

Broken Bodies:

**How American Labor Laws Changed to Protect Children from the Industrial Revolution to
Today**

Julia Folmar

Senior Division

Historical Paper

2,176 Words

Not dark like the lights are shut off in the room, but dark like the life is being sucked out of every child day in and day out. Child labor was one of the darkest events in the history of the Industrial Revolution. Child labor en masse began when the Industrial Revolution started, because many families had to find someone to work and bring in extra income or they would not survive. During the late 1800s and early 1900s the act of child labor was a dark and brutish affair. The Industrial Revolution led to children working for long hours in harsh conditions, in mines that damaged children's lungs, and in factories that were nearly suffocating. These children were also unable to go to school. The growth of early industries advanced at the expense of tiny humans' broken bodies. This oppressive and tragic atmosphere resulted in many children getting severely injured, traumatized, and sometimes killed. Over time the dehumanization caused child labor to be banned and labor laws to be set in place. In 1938, a child labor law was finally passed called the "Fair Labor Standards Act" that expanded on the laws of minimum wage and minors working overtime, a triumph for child laborers.. This law also served as the basis for future labor laws in the United States.

When the Industrial Revolution began, many families were looking for someone else to bring in an income, and because of this, many children were deprived of their childhood. Families used their children for that extra income even though it sometimes cost the children their lives. The kids that worked were paid extremely low wages and worked for incredibly long hours. Some children were hired because they were cheap, worked hard, and could do some jobs that adults could not do. In some cases, the businesses treated the children no better than slaves. They were forced into working for long periods of time in less than unacceptable conditions. In other cases, the businesses felt they were helping the children by feeding them and keeping them

from starving.¹ Chelsea Amack, a woman that studied child labor explains that, school was rare for children that were put to work, making it hard to read and write, meaning labor jobs were the only option for the future. Laws were passed to make two hours of school a requirement, but they were not followed very well.² The children working their jobs were subjected to harsh working conditions. They were also considered as “useful” and invaluable because their small stature allowed them to be cramped into smaller places while still being paid less for their services. Studies show that over 750,000 children under the age of fifteen were laborers in the United States in 1870,³ and by 1910 over two million were in the workforce.⁴ A child labor historian, Ankur Poddar said “while being exploited, children underwent many types of abuse, which included alarming accident rates, low wages, inadequate food, and little to no breaks.”⁵ In some instances the children working were orphans, and had no choice but to work for food.⁶ Because these children worked all day and did not receive an education, they had little understanding of generally-accepted morals, and ended up believing the abuse they received was okay. The exploitation these children obtained was cruel and heartbreaking. A little boy, Jonathan Downe worked in a factory from the time he was seven years old. He was interviewed in 1832 and said, “if a child became sleepy, the overlooker takes the child. In the corner of the room there is an iron cistern filled with water. He takes the boy by the legs and dips him in the cistern, and then sends him back to work.”⁷ Child labor was and is dispicable and ruthless, but because of economic need the children were compelled to work and support their families.

¹ Nelson, Ken. “Industrial Revolution: Child Labor.” *Ducksters*.

² Amack, Chelsea. “Child Labor.” 2005

³ Nelson, Ken.

⁴ House, Hen. “Child Labor in the Industrial Revolution – YouTube.” Pinterest. 2014.

⁵ Poddar, Ankur. “Working and Living Conditions.” *The Industrial Revolution*.

⁶ Nelson, Ken.

⁷ Downe, Jonathan. “Punishment in Factories.” *Spartacus Educational*. 6 June 1832.

Not only were children robbed of an education and their juvenility, but child labor in mines had severe impacts on health. For example, young coal miners had bodily deformities and their life expectancy dropped dramatically. Thanks to the harsh and cruel conditions children worked in as coal miners, many children also experienced breathing problems. In the coal mines, the children did not breathe anything but coal, dust, and dirt, which affected the way the childrens' lungs worked, leading to a shorter life span. Diseases were also very common for those subjected to the conditions of coal mines, and included, asthma; hypertrophy, the enlargement of organs; and inflammation of the heart. Marjorie Bloy, a doctor that studied the effects of child labor says that "the consequence of all these diseases is that, in all districts without exception, the coal-miners age early and become unfit for work soon after the fortieth year."⁸ Being forty and having to quit working because of physical illnesses only perpetuates the cycle of child labor because the extra income is still needed, keeping the ruthless cycle going. Defective organs were not the only risk of being a coal miner. Children often died from working in the mines, and accidents caused by rope flooding, fires, and explosions were not uncommon. A little boy aged nine, gave some insight about an accident that wounded many, he said "nearly a year ago there was an accident and most of us were burned. I was carried home by a man. It hurt very much because the skin was burnt off my face. I couldn't work for six months."⁹ One of these fatal incidents occurred on July 4th, 1838 at Husker Colliery in Skilstone that killed over twenty kids all under the age of sixteen, half of them girls. One of the survivors, Sarah Gooder, was interviewed about her job as a miner, and said:

I'm a trapper in the Gawber pit. It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and a half past [in the afternoon], I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when

⁸ Bloy, Marjorie. "Child Labour in Mines." *A Web of English History*. 4 March 2016..

