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Think of the Children: a Call for Mainstream Organizational Research on Child Employment and Labor

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Abstract

Although children are a sizeable portion of the workforce, and many of these employed children are engaged in child labor, organizational research has largely ignored this population. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the critical and timely need for organizational research on the experience of work for children, particularly those engaged in child labor (defined as work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous or threatens the education of children). I argue this is inherently a question particularly important for those with expertise in occupational health psychology, given the definitionally hazardous nature of child labor and the developmentally critical period during which children tend to be employed. To achieve this aim, I first review the current state of child labor globally with an example of recent backsliding as highlighted by modern legislative efforts to roll back protections for employed minors in the United States. I then provide results of a scoping review of 19 top organizational science journals, which largely suggest that employed children are rarely the subjects of study in mainstream organizational research, and those that are studied may not best represent the population of employed minors globally. Lastly, I provide recommendations and research questions for organizational and occupational health scholars to improve our empirical understanding of the nature of work for employed youth. Overall, this paper provides a strong foundation for increased organizational research with employed children, particularly those engaged in child labor.

Keywords Child labor · Employed minors · Youth · Adolescents

Although the employment of children (people under the age of 18) is ubiquitous and largely socially accepted, it is intrinsically tied to the more nefarious practice

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of child labor. Child labor is a specific instance of child employment in which the conditions of employment threaten the development, safety, health, and/or wellbeing of the employed child (International Labour Organization, 2024). Child labor is a scourge which the business community has grappled with for over 100 years. To better identify and end child labor, organizations like the International Labour Organization established minimum ages for various industries throughout the twentieth century, and the United Nations (2015) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals including a provision to end child labor by 2025. Yet, there is recent a global trend in which reductions of child labor have, to some degree, reversed (United Nations, 2024). For example, although child employment in the US has been regulated at the federal level since passage of the Fair Labor Standard Act in 1938, there is a recent push to roll back protections for underage workers that may threaten the health and wellbeing of employed minors, thereby increasing child labor. Despite the historic struggle navigating child employment and its safe/healthy role in the workplace, mainstream organizational research has largely ignored this phenomenon, particularly its effects on the workers themselves. The purpose of this article is to highlight the immediate need for mainstream organizational research on child employment and child labor, particularly empirical research that addresses the developmental, psychological, and social antecedents and consequences of various forms of child employment. Without this understanding, discourse regarding this issue will be left to other fields (e.g., public health, economics, sociology, public policy) that do not have a focus on the individual experience. To help address this, I first outline the state of child *labor* globally as a poignant threat to employed children's health and safety. As part of this brief overview of the state of child labor, I review relevant legislation in the United States as a specific example of the potential increase in hazardous child employment and child labor in the world's largest economy. I then provide results of a scoping review of 19 top organizational science journals regarding child *employment* to highlight the representation of child employment and child labor in mainstream organizational research. I end with recommendations for research and practice regarding child employment and labor.

A Brief Overview of the State of Child Labor

Child labor is defined by the ILO as work that is “mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and/or interferes with their schooling” (2024, para. 3–4) so not all child employment is child labor. That said, 160 million children worldwide (nearly 10% of children between the ages of 5 and 17, regardless of age) are engaged in child labor, with 79 million working in explicitly hazardous conditions (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). A recent report by the ILO finds that child labor occurs globally with rates varying by region: Sub-Saharan Africa (23.9% of children), Northern Africa & Western Africa (7.8% of children), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (6.2% of children), Latin America and the Caribbean (6.0% of children), Central and Southern Asia (5.5% of children) and Europe and Northern American (2.3% of children). Moreover, a recent analysis (de Guzman Chorny et al., 2019) found that five countries do not have any legislation protecting children from

child labor, 24% of countries have a minimum work age under 15, and 19% of countries legally allow children over a minimum age to work in hazardous conditions/industries. If we include countries that have some sort of legally defined exceptions to their minimum age and hazardous conditions laws, these percentages rises to 56% and 40%, respectively. Moreover, many countries allow minors to work long hours (e.g., 21% of countries allow 14-year-olds to work over 6 h per day) or do not guarantee long breaks in between shifts (e.g., 12% of countries do not guarantee at least 12 h of rest for employed 14-year-olds). Together, these data suggest that despite global goals to eradicate child labor, even the most basic employment protections for children are not legally guaranteed in many countries.

Looking toward the United States as an example of a country that has made strides against domestic use of child labor, we see a storied history of child labor legislation. Despite efforts to pass a constitutional amendment banning child employment in 1924, or passage of the 1916 Keating-Owen Child Labor Act and the 1919 Child Labor Tax Law (both of which were struck down by the Supreme Court), minors had few, if any, federally guaranteed protections in the workplace until passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. Since 2015, however, there has been a marked increase in the number of children employed in violation of existing child labor laws (Mast & Sherer, 2023), with over 5,000 confirmed violations of child labor laws in 2023 (Department of Labor, 2023). Moreover, since 2021,¹ 17 states within the U.S. have introduced some sort of legislation (Table 1) to roll back protections for minors in the workplace, making it easier to employ minors in a variety of industries, including those deemed hazardous (Mast & Sherer, 2023). These trends suggest that even in the largest economy in the world, and in a country that has a comparatively low rate of child labor, current economic trends are increasing the legal and illegal use of child labor and potentially dangerous child employment broadly.

Despite the prevalence of child labor and the economic trends that suggest child labor rates are currently increasing rather than decreasing, this topic is largely absent from mainstream organizational science research. Understanding the antecedents, nature, and consequences of employment, including but not limited to hazardous and unsafe employment (i.e., child labor), on minors and those around them is clearly a timely and relevant issue for organizational scientists and occupational health scholars. Below, I briefly review the limited work published in top organizational science journals regarding child employment broadly to understand how, and to what degree, this topic is addressed by mainstream organizational research. I then outline the practical and theoretical need for research regarding minors in the workplace.

