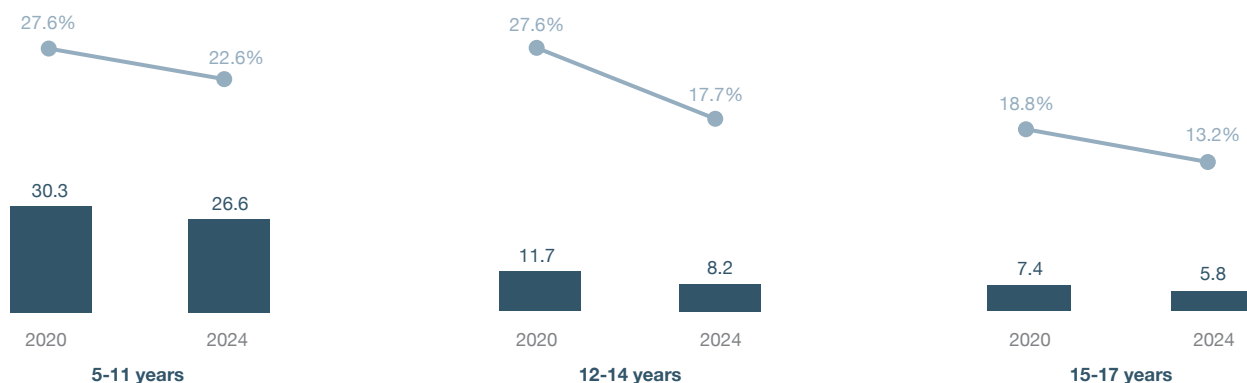
Fig 6. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age and UNICEF region



Notes: Some totals do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding. The region of North America is not included due to low data coverage for certain age groups.

Progress against child labour in the region has been slower among younger children

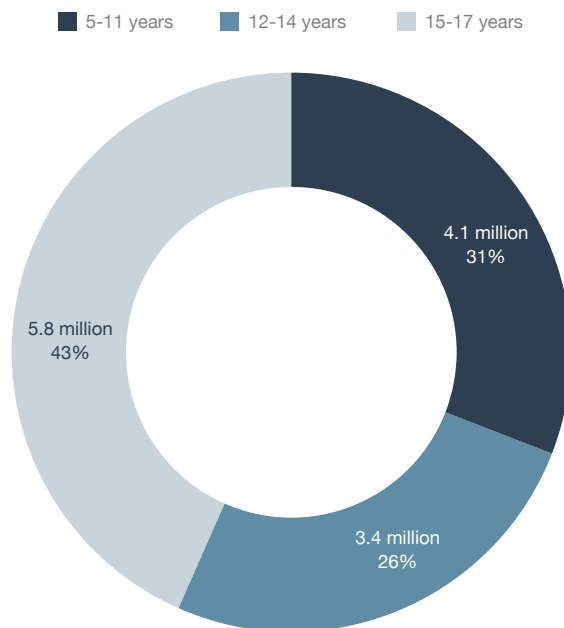
Fig 7. Number (in millions) and percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, by age



Note: The number of children in child labour by age in 2020 and 2024 does not add up to the regional totals due to rounding.

Children of all ages in the region are engaged in hazardous work, but the greatest burden is among older adolescents

