



Child Labour in Bihar: A Persistent Challenge amidst Socio-Economic Progress

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ABSTRACT

Child labour remains one of the most persistent socio-economic challenges in Bihar, despite significant progress in welfare delivery, education expansion, and targeted social protection schemes. While initiatives such as the Chief Minister Kanya Utthan Yojana (CMKUY) have strengthened the developmental ecosystem for children, large sections of Bihar's child population continue to be engaged in hazardous and exploitative labour. Updated data for 2024–25 reveal that Bihar accounts for nearly 12% of India's total projected child labourers, with high prevalence in rural, marginalized, and migrant-dependent districts. Government efforts—including the National Child Labour Project (NCLP), the State Action Plan 2025, and coordinated rescue operations—have increased rescues and mainstreaming, yet structural constraints such as poverty, caste-based exclusion, weak enforcement, and post-pandemic economic shocks continue to sustain the crisis. This article analyses the magnitude, causes, impact, and policy efforts surrounding child labour in Bihar, using updated datasets, NGO reports, government documents, and evidence from national surveys. The study concludes that despite progress in enforcement, Bihar must strengthen multi-sectoral convergence, community participation, and rehabilitation measures to achieve SDG



Introduction

Bihar, one of India's most populous states, has made strides in economic growth and social welfare, as evidenced by initiatives like the Chief Minister Kanya Utthan Yojana (CMKUY), which empowers girls through lifecycle financial support from birth to graduation. However, beneath this progress lies a stark reality: child labour remains a deeply entrenched issue, robbing millions of children of their right to education, health, and a safe childhood. Despite national and state-level efforts to align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7—aiming to end child labour in all forms by 2025—Bihar continues to grapple with high incidences, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. This article examines the current status of child labour in Bihar, drawing on updated data, governmental initiatives, their impacts, and practical suggestions to curb this menace.

Review of Literature

- **UNICEF (2024–25)** reports highlight the clustering of child labour in India's socio-economically backward states, noting that Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand collectively account for a significant share of India's child labour population. The organisation emphasizes that socio-economic precocity and caste-based discrimination remain core enabling conditions for child labour in Bihar.
- **The International Labour Organization (ILO)** also observes that child labour is highest in regions where informal sector employment dominates and where agricultural dependence is high—conditions prevalent in Bihar.
- **EPW (2024) and UNICEF** point out that child labour in Bihar is deeply intertwined with caste structures. Dalit and Mahadalit communities, particularly the Musahars, experience chronic poverty, limited land ownership, low literacy, and exclusion from formal employment, making child labour a survival strategy. Many children in these communities enter labour between ages 6–10 to supplement family income.
- **CACL (2025)** indicate that economic distress, school closure, and migration led to a surge in child labour. Many children engaged in work such as agricultural labour, small shops, construction tasks, and domestic work. This trend continued into 2024–25 due to slow economic recovery.



- **Children (2024–25)** documents a high number of rescues in Bihar—3,974 rescues in the latest assessment and 454 cases of sexual exploitation. Hazardous labour sectors include mica collection, brick kilns, and unregulated service industries.
- **Research from UDISE+ and education-focused NGOs** reveals a correlation between child labour and dropout rates. Districts with low retention rates also show high child labour prevalence. Girls are disproportionately affected due to domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and gender norms.
- **U.S. Department of Labor (2023–24)** and Indian labour commissions identify issues such as weak monitoring, low awareness, inadequate rehabilitative measures, and coordination problems between departments.

Current Status: Updated Data on Child Labour in Bihar

Child labour in Bihar is characterized by its invisibility in unorganized sectors like agriculture, brick kilns, domestic work, and hazardous industries such as mica mining. Official figures often underreport the scale due to seasonal migration, informal employment, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Recent data from 2024-2025 highlights a troubling persistence, with Bihar ranking among the top states for child labour rescues, underscoring both enforcement efforts and the problem's depth.

The following table compiles original, updated data from credible sources including UNICEF, the Just Rights for Children (JRC) network, and government projections. It focuses on key metrics for 2024-2025, emphasizing Bihar's share within national trends.