Scoping Review

To understand how and to what degree mainstream organizational science research empirically examines child employment broadly, I conducted a scoping review (Arksey & O'malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2014; Tricco et al., 2016) of

¹ Search conducted on January 10.th, 2024.

Table 1 Legislation introduced at the state-level in the United States to roll back child labor protections

State	Legislation	Effects	Status
Arkansas	Act 195 of 2023 (2023)	Children under 16 no longer need permission from the Division of Labor to be employed (which included age-verification and written parental consent)	Enacted (March, 6, 2023)
Florida	HB 49/ S 1596 (2023)	Removes limitations on when, and for how long 16 and 17-year-olds can work Removes 30-h per week maximum for 16 and 17-year-olds Removes 30 min and 1 day break requirements for 16 and 17-year-olds	Introduced
Georgia	HB 501 (2023)	Allows 14-year-olds and older to be employed in landscaping over the summer Allows minors to work without work permits	Introduced
Indiana	HB, 1062 (2024)	Allows 14-year-olds to quit school with parental permission to work full time on a farm	Introduced
Iowa	SF 542/ HF 2198 (2023)	Removes limitations on when 12–14 year-old migratory workers can work on school days Allows 15 year-olds to work in a range of industries Extends when a 16 and 17 year-old can work Minors can be exempt from any protections by the department of education or workforce development if it is part of an education-based program Allows 16 and 17-year olds to serve alcohol (not in a bar) with written parental permission	Enacted April 18, 2023
Maine	LD, 1332/HP 846 (2023)	Lowers minimum wage for minors Allows homeschooled students to work during school hours	Dead (June 13, 2023)
Michigan	LD 559/HP 364 (2023) Acts 122 (2022) and 123 of 2022 (2022) Act 101 of 2022 (2022)	Allows homeschooled students to work more hours per week Allows 16 and 17-year olds to work at liquor stores Allows 17 year-olds to serve alcohol	Dead (May 11, 2023) Enacted (June 29, 2022) Enacted (June 14, 2022)
Minnesota	SF 375 (2023) SF, 1102 (2023)	Allows 16 and 17-year-olds to work in construction Extends when minors under 16 can work on school days and non-school days	Introduced Introduced
Missouri	SB 175 (2023)	Remove requirement for work permit for minors (requires written parental permission for 14 to 16-year-olds)	Introduced
Nebraska	LB 15 (2023)	Lowers minimum wage for minors	Introduced
New Hampshire	SB 345 (2022)	Lowers minimum age to 14 for server Allows 16 and 17 year olds to work 35 h (up from 30) during school Allows 16 and 17-year-olds to work more than 6 consecutive days	Enacted (June 16, 2022)

Table 1 (continued)

State	Legislation	Effects	Status
New Jersey	A4222/S2796 (2022)	Increases time 16 and 17-year-olds can work per week and per day during the summer Increases amount of time minors can work without a break	Enacted (July 5, 2022)
Ohio	SB 30 (2023)	Allows minors under 16 to work after 7PM with parental permission	Introduced
South Dakota	HB, 1180 (2023)	Allows minors under 14 to work until 9PM during school	Dead
Tennessee	Public Chapter 68 (2023)	Allows 16 and 17-year-olds to work where alcohol sales generate more than 25% of sales	Enacted (03/28/2023)
Virginia	HB, 1669 (2023)	Lowers minimum wage of minors	Dead
Wisconsin	SB 332 (2021) AB 286 (2023)	Extends work hours for minors under 16 Allows people under minors to serve alcohol	Dead Introduced

This list is generated based on the Economic Policy Institute’s “analysis of state legislative activity” retrieved from: <https://www.epi.org/blog/florida-legislature-proposes-dangerous-roll-back-of-child-labor-protections-at-least-16-states-have-introduced-bills-putting-children-at-risk/>. Indiana’s bill was introduced on January 8, 2024 and is not included on EPI’s list. Enacted means the bill is now law, introduced means the bill has been introduced to the legislature and may still move forward in the current legislative session, dead means the bill has either been vetoed, withdrawn, or cannot otherwise move forward in the current legislative session

19 top journals (chosen to reflect the top two quartiles² of journals highlighted by the Highhouse et al. (2020) examination of journal prestige as evaluated by members of the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology).³ These journals represent the primary academic outlets for in the organizational sciences with broad topic foci, and therefore may be said to represent how the field of organizational science broadly (as opposed to those with a specialized topic interest) approaches this topic. Thus, the journals included in this scoping review are: *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organizational Research Methods*, *Journal of Management*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Organization Science*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *Applied Psychological Measurement*, and *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. It should be noted that the *Journal of Business Ethics* was not included in Highhouse et al. (2020) list and is thus excluded from this scoping review as a more specialized journal.⁴ I searched Google Scholar on January 2, 2024 using the following Boolean search terms: ("employed minor*" OR "child labor*" OR "employed adolescent*" OR "employed teen*" OR "adolescent employment") and limited results to the aforementioned journals.⁵

The initial search yielded 155 results, after removing duplicates ($n=2$), and results from non-eligible journals ($n=37$) and articles that did not mention child employment/labor ($n=12$) or were not primary empirical articles ($n=42$), there were 62 empirical papers (Table 2) that mentioned child employment in some capacity published across the entire history of these 19 journals (published between 1938 and 2023, median publication date was 2014). Of these, 17 included samples of child workers, six included child labor as part of a vignette-based experimental manipulation, two (Distelhorst & McGahan, 2022; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012) focused on use of child labor at the firm level, one included a sample of executives in agriculture

² I excluded Academy of Management Review because it does not include empirical papers.