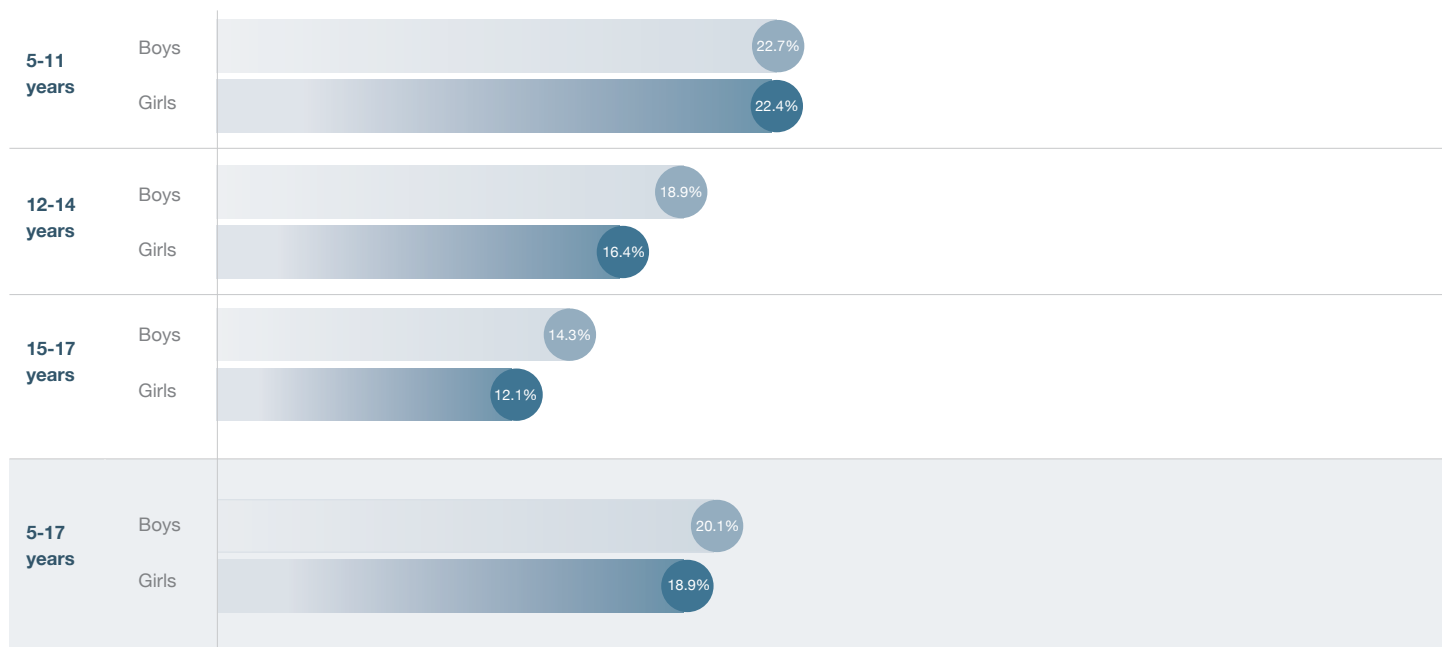
Fig 8. Number and percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in hazardous work in Eastern and Southern Africa, by age



Note: The number of children in hazardous work by age does not add up to the regional total due to rounding.

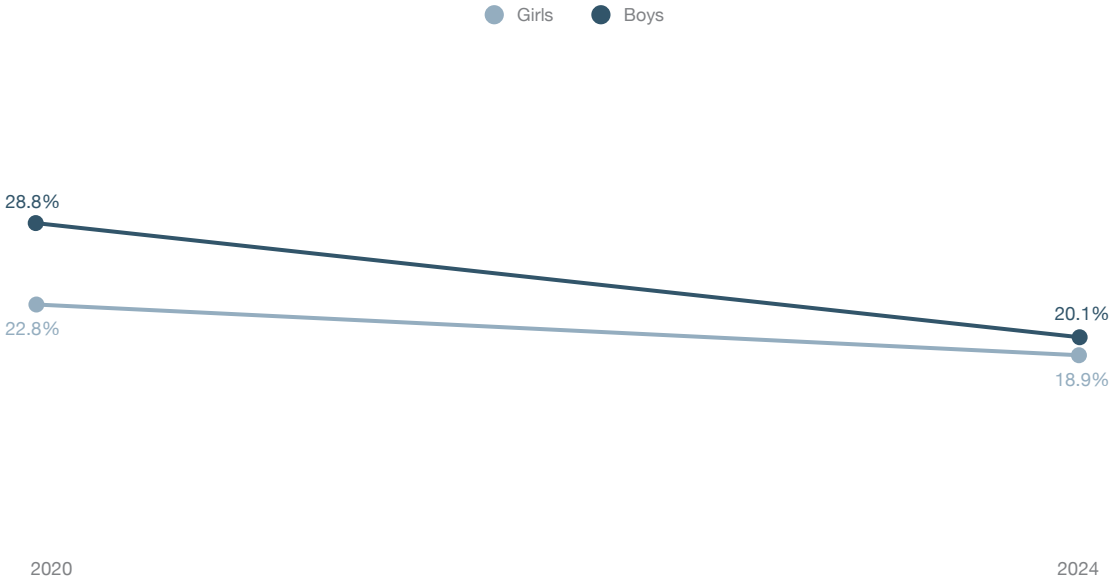
With age, child labour becomes slightly more common among boys than girls in Eastern and Southern Africa