⁹ Philip, Philips. "In Harm's Way." *Children in Mines*.

I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit.... I would like to be at school far better than in the pit.¹⁰

There were a number of different jobs as a coal miner, the trappers, like Sarah Gooder, was for the youngest, and they sat in darkness for a total of twelve hours at a time—it was long, boring, and dangerous. The hurrier and the thruster were for the middle-aged children, and their job was to pull coal through the tunnels. The Getter was a job that the oldest and strongest children performed, and they cut the coal with a pickaxe. They were the only ones allowed to have a lamp.¹¹ Another boy, aged eight, told about a time he got his head crushed by a falling piece of roof.¹² Because of these physically demanding jobs, the miners experienced deformities in their legs, knees, feet, and spinal column. Women suffered especially from this work because of the positions they were placed in for hours at a time, and “deformities of the pelvis consequent difficult, even fatal, childbearing risks arise from the work of women in the mines.”¹³ Once the children were injured and no longer able to work, they were abandoned, and left to fend for themselves. Historian Kylie Crows questions, “One can’t help but to wonder if the detrimental effects of child labor and the high use of child labor and dangerous working conditions overall for all involved contributed to the decrease in lifespan for children.”¹⁴

In addition to daily job-related dangers, disasters due to poor safety regulations were also common. Fingers being chopped off and workers jumping out of burning buildings were frequent occurrences for youth that worked in factories. A *New York Times* newspaper covered one of the worst workplace disasters in history, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, and reported that “141

¹⁰ Gooder, Sarah. “Underground Child Labour in the Coal Mining Industry Did Not Come to an End in 1842.” *Spartacus Education*. 2 August 2017.

¹¹ “What Jobs did Children Undergo?” *My Learning*.

¹² Skidmore, William. “In Harm’s Way” *Children in Mines*.

¹³ Bloy, Marjorie.

¹⁴ Crowe, Kylie “The Long Lasting Detrimental Effects.” *History at Normandale*. 14 December 2016.

Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside.”¹⁵ Many of these were adolescent girls. Not long after, the number rose to one hundred and forty-six casualties. As a result of the severity of the fire, only six of those one hundred and forty-six victims were identified, and were all under the age of thirty-five years old.

In the 1800s, there were no safety regulation laws, barely any fire escapes, zero capacity rules, the equipment was unsafe, and factories fires were not unusual. A photo from around the 1900s illustrates the conditions men, women, and children worked in on a daily basis, showing fabrics, trash, and machines scattered all around the floor, making it easy to understand why factory fires were so common.¹⁶ The fire at Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, in particular, was a tragedy, and was one of the leading causes for the child labor laws we know today. One hundred and forty-six people were killed, and the majority of them were young females. A lady interviewed after the fire, Mary Domsky-Abrams, said, “There were many indirect victims of the fire. Mothers who lost their daughters--girls full of life and hope, brides-to-be, innocent--could not contain their grief, and many of them passed away before their time.”¹⁷ There was only one exit in the building and the fire occurred on the ninth floor, with hundreds and hundreds of people all trying to get out safely at once. Besides the elevator, the only other way out was the window. Witnesses reported a countless number of girls and boys jumping to their deaths from the window down nine stories trying to escape the fire. One of the surviving victims Ethel Monick Feigen said, “I went to the window on the Washington Place side. I wanted to fall out. Then I got ashamed about the way I would look. They pushed me back to the elevator and they

¹⁵ “Newspaper and Magazine Articles.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. 26 March 1911.

¹⁶ “Workers and Working Conditions.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. Photograph. 1900.

¹⁷ Domsky- Abrams, Mary “Leon Stein Interviews.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*.

pushed me right in. When I got to the street I kept murmuring to myself, ‘It’s all a bad dream.’”¹⁸ Another survivor Joseph Fletcher told his experience on June 5th, 1958: “When I was on the 10th floor, and then on the roof, looking out of the window and from the roof saw people ‘sticking out of the windows’ and falling. Some jumped to the sidewalk where they lay dead.... They pulled out a net—6 to 7 feet wide. Sixty-seven firemen kept the net up. When a man took it on himself to jump he would go right through the net and hit the sidewalk.”¹⁹ For months after, the survivors suffered from the effects of the fire, physically and mentally.