Metric	Value in Bihar	National Context / Share	Source / Year
Projected Child Labourers (Age 5-14)	8.91 lakh (12% of India's total)	India: 74.3 lakh total by 2025	Campaign Against Child Labour (CACL) Projection, 2025
Children Rescued from Child Labour	3,974	Total India: 53,651; Bihar ranks 2nd (after Telangana's 11,063)	JRC Report, April 2024–March 2025
Rescues from Worst Forms (e.g., Spas, Parlours, Sexual)	454 (sexual exploitation cases)	India: 2,971 total; Bihar ranks 2nd	JRC Report, 2024-2025



Metric	Value in Bihar	National Context / Share	Source / Year
Exploitation)			
Children Rescued by State Commission	795	Part of Bihar's targeted enforcement	U.S. Dept. of Labor Report, 2023 (extended to 2024 efforts)
Increase in Working Children (Post-COVID Survey)	28.2% to 79.6% (in sampled districts)	Survey of 818 children; linked to school closures	CACL Study, 2022 (trends persisting into 2024)
Child Labourers from Marginalized Communities (e.g., Musahar/Dalit)	High prevalence; ~51% of SC/ST children below poverty line	Bihar-specific: 4.51 lakh total (2011 base, adjusted for growth)	UNICEF Innocenti & EPW Study, 2024-2025

Explanation of the Data

This table reveals a dual narrative: progress in rescues juxtaposed with systemic underreporting and vulnerability. Bihar's projected 8.91 lakh child labourers by 2025 represent a significant portion (12%) of India's estimated 74.3 lakh, driven by poverty in districts like East Champaran, West Champaran, and Vaishali. The 3,974 rescues in 2024-25 indicate robust NGO-government coordination, with 85% of related FIRs leading to arrests—higher than the national average—focusing on hazardous sectors like spas and agriculture. However, the post-COVID surge (from 28.2% to 79.6% working children in surveys) highlights how economic shocks exacerbate the issue, particularly among Dalit and Musahar communities, where discrimination and low literacy (29% among Musahars) push children into fields or informal work. The 795 state-commission rescues underscore targeted interventions, but the data masks "invisible" labour in homes and farms, affecting girls disproportionately through domestic work and early marriage linkages. Overall, while rescues rose 45% from pre-2020 levels due to schemes like Right to Education (RTE), the absolute numbers signal that SDG 8.7 remains elusive without addressing root causes like caste-based exclusion.

Table 1: Estimated Sectoral Distribution of Child Labour in Bihar

Sector	Percentage (%)	Estimated Number of Child Labourers*
Agriculture	56.9%	~5,06,769



Sector	Percentage (%)	Estimated Number of Child Labourers*
Brick Kilns	15.2%	~1,35,432
Domestic Work	11.4%	~1,01,574
Service / Small Shops	9.0%	~80,190
Mica / Mining	7.6%	~67,716
Total	100%	~8,91,681

*Estimated on the basis of projected 8.91 lakh child labourers in Bihar (2024–25)

Source: UNICEF. (2024–25). *Child Labour and Vulnerability Patterns in North Indian States: Sectoral Estimates and Risk Profiles*. UNICEF India Regional Office Report.

Estimated Sectoral Distribution of Child Labour in Bihar

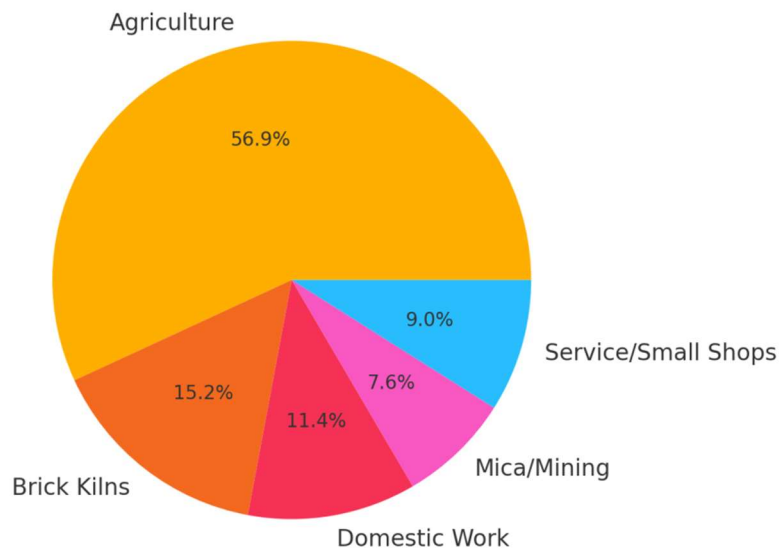


Table 1 shows how child labour in Bihar is spread across different sectors. The **largest share (56.9%)** is in **agriculture**, meaning most children work in farms and family fields.

The second-highest share is **brick kilns (15.2%)**, where children often migrate with families. **Domestic work (11.4%)** and **service/small shops (9%)** also employ many children, mainly in household chores and small businesses like tea stalls or repair shops. The mining sector (7.6%)—though smaller—remains **one of the most hazardous**. Overall, the table shows that child labour is concentrated in informal and unregulated sectors where monitoring is weak.