³ These journals are exclusively published in English, and thus exclude any discourse that occurs in outlets published in other languages, regardless of whether it would be considered mainstream by the relevant communities.

⁴ This may be concerning given that conducting the same search focused on the *Journal of Business Ethics* yields 414 initial results, by far the greatest number of any journal searched. This may indicate that child employment/child labor is viewed as a niche topic of interest largely only for organizational scholars interested in business ethics, not mainstream organizational scholarship. This is reinforced by the fact that Highhouse et al. (2020) allowed participants to write in journals that they thought should be included and reported those that were listed at least five times, and this list also excludes the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

⁵ Per a reviewer suggestion, I also replicated this search for *Work & Stress*. Only one article (Mullen et al., 2011) was returned. The article focuses on young workers and safety. Although the included sample of Canadian young workers has a mean age of 20.1 ($SD=2.9$) it is not clear if the sample includes minors. Given that this journal was not in the Highhouse et al. (2020) list, this article is not included in the following sections.

Table 2 Scoping review results

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Barling et al. (1995)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Sample	Examined job characteristics and their relationship with class cutting, time use, and self-esteem in a sample of Canadian teens
Barnett and King (2008)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Child labor is mentioned as an example of an error that a firm could make that might harm other firms
Baucus and Baucus (1997)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Child labor is given as an example of a legal violation a firm may make, but is not explicitly coded for in their search
Bermiss et al. (2014)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned as an example of corporate social responsibility violations met by media attention
Bird et al. (2019)	Organization Science	Mention	Example of a code of conduct that governing bodies regulate
Blustein et al. (2020)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Mention	Mentioned as a correlate of a lack of decent work
Chatterjee et al. (2023)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Mention Khan et al. (2007) that found efforts to reduce child labor had unintended negative consequences as an example of a difficulty with addressing grand challenges
Cinamon (2018)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Explored the work-school interface (both conflict and enrichment) including various antecedents (e.g., social support, work hours, freedom to choose working) and outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction, grades, academic behavior) in a sample of 289 employed students aged 15–18 in Israel
Cole and Chandler (2019)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Mention	Mentioned as an example of behavioral change as part of organizational impression management
Creed et al. (2008)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Examined job seeking attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes as an outcome of teen employment status in Australia
Crilly and Sloan (2014)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned in a quote from a participant as an example of being responsible to society
Crilly et al. (2016)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Child labor is given as an example of a human rights violation
Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2023)	Organization Science	Mention	Included in an example of corporate social responsibility actions\ that were explored at the firm level
DesJardine et al. (2023)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned as an example of corporate social responsibility

Table 2 (continued)

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Diestre and Santaló (2020)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned as an example of stigmatized human capital input in a broader exploration of impacts of stigmatized chemical inputs on firm outcomes
Diestre et al. (2023)	Organization Science	Mention	Discussed as a boundary condition that might be a limit to firm-level impression management techniques
Dietz and Zacher (2022)	Journal of Business and Psychology	Mention	Child labor is given as an example of unfair corporate behavior that may elicit negative affective reactions from customers (citing Grappi et al., 2013)
Distelhorst and McGahan (2022)	Organization Science	Focus	One of many outcomes explored in manufacturing firms, finding that 6% of the time there were child labor violations, and that child labor violations were positively correlated with other types of violations
Dupré et al. (2006)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Sample	Explored antecedents of aggression in teenage workers including time with supervisor, hours worked, pay rate, interpersonal injustice, abusive supervision, working for financial reasons, and working for personal fulfillment in a sample of 131 Canadian teens
Eisenbeiss (2012)	Leadership Quarterly	Mention	Whether to continue using a supplier that uses child labor is used as a rhetorical example of an ethical choice that a CEO may face
Folkes and Whang (2003)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Manipulation	Across three studies of USA undergraduate students, a vignette regarding the use of child labor (youngest employee being 14 or 7) was used as a strong manipulation of organizational harm doing to determine employee condoning behavior when asked to read about, justify, apologize for, or deny the company's actions
Frone (1998)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Sample	Using a sample of 319 teenagers (16–19 years old) in the USA this study examined predictors (affect, tenure, exposure to physical hazards, boredom, workload, substance use on the job, poor physical health, and gender) of workplace injuries
Frone (2000)	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	Sample	Using a sample of 312 teenagers (16–19 years old) in the USA this study explored conflict with supervisors and conflict with coworkers as antecedents of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, depression, self-esteem, and somatic symptoms

Table 2 (continued)

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Frone (2003)	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	Sample	Using a sample of 319 teenagers (16–19 years old) in the USA this study examined predictors of substance use (overall, and on the job), including demographic, personality, and expectation predictors as well as work-related substance availability, social control at work, and various workplace stressors (low autonomy, meaninglessness, injustice, demands, hazards, conflict)
Gamboa et al. (2013)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Examines the impact of aspects of a vocational internship on career and self-attitudes and outcomes, in a sample of Portuguese teens
Jacqueminet and Durand (2020)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Not using child labor is mentioned as part of corporate social responsibility
Jayasinghe (2016)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Regulating child labor in emerging economies is given as an example of a broader voluntary labor code adoption by some countries
Kim et al. (2018)	Journal of Management	Mention	Mentioned as an example of ethical responsibility
Kim et al. (2019)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Not using child labor is mentioned as part of fairtrade labelling in East Africa
Lamin and Zaheer (2012)	Organization Science	Focus	A specific form of violation of “sweatshop” references in mass media and press releases of companies violating social norms in the United States. The public was more negative toward the firm if child labor was involved
Loughlin and Barling (1998)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Sample	Examined work attitudes as an outcome of family characteristics and work characteristics in a sample of Canadian teens
Markel and Frone (1998)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Sample	Found that workload, job hours, and job dissatisfaction predict work-school conflict which reduces school readiness in turn harming school performance and increasing dissatisfaction with school in a sample of teens in the USA
Mitra et al. (2021)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned in a footnote detailing firm-level controversies that include among other things child labor