Fig 9. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, by age and sex



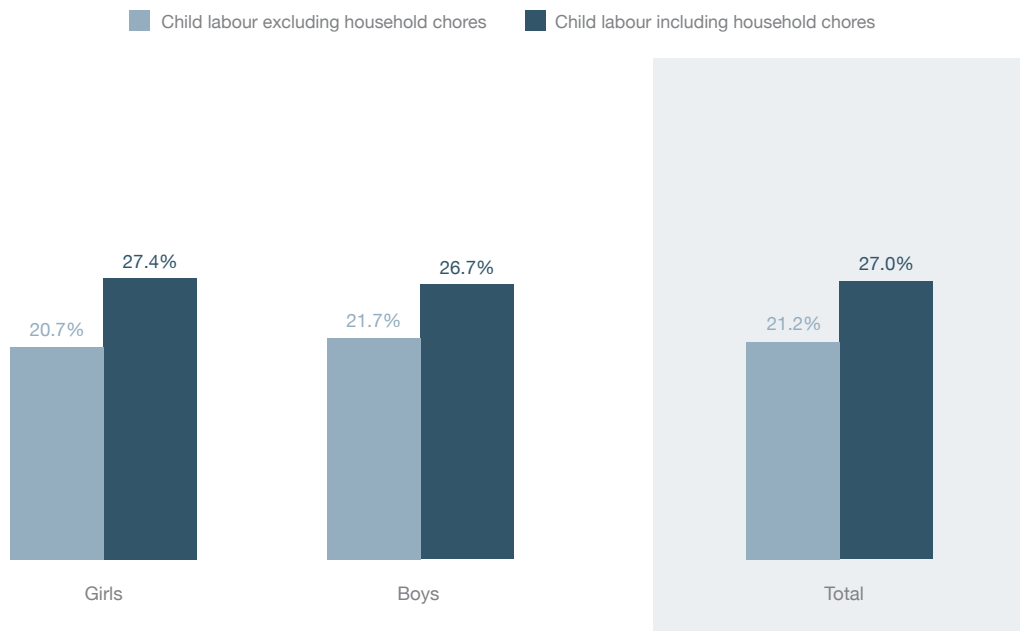
Child labour has declined for children of both sexes since 2020, but progress has been slower for girls

Fig 10. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, by sex



Factoring in household chores raises overall prevalence of child labour in the region from 21 to 27 per cent, with no significant difference by sex

Fig 11. Percentage of children aged 5 to 14 years in child labour (including and excluding household chores performed for 21 or more hours per week) in Eastern and Southern Africa, by sex