Not long after this tragic event, labor unions started forming; the people started demanding higher pay and shorter hours, and they finally came to the realization that children were being extremely mistreated. Therefore, Labor Unions instituted strikes and protests. Nonetheless, immigrants came to the United States, and more workers became available. The immigrants were more compelled to work under the unfair treatment, which diminished the effect of the unions and the fight for labor laws. However, in 1912 the New York Legislature passed eight bills proposed by the Factory Investigating Company to help better regulate the safety conditions of working environments. By 1913 the legislature passed twenty-five bills to make each building safer than the last, all because people had to commit suicide to get out of a burning building.²⁰

A few decades later, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was passed and changed the face of child labor forever. It was 1938, and “the employment of oppressive child labor was prohibited.”²¹ “The FLSA provisions prohibit (1) the employment of oppressive child labor for

¹⁸ Feigen, Ethel, Monick “Leon Stein Interviews.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. 29 September 1958.

¹⁹ Fletcher, Joseph “Leon Stein Interviews.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. 5 June 1958.

²⁰ Morley, Barbara. “Timeline of Events.” *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. January, 2011.

²¹ Donovan A. Sarah and Shimabukuro O. Jon. “Summary.” *The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) Child Labor Provisions*. 29 June 2016.

children covered by the act, and (2) the interstate shipment of goods produced in an establishment in or about which oppressive child labor is employed.”²² This Act does not ban all work performed by minors, just unlawful work. The FLSA has exceptions to work requirements for fourteen through eighteen-year olds depending on the situation. For example, only eighteen years of age and older can work in hazardous occupations, and fourteen year olds can work in the appropriate conditions with restrictions on work hours.²³ Fines up to \$50,000 are alleged for employers that violate The Fair Labor Standards Act.²⁴ This Act tremendously improved the treatment of child laborers and still continues to today. Aside from the physical and emotional drainage this law put a stop to, FLSA also took into account the materialized worth of children. Making the legal income up to \$12.00 per hour in some states, rather than the previous wage for children of 0.10 cents.²⁵

The horrific nature of child labor led to hundreds of girl and boys being killed and severely injured. The Industrial Revolution beat young people down into the ground, by forcing them to work in hazardous mines, and factories with little to none educational experience. While in the long run these tragedies helped usher in labor laws laws for us today, the way we got here was reliant upon horrific acts on the human body that were written down and published for all of the world to see.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ “Wage and Hour Divisions.” *United States Department of Labor*. 1 January 2019.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Domsky- Abrams, Mary. "Leon Stein Interviews." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, Web.
<https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/MaryDomskyAbrams.html>.

Mary was one of the few survivors of the factory fire at Shirtwaist Factory in 1911. She gives her story about the horrifying day, and explains the tremendous stress she was put through trying to get out of the building. The quote I used incorporates a better image of the dispiriting events that took place.

Downe, Jonathan, "Punishment in Factories." *Spartacus Educational*, 6 June 1832, Web.
<https://spartacus-educational.com/IRpunishments.htm>

A young boy that worked in a factory, Jonathan explains the consequences of laborers that don't work fast enough, get too tired, or break the rules. He tells about how the overlooker would put the children inside of a hot cistern for being 'bad'. Using Jonathan's own words helps prove the godforsaken actions that took place.

Feigen, Ethel, Monick. "Leon Stein Interviews." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, 29 September 1958, Web.
<https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/EthelMonickFeigen.html>.

Feigen was a survivor during the Shirtwaist Factory Fire that occurred on 1911. He gave his story about victims going to windows in building, and jumping to their deaths. Feigen stated he thought about jumping to get away from the fire, but decided otherwise, and managed to survive. His story outlines the traumatic events, and makes the victims emotions come to life.

Fletcher, Joseph. "Leon Stein Interviews." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, 5 June 1958, Web.
<https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/JosephFletcher.html>.

Fletcher, a survivor of the 1911 factory fire gave his experience about being shoved into the only elevator in the Shirtwaist building, and later witnessing victims jumping nine stories to the concrete. Telling readers that a factory worker practically had to choose his way to die, proves the unfortunate circumstances that took place during this time.

Gooder, Sarah. "Underground Child Labour in the Coal Mining Industry Did Not Come to an End in 1842." *Spartacus Educational*, 2 August 2017, Web. <https://spartacus-educational.com/spartacus-blogURL97.htm>.

A girl that worked in a mine as a trapper, shared her experience in the mines, about how laborers got little sunlight, were scared, hungry, and tired. Sarah's point of view allows readers to have a better sense of what mining was like for younger aged people.

Skidmore, William. "In Harm's Way" *Children in Mines*, Web. <https://museum.wales/articles/2011-04-11/Children-in-Mines/>.

A victim of a mining incident, William Skidmore was hurt while working in a mine one day. He said that his head got crushed by a piece of roofing that set him back for a while. Describing different accidents in this paper helps emphasize the dangers of going to work everyday.