Table 2 (continued)

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Noonan et al. (2007)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	A qualitative study with 27 teens from the USA examining the impact of social class on self- and career-attitudes
Odziemkowska and Henisz (2021)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned as an example of social performance at the firm level
Peterson-Badali et al. (2003)	Journal of Applied Social Psychology	Focus	Explored college students' attitudes toward children's rights including many regarding employment
Phillips et al. (2002)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	A qualitative study with 17 teens from the USA examining the impact of work-based learning on preparedness for transitioning from school to work
Reinecke and Ansari (2015)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Not using child labor is mentioned as part of fairtrade labelling, broadly, but also specifically in Africa
Ribeiro et al. (2019)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Mention	Reducing child labor is discussed as an aim of the decent work agenda
Ritov and Baron (1999)	Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processing	Manipulation	Across three of four studies, a supplier's use of child labor in "a poor country" is used as one of many violations of protected values to which participants (college students) respond
Schembbera et al. (2023)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned in the introduction as an example of policy tradeoff in which attempts to reduce child labor may increase poverty
Schill et al. (1985)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Found that employed teens in the USA have higher GPAs than unemployed teens (but the effect goes away if working over 20 h per week). Also found employed teens' parents tended to have higher status jobs than unemployed teens
Schuessler et al. (2023)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Child labor is mentioned in a quote by a participant as an outcome of unrealistic of retailers on manufacturers
Senter and Martin (2007)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Included high schoolers as a unique group among many other groups of part-time workers in the USA exploring the predictors of turnover
Shea and Hawn (2019)	Academy of Management Journal	Manipulation	Across three studies, possible child labor in "overseas, third-world facilities" is used as part of a broader vignette manipulating corporate social irresponsibility evaluated by two samples of workers recruited from MTurk and a sample of college students

Table 2 (continued)

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Soleimani et al. (2014)	Organization Science	Mention	Mentioned as an example of a standard adopted by the International Labour Organization
Spreitzer (2007)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Mention	Not using child labor is briefly mentioned as part of supplier codes of conduct that organizations have adopted
Staff and Schulenberg (2010)	Journal of Business and Psychology	Sample	Presents descriptive data from the Monitoring the Future study to compare adolescent employment across generations in the USA
Stagner (1938)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Mention	Child labor is one of many attitudes that couples could report disagreeing on in a broader study of couples' socio-economic attitudes
Su and Tsang (2015)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	NGOs that seek to reduce child labor are identified as secondary stakeholders in firm decisions
Tang and Tang (2016)	Journal of Management	Mention	Mentioned as an example of a scandal covered by Chinese media
Thouin et al. (2023)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Examined work hours during high school as a predictor of identity and career outcomes in a sample of Canadian teens
Ulmer (1960)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Mention	Mentioned the first child labor case covered by the Supreme Court of the United States as an example of a case the court was divided on
Van de Vliert et al. (2008)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Mention	A region's rate of child labor is used as the operationalization of that region's need for money substitutes
Vaz and Kanekar (1992)	Journal of Applied Social Psychology	Mention	Mentioned in the discussion as something that may increase a family's finances
Wang et al. (2021)	Organizational Research Methods	Manipulation	Teams read a case study about Levi Strauss's use of child labor and discussed what the company should do. Outcomes were qEEG measures of attention and time spent talking on the task
Weaver et al. (1999)	Academy of Management Journal	Mention	Levi Strauss's policies for overseas suppliers regarding child labor are mentioned along with other ethical initiatives as outcomes of a CEO's ethical commitments

Table 2 (continued)

Citation	Journal	Type	Notes
Wellman et al. (2016)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Manipulation	In one of three studies, which used an undergraduate sample in the USA, child labor being used by a supplier was used as part of a business case to which a scripted team chat either was or was not concerned about the labor. This was done to test the effects of legitimate power and warmth on social sanctions
Westaby et al. (2010)	Leadership Quarterly	Focus	The paper samples 283 leaders of agricultural organizations in the USA willingness, reasons for, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors regarding hiring minors to behavioral reasoning theory
Wittmer and Martin (2011)	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Sample	Grouped high schoolers in with other fixed part-time workers in the USA and explored their job attitudes and perceptions
Yue et al. (2013)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Mention	Mentioned as a controversy that can result in regulations regarding social responsibility
Zhang et al. (2018)	Academy of Management Journal	Manipulation	In one of four studies, participants (working adults recruited from Qualtrics panel) were given a vignette in which they were asked to imagine they worked for a non-profit that seeks to reduce child labor in South-east Asia but have to decide whether to seek funding from a group that employs children. The study explored incentive structure and divergent thinking as predictors of moral insight

Focus indicates that the paper's central focus is on child employment or labor but that the paper does not include a sample of child workers nor does it include an experimental manipulation focused on child employment or labor. Manipulation indicates that the paper included an experimental manipulation which, to some degree, referenced child employment or labor. Mention indicates that the paper includes a reference to child employment or labor but that child employment or labor is neither the focus of the article, part of an experimental manipulation, nor does the paper include a sample of child workers. Sample indicates that the paper includes a sample of child workers

who may choose to employ minors (Westaby et al., 2010), and one reported college students' attitudes toward children's rights with a large focus on employment/economic rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003). The remaining 35 articles only briefly mentioned child employment or labor as a passing example included in the broader discussion of fairtrade labels, decent work, corporate social responsibility, or moral issues (e.g., Jacqueminet & Durand, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). This includes more nuanced representations of child labor such as an example of stigmatized input akin to using PVC in manufacturing (Diestre & Santaló, 2020), an example of something that when regulated may result in worse outcomes (Schembera et al., 2023), or one of many topics that married couples may disagree with one another on (Stagner, 1938).