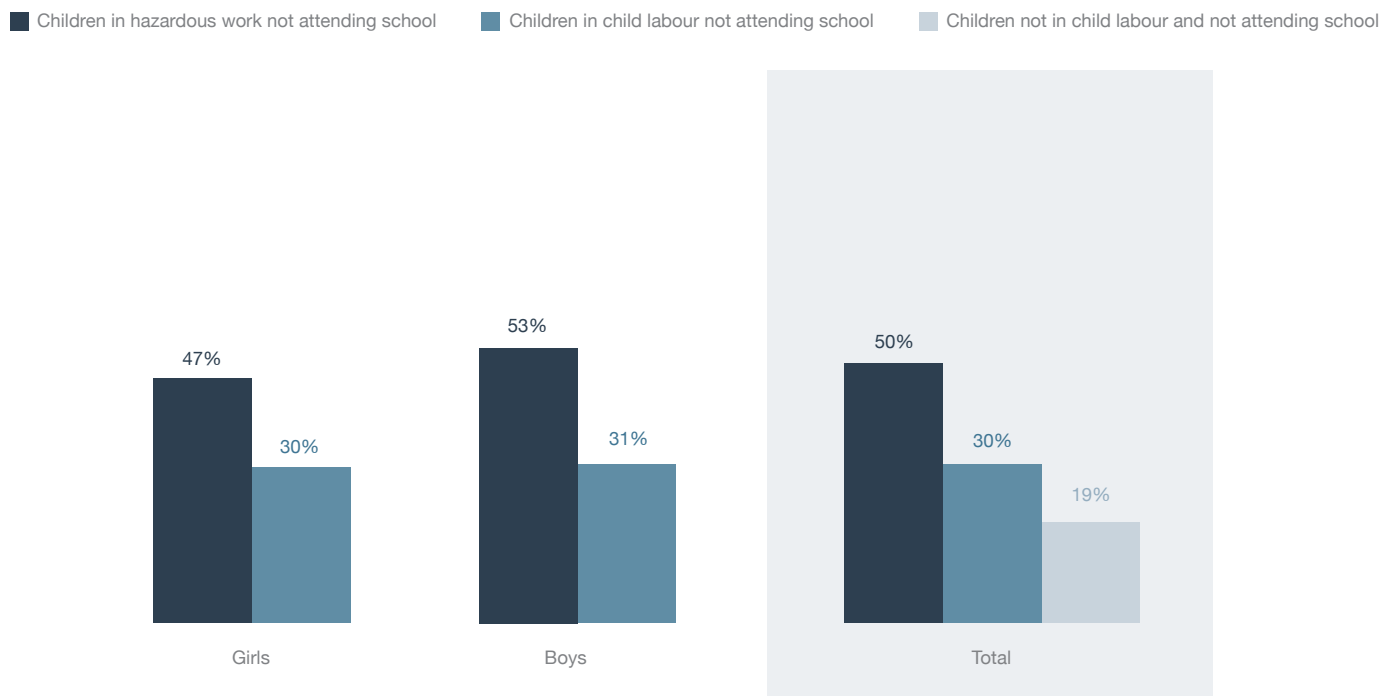


Note: Household chores refer to services performed for and within one's own household, such as caring for siblings or household members who are sick, are elderly or have disabilities; cleaning and carrying out minor household repairs; cooking and serving meals; washing and ironing clothes; and transporting or accompanying family members to and from work and school.



Children in child labour, and particularly hazardous work, are less likely to go to school

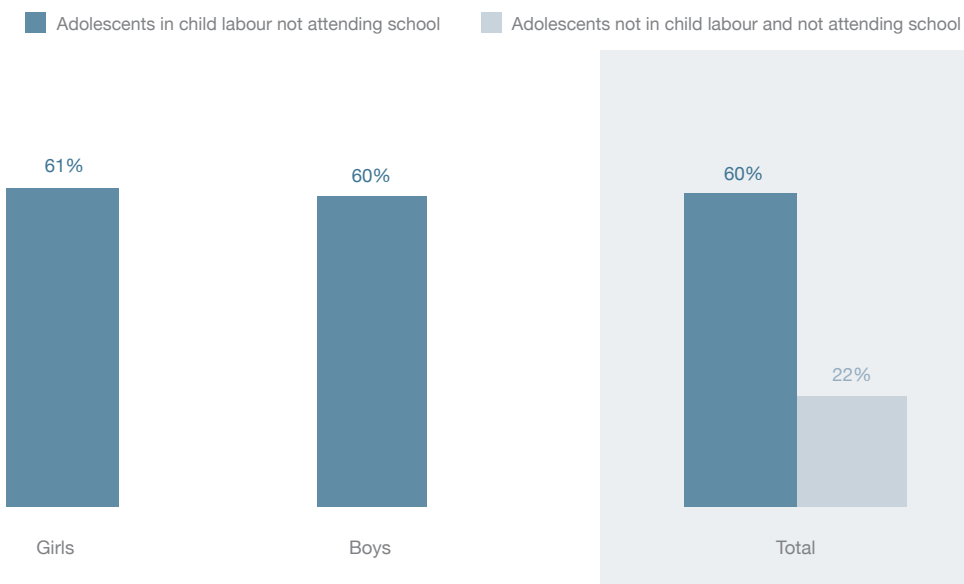
Fig 12. Percentage of children aged 5 to 14 years not attending school in Eastern and Southern Africa, by sex



Note: The percentage of children not in child labour and not attending school could not be calculated by sex.