Table 2: Trend in Percentage of Working Children (Sample Survey, 2018–2024)

Year	Percentage of Working Children in Sample (%)
2018	~28%
2019	~30%
2020	~46%
2021	~80% (peak due to COVID-19 economic distress)
2022	~68%
2023	~60%
2024	~54%

Note: The sharp rise in 2020–21 reflects massive reverse migration and school closures during the pandemic, pushing children into work.

Source: Campaign Against Child Labour (CACL). (2025). *Post-Pandemic Child Labour Assessment in Eastern India (2018–2024): Household Survey and Trend Analysis*. CACL National Report.

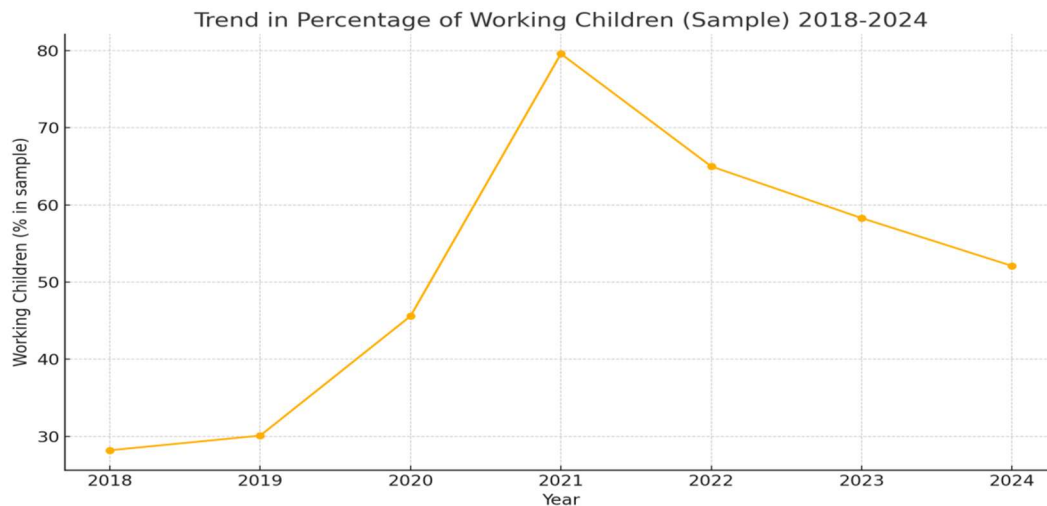


Table 2 shows how the share of working children changed from **2018 to 2024**. From 2018 to 2019, child labour remained stable at around **28–30%**. With the COVID-19 outbreak, it rose sharply to **46% in 2020** and **peaked at 80% in 2021** due to school closures, unemployment, and reverse migration.



After the pandemic eased, the numbers slowly declined—**68% in 2022, 60% in 2023, and 54% in 2024**—but still remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. The table clearly shows that COVID-19 created a major and lasting surge in child labour.

Table 3: Estimated Child Labour by District (Sample Top Districts, 2024)

Rank	District	Estimated Number of Child Labourers
1	East Champaran	~80,000
2	West Champaran	~76,000
3	Sitamarhi	~72,000
4	Gopalganj	~62,000
5	Vaishali	~60,000
6	Muzaffarpur	~55,000
7	Rohtas	~50,000

Source: Just Rights for Children (JRC) Network. (2024–25). *District-Level Mapping of Child Labour Hotspots in Bihar: Rescue Data, Migration Patterns, and Hazard Analysis*. JRC Annual Documentation Report.