Within the 17 studies that sampled child workers,⁶ outcomes explored include job injuries (Frone, 1998), job attitudes (Frone, 2000; Wittmer & Martin, 2011), psychological strains (Frone, 2000), substance use (Frone, 2003), work-school conflict/facilitation and academic performance (Cinamon, 2018; Markel & Frone, 1998; Schill et al., 1985), aggression (Dupré et al., 2006), work/career-oriented attitudes and outcomes (Creed et al., 2008; Gamboa et al., 2013; Loughlin & Barling, 1998; Phillips et al., 2002; Thouin et al., 2023), and turnover (Senter & Martin, 2007). Other studies focused on generational differences in employment patterns among teens (Staff & Schulenberg, 2010) and the impact of social class on teens' experience of work (Noonan et al., 2007). All studies focused on teenagers with mean ages between 15 and 18 and age ranges between 13.9 and 19. Samples originated from Canada, the United States, Australia, Israel, and Portugal.

Within the studies that included child labor as part of experimental manipulations, most focused on child labor originating “overseas”, “foreign countries” (Folkes & Whang, 2003), “third-world facilities” (Shea & Hawn, 2019), or “a poor country” (Ritov & Baron, 1999) with Zhang et al. (2018) explicitly stating “South-east Asia”, Wang et al. (2021) using a case study regarding Levi Strauss & Co.'s use of child labor in Bangladesh, and Wellman et al. (2016) referring to “a supplier”. Across five studies, child labor violations were experimentally manipulated, not to assess attitudes or reactions to child labor violations per se, but rather as a response to unethical/immoral behavior in a corporate setting. In the case of Wang et al. (2021) the case study was used as a stimulus for teams to engage in discussion with outcomes being attention and time spent talking.

Taken together, the results of this scoping review suggest that there is relatively minimal empirical attention paid in mainstream organizational research to child employment broadly, and its impacts on the workers themselves. Specifically, when child employment is mentioned in empirical studies in our mainstream outlets, it is largely represented as child labor (often in global majority populations) and even then, it is typically only passingly referred to as an example of corporate social responsibility or unethical behavior more broadly in either the introduction or discussion. No studies explicitly explored child labor's effects on the workers

⁶ Peterson-Badali et al. (2003) included 17-year-olds in their sample of college students but did not provide employment information on any of their participants. Thus this study is excluded from this count.

themselves, but two did explicitly explore the impacts of child labor use on firm outcomes. The little empirical attention that is paid to child employment broadly tends to largely address the impact of adolescent employment on work/career attitudes outcomes or, to a lesser extent, the impact of work on health or school performance.

These results do not imply that research exploring young workers, child employment, or child labor does not exist anywhere within organizational science research (see Barling & Kelloway, 1999; Laberge & Ledoux, 2011; Loughlin & Frone, 2004; and Turner et al., 2022 for some key examples of considerations of this phenomenon), just that it is not represented in mainstream organizational research outlets. I argue that the results of this scoping review suggest that mainstream organizational research is largely ignoring a significant proportion of the workplace and their experiences that have clear impacts on their health and wellbeing. Moreover, when child workers are studied in mainstream organizational research, they likely do not classify as engaging in child labor, and when child labor is empirically examined it is simply as a vignette-based stimulus focused on participant reactions or as an antecedent to firm-level consequences. As organizational scholars, particularly those with a focus on the health and wellbeing of workers, it is cause for dismay that child employment broadly, and more specifically child labor, are not more represented in our mainstream science.

Recommendations and Agenda for Future Research

As both the scoping review of our top journals and the evaluation of the state of child labor across the globe would suggest, there is a pressing need for more frequent, high-quality, diverse explorations into the individual experience of employment for minors, particularly child labor. Yet, mainstream organizational science journals are largely devoid of meaningful explorations of this phenomenon. Might this be because we are turning a blind eye to this uncomfortable phenomenon to protect our own emotions or reputations? Or because research with children is difficult, especially if the children are possibly employed illegally? Or because there simply is no interest from key stakeholders in understanding the experience of children at work? Regardless of the cause, there is a clear need to bring research focusing explicitly on the individual experience of child workers, particularly (but not only) those in hazardous conditions, into mainstream organizational research. Below I outline some recommendations based on the scoping review and state of child labor to help push our field in a needed direction, and to help ensure that we can bring an empirical understanding of the individual experience of child employment and labor to the discussion with other disciplines who also focus on this topic from a different lens (e.g., public health, economics, public policy, sociology).

Recommendation 1: Publish Research on Child Workers

The most glaring issue regarding research on child employment is whether, and to what degree, our understanding of the psychological experience of work (developed

with adult samples) extends to children. Further, there is a clear disconnect between who is most likely to engage in child labor and who is represented in the few samples of employed children explored in our mainstream journals. This reflects the POSH (professionals, official work, safe from discrimination, and citizens of high-income countries; Gloss et al., 2017) and WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) biases of management research broadly. Moreover, this disconnect is not due to a lack of insight within our field (note that nearly every experimental manipulation of child labor referenced child labor in global majority countries). Perhaps, this disconnect is because research with vulnerable populations (e.g., undocumented immigrants, illegally employed minors, minors broadly) or in countries apart from one's home country is particularly challenging. Below I outline three key recommendations to take steps to address this issue.