The toll of child labour on education is even steeper among adolescents in the region: 6 in 10 adolescents in child labour are not attending school compared with 2 in 10 of their peers who are not in child labour

Fig 13. Percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 17 years not attending school in Eastern and Southern Africa, by sex



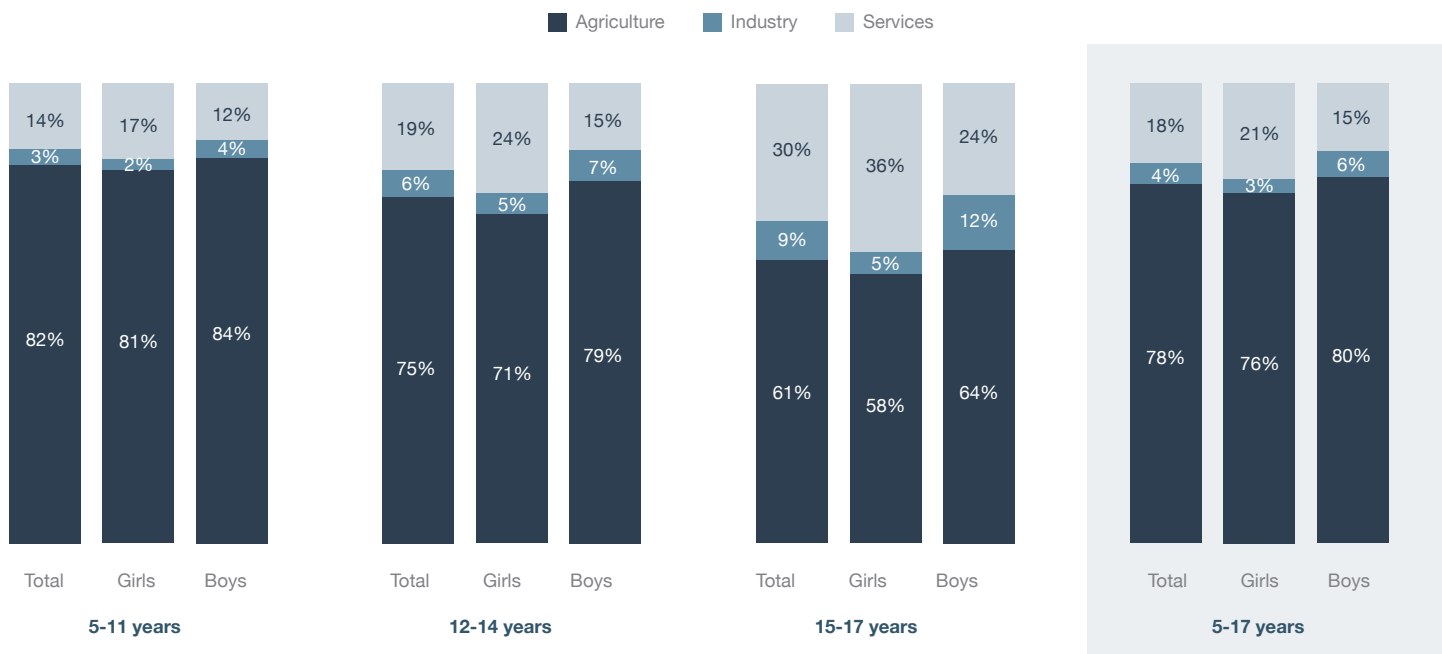
Note: The percentage of adolescents not in child labour and not attending school could not be calculated by sex.

Characteristics of child labour and hazardous work



In Eastern and Southern Africa, most child labour is in agriculture, although the relative share diminishes as children get older