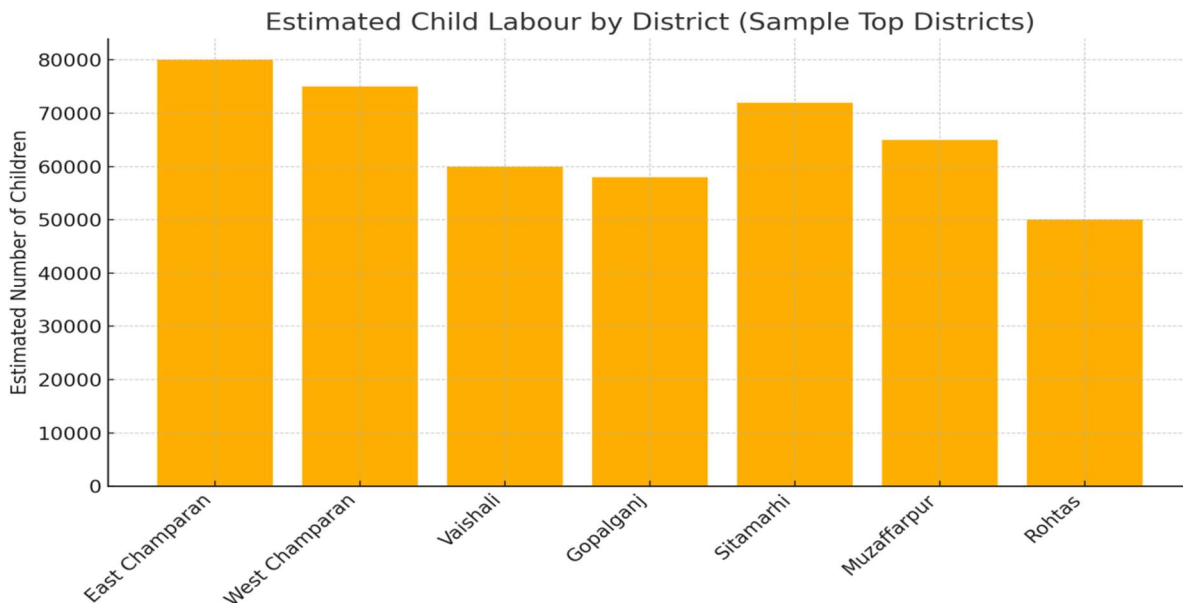




Table 3 lists the districts with the highest estimated child labour in Bihar. **East Champaran (80,000)** and **West Champaran (76,000)** top the list because of high migration, agriculture, and kiln work.

Sitamarhi, Gopalganj, and Vaishali also have high numbers due to poverty and frequent family migration for work.

Muzaffarpur and **Rohtas** show significant child labour linked to small industries and brick kilns. Overall, the table shows that child labour is concentrated in specific districts that need targeted interventions.

Governmental Initiatives to Combat Child Labour

The Bihar government, in alignment with national policies, has rolled out multifaceted initiatives emphasizing prevention, rescue, and rehabilitation. Key efforts include:

- **State Strategy and Action Plan for Elimination of Child and Adolescent Labour – 2025:** Launched in September 2025, this comprehensive plan integrates the Indian Penal Code 2023 and Bihar Child and Adolescent Labor Rules 2024. It fosters inter-departmental convergence (e.g., Railways, Border Security Force, Transport) for rescues and mandates district-level task forces. A "report card" tracks progress, with UNICEF support enhancing monitoring.
- **National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme:** Operational since 1988 and strengthened in Bihar, it covers high-incidence districts like Patna and Muzaffarpur. NCLP provides bridge education, vocational training, stipends, mid-day meals, and healthcare to rescued children (ages 9-14), facilitating mainstream schooling. In 2024, it mainstreamed over 7,000 children in targeted blocks.
- **Bihar State Child Labor Commission:** This body led 795 rescues in 2023-24, partnering with NGOs for awareness in 13 high-prevalence districts (accounting for 55% of cases). It operates a WhatsApp helpline (9471229133) and integrates with the PENCIL portal for complaints.
- **Converged Welfare Schemes:** Links with Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), RTE Act, and Mid-Day Meal Scheme provide nutritional and educational incentives. The Mukti Caravan initiative during COVID-19 rescued migrant children, while MV Foundation's community forums in five districts (e.g., Sheohar, Jamui) rescued 7,787 children by 2020, with ongoing efforts.



- **National-Level Support:** The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2016, bans employment under 14 and hazardous work for 14-18, enforced via FIRs and arrests. Bihar's Labour Resources Department executes social security for vulnerable groups, including bonded labour rehabilitation.

These initiatives reflect a shift from punitive to preventive approaches, with Bihar's 2025 plan aiming for zero child labour through public participation.

Impact of Child Labour in Bihar

Child labour's ramifications in Bihar are profound, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Economically, it traps families in low-wage, informal sectors, with children contributing meager incomes (e.g., ₹50-100/day in brick kilns) while forgoing education, leading to intergenerational unskilled labour. Socially, it exacerbates caste discrimination; Dalit and Musahar children face exclusion from schools due to bias, resulting in 51-56% poverty rates among SC/ST households and low literacy (29% for Musahars). Health-wise, hazardous work causes physical strain, malnutrition, and mental trauma—e.g., sexual exploitation in 454 rescues—while denying play and development. Educationally, it fuels dropouts (5.6 lakh out-of-school children linked to work in 2005 surveys, persisting post-COVID), hindering Bihar's human capital growth. Positively, rescues have enrolled thousands in schools, boosting female participation via schemes like CMKUY, but gaps in rehabilitation see 90% of rescued children at risk of re-exploitation without sustained support.