First, one of the greatest barriers to doing research with child workers is appropriately addressing the needs of this vulnerable population, particularly those that may be exacerbated by their employment or economic status. I recommend reading about research with vulnerable populations (e.g., Sieber, 2012) and IRB approval for research with minors (Department of Health and Human Services (2021)). Recommendations from this reading and broader research include establishing appropriate safeguards for participants (e.g., gaining consent from parents, use of appropriately compensated community advisory boards drawn from the community of interest, tailoring of the research question and materials to the population being sampled, ensuring participation is not able to be tied back to the participant by current or future employers) and ensuring that research is directly used to benefit the community providing the data. A key factor to consider here is the nature of the sample, and what additional guardrails may be necessary based on additional vulnerabilities. For example, although research with legally employed minors in the United States still requires consideration of consent from parents and data security, research with undocumented immigrant children, or children legally engaged in child labor in one of the few countries without any protections for them likely necessitate additional safeguards (e.g., options for methods of compensation, provision of information for trustworthy and actionable resources to protect participant safety) and consideration (e.g., community advisory boards, different modes/languages of surveying, provision of actionable results and policies to the community of interest). Similarly, results from one population (e.g., legally employed children in the United States) ought not be generalized to other populations (e.g., children engaged in child labor in a global majority country) without evidence that this leap is justifiable.

Until new appropriate samples can be obtained, researchers may also look toward archival datasets that include employed children (e.g., Monitoring the Future Study, Johnston et al., 2016; Longitudinal Study of American Youth, Miller, 2021; National Youth Development Study, Mortimer, 2023). Archival data provides rich information, and many datasets include information from children, many of whom are likely to be employed. Although archival datasets rarely have the exact measure one is looking for, they may provide enough information to creatively test research questions, particularly those regarding the generalizability of findings found in adult-only samples.

Third, another key barrier to publishing research on child workers is overcoming reviewer pushback about unique populations, particularly those from global majority countries. I call for reviewers and editors to value samples that originate from areas in which child labor is more common and increase scrutiny of adult-only samples from global minority countries (e.g., North America and Europe) to better reflect global trends in employment (in line with APA's resolution for promotion of global perspectives; APA, 2017). Similarly, when working with data from industries that have high rates of child employment (e.g., leisure and hospitality, retail, education and health services, BLS, 2023) or child labor (e.g., agriculture; ILO & UNCEF, 2021) authors should be intentional about their (lack of) inclusion of minors, ensuring that the decision is based on the research question rather than convenience. Reviewers and editors, too, should keep this in mind when viewing datasets that draw heavily from these industries.

Recommendation 2: Build Interdisciplinary Teams to Understand Child Employment

Although child employment and child labor are not well represented in mainstream organizational science outlets, this is a topic of interest and research for many scholars within other disciplines. We ought not seek to reinvent the wheel, nor should we step outside our professional expertise. To effectively and ethically address this need, I recommend interdisciplinary efforts designed to evaluate the experience of working children, their families, and their coworkers. The involvement of organizational researchers in these multidisciplinary efforts is particularly important given that some of the largest of the efforts focused on child labor approach the topic from a largely macro-economic level (e.g., ILO's Global Accelerator Lab).

Much has been published on successfully creating and executing multidisciplinary teams (e.g., Brown et al., 2023; Proctor & Vu, 2019; Sterbenz et al., 2019). I highlight pursuing conference or center grants (e.g., NIH's Support for Scientific Conferences, R13 and U13; NIH's Center Core Grants; P30) to bring together scholars from different disciplines as one key step toward establishing these teams. Moreover, given the inherently international nature of child employment and child labor issues, it is critical that these collaborative efforts be international as well. Ideally these efforts incorporate researchers from the countries of data collection to better ensure that the research is used to promote the community's needs and carried out in a safe and sensitive manner. Yet, this task need not be dauntingly large. As Proctor and Vu (2019) highlight, "multidisciplinary research can be conducted on a smaller scale, with only two principal investigators from different disciplines...initiated by mutual interests" (p. 275). Thus, expanding one's network, attending conferences or joining professional organizations with those with relevant expertise can help generate the connections needed to start these multidisciplinary efforts.

On the other hand, interdisciplinary research is challenging (Newman, 2024) and can have significant negative impacts on productivity (Leahey et al., 2017). Beyond the additional time and costs associated with conducting multidisciplinary research, one of the biggest barriers to publishing (and therefore incentivizing)

multidisciplinary research is finding appropriate outlets (e.g., Leahey et al., 2017; Newman, 2024) and appropriate reviewers (e.g., Bammer, 2016; Perper, 1989). Thus, when possible, I recommend editorial boards explicitly solicit multidisciplinary work on child employment and child labor, perhaps arranged around special issues. Editorial systems should also include a rating scale of familiarity with the subject and methodology for reviewers, and explicitly use this as a weighting system in overall evaluation of these papers. Editorial boards should also explicitly seek out relevant reviewers from outside organizational science (e.g., sociology, economics, political science) that can better speak to the interdisciplinary aspects of relevant papers. This would benefit both the authors and the journals as multidisciplinary work tends to be more highly cited (Leahey et al., 2017).