Philips, Philip. "In Harm's Way" *Children in Mines* Web. <https://museum.wales/articles/2011-04-11/Children-in-Mines/>

A victim of mining dangers, Phillip Phillips tells a time there was an accident in the mine, and a fire occurred that burned the skin off of his face. Philip's story allows readers to have a better sense of what mining conditions were like.

Secondary Source

Amack, Chelsea. "Child Labor." 2005, Web. http://www.kawvalley.k12.ks.us/schools/rjh/marneyg/05_history-projects/05_amack_childlabor.htm.

This article explains the conditions child laborers lived in and worked in during the Industrial Revolution. Author, Amack, illustrates the struggles and issues of child labor. This information proves the harsh conditions children were subjected to.

Bloy, Marjorie. "Child Labour in the Mines." *A Web of English History*, 15 November 2016, Web. <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/factmine/childmin.htm>.

Marjorie was a doctor that studied the effects of child labor. In this article she explains the detrimental effects of children working in mines, and the sufferings they went through for their families. Marjorie's studies are able to strengthen concerns for the beginning of this paper.

Crowe, Kylie. "The Long Lasting Detrimental Effects." *History at Normandale*, 14 December 2016. Web.

<https://historyatnormandale.wordpress.com/2016/12/14/united-states-and-the-impact-of-utilization-of-child-labor-during-the-industrial-revolution/>.

An article showing death rate of child labor during the Industrial Revolution. Crowe explains events taken place during this time, the effects of child labor, and tells about the laborers days. Crowe's point of view helps accentuate the worries of how children were treated.

Donovan A. Sarah and Shimabukuro O. Jon. "Summary." *The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) Child Labor Provisions*, 29 June 2016, Web. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44548.pdf>.

A document by Congressional Research Service, informing legislature debate since 1914. Explaining the rules and regulations about the Fair Labor Standards Act, put in place to stop the abuse towards laboring children. This document states the restrictions towards treatment towards employees, age restrictions for working minors, and addresses minimum wage. Proves that Labor Laws were changed after the numerous disastrous events and incidents.

House, Hen. "Child Labor in the Industrial Revolution – YouTube." Pinterest. 2014.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/508906826614662262/>.

A video created to explain and illustrate the conditions children worked in during the Industrial Revolution. This video explains lifestyles and hardships these children went through. The statistics made the effects of child labor feel more real life and concerning.

"Newspaper and Magazine Articles." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, 26 March 1911. Web.

https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/newspapersMagazines/nyt_032611.html.

A newspaper headlined the fire and told how many dead, how many survived, and about the fire. The newspaper told step by step updates about the fire, and explained what happened. This helped emphasize the heartbreaking incidents that happened during the Triangle factory Fire.

Morley, Barbara. "Timeline of Events." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, January, 2011, Web.

https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/supplemental/timeline/pages/bills_passed.html.

This articles a list of bills and events passed about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, and goes into detail about the actions that took place following the fire, and casualties caused by the incident. The bills are used to show what actions took place after the Triangle Factory Fire.

Nelson, Ken. "Industrial Revolution: Child Labor." *Ducksters*, Technological Solutions, Inc. (TSI), www.ducksters.com/history/us_1800s/child_labor_industrial_revolution.php.

An article that describes the tragedy of child labor, and what effect child labor has on children. This article explains statistics of minor laborers, acts that were set in place because of child labor, and what life was like for child laborers.

Poddar, Ankur. "Working and Living Conditions." *The Industrial Revolution*, Web. <https://firstindustrialrevolution.weebly.com/working-and-living-conditions.html>.

Poddar, author of this article, goes in to details about the terrific working conditions and living conditions of children in the Industrial Revolution. Poddar describes the Labor Unions interference with child labor, and the horrific ways children were treated.

"Wage and Hour Divisions." *United States Department of Labor*, 1 January 2019, Web. <https://www.dol.gov/whd/minimumwage.htm>

An article explaining the rules of the Fair Labor Standard Act. This article goes into details about minimum wage regulations, and which states are exposed to each minimum wage requirement. Proves that steps were taken to better Child Labor Laws for America.

"What Jobs did Children Undergo?." *My Learning*, Web. <https://www.mylearning.org/stories/coal-mining-and-the-victorians/236>.

An article that describes the responsibility of child miners. This article explains the importance of each job the children are given, and why each child is assigned to the jobs they have. Explains the conditions that children worked in.

"Workers and Working Conditions." *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*. Photograph. 1900 <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/slides/220.html>

A photograph from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, the displays the 'harsh' conditions talked about during the industrial revolution. The photograph shows laborers working in a cramped area, with fabrics and trash scattered across the floor, making fires susceptible to an outsiders eye.