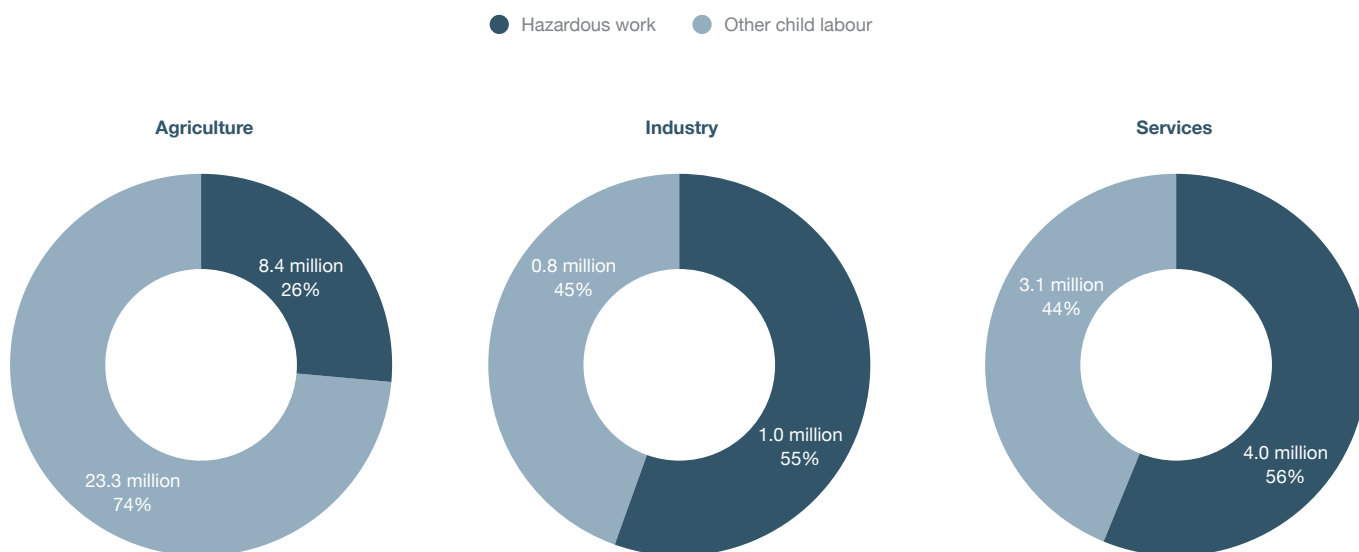
Fig 14. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, by sector of economic activity, age and sex



Notes: Industry encompasses construction, manufacturing and mining. Services include domestic work in third-party households, small-scale commerce and other informal service work. Some totals do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

While hazardous child labour is not confined to any single sector in the region, it poses the greatest concern in industry and services, where more than half of all child labour is hazardous

Fig 15. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, by hazardous work and sector of economic activity



TECHNICAL NOTES

Definitions

The measurement framework used to produce the 2024 global and regional estimates of child labour, and the regional estimates reproduced here for Eastern and Southern Africa, aligns with the resolution on child labour statistics adopted by the 18th International Conference of Labour Statisticians. The measurement framework for the estimation of child labour is depicted in the figure below. For additional details on definitions and the measurement framework, see: [International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, *Methodology of the 2024 ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour*, ILO and UNICEF, Geneva and New York, 2025. License: CC BY 4.0](#)

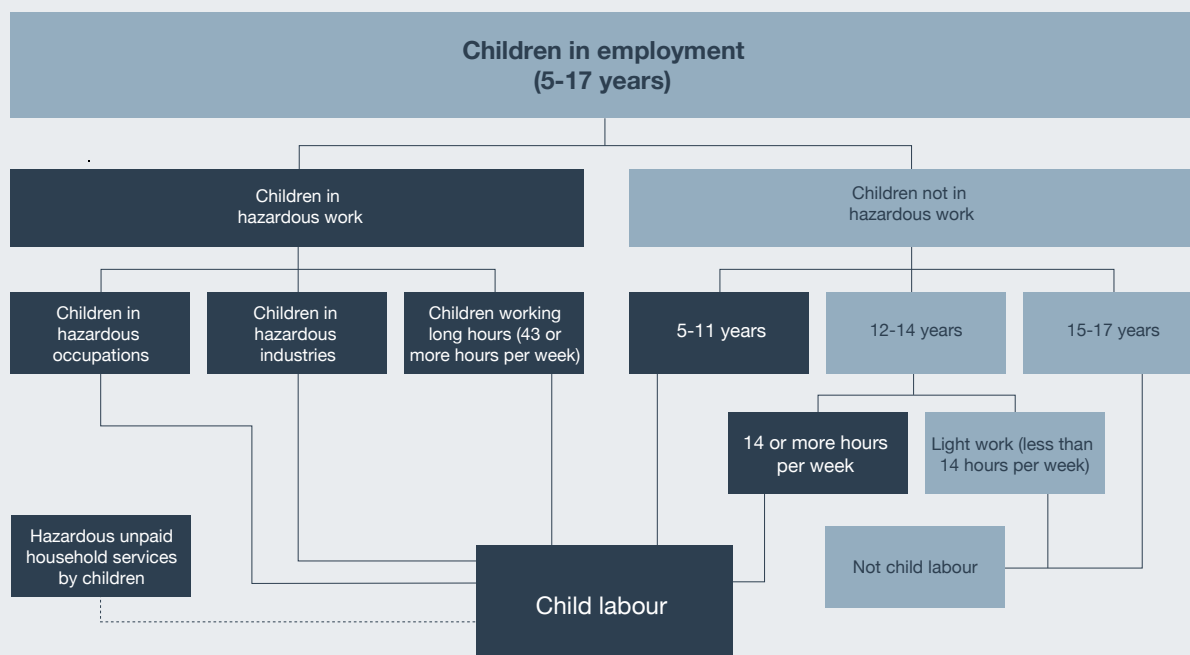
Data sources and data coverage of global and regional estimates