Future Research Agenda

To aid in the execution of my two previous recommendations, I have generated specific research questions (Table 3) to begin the conversation, spark ideas, and address the most pressing needs. I divide these research questions into three categories: generalization of traditional organizational research to child workers, unique exposures of child workers and laborers, impacts of child work/labor on other stakeholders. Below I highlight and expand on some to bring attention to particularly promising and necessary areas of research.

Generalization of Findings

Because young workers have systematically been excluded from the bulk of the research that creates the mainstream organizational scholarship, it is unclear the degree to which our existing theories and findings generalize to this particularly vulnerable population. Some key theories and findings that must be explicitly explored include the perception and impact of stressors. One particularly poignant pattern of findings that we should explore is to what degree are child workers more sensitive to adverse working conditions (e.g., long hours, shift work, overnight work, interpersonal mistreatment) than adult workers regarding work (i.e., performance, job attitudes) and wellbeing (i.e., distress, somatic symptoms) outcomes. Many of the laws and guidelines that promote safe and healthy employment of minors focus on exposure to specific stressors (e.g., long hours, overnight work) and the distinction between child employment and child labor rests on the nature of the expected impact of the employment conditions on workers. Without additional research into the generalizability of relevant theories (e.g., Job Characteristics Model⁷; Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and findings (e.g., the relationship between job satisfaction and health; Faragher et al., 2005) it may be the case that critical work characteristics that impact the health and wellbeing of employed minors (and therefore define the distinction between child employment and child labor) are being ignored. To effectively test

⁷ It is worth highlighting that Barling et al. (1995) and, to a lesser extent, Loughlin and Barling (1998) do draw upon the Job Characteristics Model laying the groundwork for future explorations.

Table 3 Suggested research questions regarding child employment and labor

Area of research	Relevant research questions	Possible practical outcomes of research question
1. Theory generalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do measures of job attitudes or self-report measures of job characteristics show measurement invariance when comparing children and adult workers? • To what degree are child workers more sensitive to adverse working conditions (e.g., long hours, shift work, overnight work, interpersonal mistreatment) than adult workers with regard to work (i.e., performance, job attitudes) and wellbeing (i.e., distress, somatic symptoms) outcomes • What are the longitudinal physiological and developmental consequences of exposure to various forms of paid labor (e.g., manual labor, sedentary labor, socially stressful labor)? • How do age differences and the legality of employment alter power differentials between child workers and employers/supervisors? • How does child employment impact self-concept (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) and broader views (e.g., political attitudes, motivations)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of a need for, and creation of novel measures if conclusions of either academic or applied research are to be meaningful • Evidence-based guidelines for regulations regarding workplace characteristics for child workers • Evidence-based guidelines for organizational interventions to protect and support child workers • Evidence-based guidelines regarding enforcement of regulations regarding child workers

Table 3 (continued)

Area of research	Relevant research questions	Possible practical outcomes of research question
2. Unique exposures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what degree are children exposed to the same social stressors (e.g., abusive supervision, coworker mistreatment, customer mis-treatment) and able to draw upon the same resources (e.g., supervisor support, coworker support, formal mechanisms, psychological capital) as adults? • How do various child labor laws (e.g., lowered age to serve alcohol, lowered age to work in hazardous environments) alter the workplace experience and exposures of child workers including reducing the participation of children in the workforce versus simply reducing the <i>legal</i> participation of children in the workforce? • What market forces or firm-level decisions or qualities (e.g., family-owned) impact the psychological experience and exposures of working children at various points in the supply chain? • What role do various educational policies (e.g., school closures, school vouchers) have on rates and experiences of child workers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence to support, reject, or alter various public policies and laws regarding child employment and labor • Evidence to guide or regulate firm-level decisions and market pressures regarding child labor • Evidence to support, reject, or alter various public policies and laws regarding education • Evidence to support healthcare or compensation for child laborers
3. Other stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are children, compared to adults, integrated into the social networks at work including formal teams and informal social groups? • How does working with children impact perceptions of the self (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) and the organization including both moral and job attitudes? • To what degree are coworkers or families of employed minors at a greater risk of exposure to social or structural stressors than employees of organizations that do not employ children? • How does having an employed child alter one's self-perceptions as a parent and one's relationship with the child? How is this modified by the nature of employment (e.g., family-owned business, family farm, other employer)? • How does the reduction or increase of child employment alter pay and benefits within an organization, industry, or location? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines to facilitate interactions between adult and child coworkers • Evidence-based suggestions to minimize or eliminate child labor to maintain adult workforce • Evidence for government-level intervention to provide community resources to areas with higher rates of child labor • Improved therapeutic, counseling, or community-based interventions for families with employed children

this, researchers must statistically compare model fit for employed children against employed adults, something that (other than Senter and Martin's (2007) test of antecedents of turnover) was absent from my scoping review.

Another key domain of theory generalization to child workers that must be explored is the impact of work experiences on the self. Much of mainstream organizational research that explores the impact of work on self-concept (e.g., Fletcher & French, 2021; Harris et al., 2009) is executed with adult samples. Research (e.g., Sebastian et al., 2008) suggests that self-concept is particularly malleable during adolescence, thus it stands to reason that exposure to aspects of work that may impact one's self-concept (e.g., taking on a leadership role, being harassed) may have life-long impacts on adolescents that are not yet explored. For example, although their work does not focus on employed children, French et al. (2022) showed that exposure to psychological maltreatment during childhood impacted self-concept and, ultimately, work-family conflict in adulthood. Results from our scoping review highlight a few studies that explored identity navigation (Noonan et al., 2007), self-exploration (Gamboa et al., 2013), and self-esteem (Barling et al., 1995) as possible short-term self-concept outcomes of child employment. For example, building from these studies, researchers may explore what *qualities* of employment (e.g., mentorship, productive conflict, social relationships, skills training) foster productive self-exploration, or increases in self-efficacy and esteem as well as the relevant psychological mechanisms of action.