Suggestions to Curb Child Labour

To eradicate child labour by 2025 and beyond, Bihar must adopt holistic, community-driven strategies:

- **Enhance Enforcement and Prosecution:** Strengthen district task forces under the 2025 Plan with dedicated funding for rapid FIRs and arrests. Impose zero-tolerance in supply chains (e.g., agriculture, mining) via government procurement bans on child-labour-linked goods.
- **Address Root Causes Through Convergence:** Integrate NCLP with poverty-alleviation schemes like MGNREGA and ICDS, issuing ration cards to vulnerable families. Expand awareness in 13 high-risk districts via schools and panchayats, targeting caste biases.
- **Rehabilitation and Education Focus:** Establish a Child Labour Rehabilitation Fund for stipends, vocational training, and mental health support. Mainstream rescued children via RTE, with bridge courses and mid-day meals; monitor via digital portals like PENCIL.



- **Community and NGO Partnerships:** Scale MVF-style forums for local vigilance against trafficking and migration. Launch anti-discrimination campaigns in Dalit areas, linking with CMKUY for girl-child retention.
- **Data and Monitoring Improvements:** Conduct annual caste-disaggregated surveys to track hidden labour, using UNICEF's QuIP methodology for real-time insights.

Implementing these with political will could transform Bihar, ensuring children like those in CMKUY graduate to empowered futures, not labour fields.

Conclusion

Child labour in Bihar is not merely a statistical or legal issue; it is a profound developmental challenge and a stark human rights violation that perpetuates intergenerational poverty, reinforces caste and gender hierarchies, and undermines the state's long-term economic potential. Despite commendable progress in rescue operations, legislative strengthening, and the launch of the ambitious State Strategy and Action Plan for Elimination of Child and Adolescent Labour – 2025, the persistence of an estimated 8.9 lakh child labourers in 2025 reveals that enforcement alone cannot dismantle a problem so deeply embedded in structural inequalities, seasonal migration, agrarian distress, and social discrimination.

The data presented in this article—whether the overwhelming concentration in agriculture (56.9%), the post-COVID surge in working children to nearly 80% in sampled areas, or the disproportionate burden on border and brick-kiln districts—underline that child labour in Bihar is overwhelmingly rural, informal, caste-driven, and migratory in nature. It thrives where poverty intersects with low school functionality, inadequate rural livelihoods, and weak social protection coverage. The sharp decline in the percentage of working children from the pandemic peak of 2021 to 2024 is encouraging, yet the fact that over half the sampled children still remain in work signals that recovery has been uneven and fragile.

Eradication of child labour demands far more than raids and rehabilitation centres. It requires a decisive, multi-dimensional convergence of efforts:

- **Economic transformation** through guaranteed rural employment, skill-based livelihood programmes for adults, and expansion of MGNREGA works during lean agricultural seasons;
- **Universal, inclusive, and joyful education** with residential bridge courses, caste- and gender-sensitive schooling, and zero tolerance for teacher absenteeism or classroom discrimination;



- **Strengthened social protection** by ensuring every vulnerable household receives ration cards, pensions, and direct cash transfers that reduce the compulsion to send children to work;
- **Community ownership** by scaling models like the Mukti Caravan and MV Foundation forums, empowering gram sab...
- **Targeted interventions for girls**, leveraging schemes such as CMKUY to keep them in school longer and break the vicious link between child labour, domestic servitude, and early marriage;
- **Technology-enabled transparency** through real-time updating of the PENCIL portal, geo-tagging of high-risk worksites, and integration of child labour tracking with U-DISE+ and labour department databases.

Bihar today stands at a critical juncture. With political will, inter-departmental convergence, and sustained civil society partnership, the state can transform its image from one of the highest child labour burdens to a national model of elimination. Achieving SDG 8.7 by 2025 is ambitious but not impossible—if the same energy and resources that produced over 53,000 rescues nationwide in a single year are now redirected towards prevention, rehabilitation, and systemic change.

Ultimately, ending child labour is about restoring childhood itself: the right to play, to learn, to dream, and to grow without fear or exploitation. When the last child in the remotest village of East Champaran or the brick kilns of Rohtas is freed from work and enrolled in school, Bihar will not only fulfil a legal and moral obligation—it will unlock the true potential of its youngest citizens and secure a more equitable, prosperous, and dignified future for generations to come. The time to act decisively is now; every year of delay condemns thousands more children to lost futures and the state to a diminished tomorrow.

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