The 2024 Global Estimates of Child Labour are based on data from 107 countries drawn from national Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), national child labour surveys and national labour force and other household surveys conducted between 2020 and 2024. The available data used as the basis for the estimates cover 60 per cent of the global population of children aged 5 to 17 years.

Estimates for Eastern and Southern Africa are based on a subset of 17 countries with data between 2020 and 2024 and cover 76 per cent of the regional population of children aged 5 to 17 years. Data sources for these countries primarily include MICS and national labour force surveys (see table below).

Country	Data source
Angola	IEA 2021
Botswana	MTHS 2023
Burundi	ECVM 2020
Comoros	MICS 2022
Eswatini	MICS 2021-2022
Ethiopia	NLFS 2021
Kenya	CHS 2021
Madagascar	EPM 2022
Malawi	IHS 2020
Mauritius	CMPHS 2022
Rwanda	LFS 2021
Somalia	LFS 2019
South Africa	QLFS 2023
Uganda	LFS 2021
United Republic of Tanzania	LFS 2020
Zambia	LFS 2022
Zimbabwe	MICS 2019

Fig A1. Measurement framework for the global estimation of child labour



Note: The dotted lines refer to the measurement of hazardous unpaid household services being optional based on the 2008 resolution on child labour statistics.

Modelling strategy

For details on the modelling strategy employed for production of the 2024 estimates, see: [International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, *Methodology of the 2024 ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour*, ILO and UNICEF, Geneva and New York, 2025. License: CC BY 4.0](#)

Regional classification

This data brief applies UNICEF’s regional classification. The region of Eastern and Southern Africa is composed of 25 countries: Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Monitoring and reporting on SDG 8.7.1

Two indicators are used for measuring child labour for the purpose of SDG reporting at the country level. The first is based on the production boundary set by the UN System of National Accounts, and the second is based on the general production boundary. The global SDG database includes national estimates on both indicators (where data are available), recalculated by ILO and UNICEF in accordance with these indicator definitions (and verified by national authorities through an annual country consultation). National estimates of child labour produced for SDG reporting on both indicators differ definitionally from the joint global and regional estimates produced by ILO and UNICEF, since the former do not account for children in hazardous industries and occupations.

Endnotes

1. See resolution II concerning statistics on child labour in: International Labour Organization, ‘Report of the Conference: 18th international conference of labour statisticians, Geneva, 24 November–5 December 2008’, ICLS/18/2008/IV/FINAL, ILO, Geneva, 2009. Although there is a more recent resolution concerning statistics on child labour (20th ICLS, 2018), most countries still use the previous statistical framework (18th ICLS, 2008). The ILO is actively supporting countries’ efforts to transition to the most recent statistical standards. Once most household surveys use the new statistical standards, it will be possible to produce global and regional estimates based on them.
2. Employment encompasses any form of market production and certain types of non-market production (principally of goods such as agricultural produce for own use).
3. For statistical measurement, light work includes employment in non-hazardous work for less than 14 hours a week performed by children aged 12 to 14 years.
4. This includes children’s exposure to physical, emotional or sexual abuse; work underground, underwater, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or that involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads; work in an unhealthy environment that may, for example, exposure to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels or vibrations damaging to children’s health; and work under particularly difficult conditions, such as for long hours or during the night, or that does not allow returning home each day.
5. These activities include caring for household members, cleaning and minor household repairs, cooking and serving meals, washing and ironing clothes, and transporting or accompanying family members to and from work and school.

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For information on programmatic work on child
labour in the region:
UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office
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for every child