Unique Exposures

The defining feature of child employment is that children under the age of 18 are a vulnerable population. Just as this group's vulnerability alters the nature of engaging in research with them, it may fundamentally alter their experience of work. This vulnerability is compounded by the additional vulnerabilities of being employed illegally or being in a global majority country. A critical theoretical and practical question that must be addressed is how do age differences and the legality or location of employment alter power differentials between child workers and their employers/supervisors. Further, how does this power differential alter the work environment as well as the decision to join or leave that environment? For example, when workers are compensated in tips (i.e., lower power position), they are more likely to be sexually harassed (e.g., Klein et al., 2021; Kundro et al., 2022). It might thus be the case that because child workers (particularly those employed illegally or those in global majority countries) have lower power, they are exposed to a greater variety and magnitude of stressors and given fewer resources to address them.

A second unique exposure to stressors that should be better explored within child workers is the conflict between work and developmental experiences such as education, dating, and friendship development. Although work-school conflict has received attention in our mainstream journals (e.g., Butler, 2007; McNall & Michel, 2011; Park & Sprung, 2013) it is largely (other than Barling et al., 1995; Markel & Frone, 1998; Schill et al., 1985) examined with college student samples. There is reason to believe that college students, with more flexible schedules and adult-level rights and responsibilities, experience work-school conflict differently than children

under the age of 18, particularly those engaged in child labor. Similarly, although work-family and work-nonwork conflict have received significant attention from the organizational sciences, little work exploring the impact of work-friendship or work-dating conflict has been done. This is particularly important for adolescents for whom romantic interest is emerging and being shaped (Bouchey & Furman, 2006) and for whom friendship is becoming increasingly important for identity and norm creation and social support (Brown & Klute, 2006).

Other Stakeholders

Child employment does not occur in a vacuum and its presence may impact (or be impacted by) coworkers, customers, and family members. One stream of necessary research is into attributes of the family that predispose children to working, particularly working in hazardous conditions. Family-owned businesses, for example, may be more likely to employ their own children, and some research suggests that teens (within the United States) employed in family-owned businesses are more likely to experience injury compared to those employed for others (Zierold et al., 2012). On the other hand, for families that are experiencing poverty, children may be more likely to work or engage in child labor (Amin et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2003). Similarly, although the economic consequences for families with working children have been explored, the psychological impact on children's work on their parents or their relationship with their parents and siblings is underexplored, particularly in the organizational sciences. However, there is recognition that many families and regions are dependent upon the income from children to survive and that without major structural reforms (requiring collaboration with public policy experts, economists, sociologists) attempts to reduce child labor or employment may cause unintended harm (e.g., Khan et al., 2007). Thus, research into these interventions, not just from an economic or policy perspective, but from an individual-level, psychological perspective is necessary.

Looking beyond the family, the employment of children, particularly in hazardous conditions (i.e., child labor) may have significant consequences for coworkers. The employment of children may be seen as a signal (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011) from the organization to employees that their labor and wellbeing are not valued. For example, Distelhorst and McGahan (2022) found that manufacturing firms that had child labor violations were also more likely to have other forms of labor violations and tended to have worse quality products. As my scoping review highlights, child labor is, on its face, viewed as abhorrent and immoral, yet no research explores how direct exposure to this moral hazard impacts workers. If not a moral issue, the employment of children may be seen as a method to artificially keep adult worker wages low or to address labor shortages without improving working conditions. How might working alongside children impact workers' satisfaction with their pay or their organization?

Implications and Conclusion

As my review of global trends and mainstream organizational literature suggests, there is a timely practical need for an empirical understanding of the individual experience of child employment and child labor. I argue that high-quality, interdisciplinary research that addresses this need will provide the groundwork for a range of practical implications, a few of which I highlight here. First and foremost, national and local policies designed to curb child labor and provide for the safe enactment of child employment broadly could benefit from a better understanding of the unique and varied hazards that employed children face. By better identifying the workplace factors that harm development or threaten safety and wellbeing for children, organizational scholars can outline necessary policies that will help create a safer legal space for child employment. On the other hand, by identifying the psychological outcomes associated with child labor, organizational scholars can help design and promote interventions to mitigate the harms experienced by the millions of children globally experiencing child labor.

Beyond policy changes and post-hoc interventions to mitigate harm, by explicitly bringing child workers into the mainstream organizational research, we can take the necessary steps to fully integrate child workers into discussions of safe and healthy labor practices. By excluding children from our samples, we implicitly depower and devalue this portion of the workplace. By explicitly incorporating employed children in our research streams, we can better ensure our findings apply to this vulnerable population, and that their voices are heard and inform our findings. This can help better prepare managers to lead workforces comprised of adults and minors, as well as corporate decisions regarding the employment of minors and the benefits given to them.

With this paper, I sought to highlight the present need for mainstream organizational research on the employment of children, particularly on child labor. Despite legal and social movements to eliminate child labor specifically, we still see high rates in various global regions and recent reversals of gains against child labor. Moreover, as my scoping review highlights, mainstream organizational research largely has ignored this phenomenon, thereby leaving many individual-level experience associated with child employment and labor underexplored. This results in uninformed policies, interventions, and theoretical understandings of the nature of work as a human experience. As such, I call for organizational scholars, particularly occupational health researchers, to direct their attention and expertise towards this understudied and vulnerable population so we can provide better recommendations to policy makers as well as families of employed children and the children themselves.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The author declares he has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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* indicates that a reference was included in the scoping review

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