



**International Labour Organization
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)**

**El Salvador
Child Labour in the Urban Informal Sector:
A Rapid Assessment**

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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



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¹ Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

Executive Summary

Child labour in the urban informal sector in El Salvador is directly linked to an economic, social and historical context in which nearly 50 per cent of the nation's families live in extreme or relative poverty, as well as to underlying cultural attitudes that view children's work as an introduction to vocational training and to the responsibilities of adulthood.

Urban child labour is an established feature of Salvadorian society, characterized by the fact that a large percentage of working children are from extremely poor households. To make matters worse, numerous studies conducted agree that child labour in El Salvador is a social phenomenon that is on the rise. Also disturbing is the fact that boys and girls find it impossible to reconcile work with school; some ultimately drop out and those who remain in school demonstrate very low levels of achievement.

Issues concerning children, in general, and child labour, in particular, have been addressed in actions undertaken by the Salvadorian Institute of Child Protection [*Instituto Salvadoreño de Protección al Menor, ISPM*], which is charged with formulating and directing child-oriented policies in the country. Other (non-governmental) organizations of civil society have also led efforts. The results obtained by the programmes and projects implemented have been very modest, mainly because they involved pilot projects or small-scale efforts.

The methodology used to carry out this study follows the guidelines and recommendations of the rapid assessment methodology developed jointly by the ILO-IPEC and UNICEF and aimed at yielding quantitative and qualitative results.

This study was conducted in the cities of Santa Ana, San Miguel and San Salvador, which are the seats of their respective districts. The latter, in turn, account for approximately 50 per cent of the country's population.

The first section presents the frame of reference of the study, consisting of a brief description of the country's political, economic and social context, as well as of the causes of urban informal work in El Salvador, including estimates of its magnitude and actions undertaken to deal with it. This section also presents a summary of IPEC and of the ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

The second section presents the methodology used in the study, with a description of its objectives and target population. It also provides details concerning the design of the survey of child workers and describes the interviews held with other key informants in the working and family environment of these boys and girls.

The instruments used to gather the empirical data reflected in this report include a survey of 110 boys and girls working in the urban informal sector and a series of interviews of key informants, namely the children's teachers, employers, and parents, as well as adults present in their working environment.

The third section provides an analysis of the investigation's findings and includes the following themes: "Who are the children working in El Salvador's urban informal sector?"; "Migration and family composition"; "School enrollment of children working in the urban informal sector"; "Characteristics of child labour in the urban informal sector in El Salvador"; and "Risks and worst forms of child labour in El Salvador".

Researchers found that children working in the urban informal sector come from families who live in relative and extreme poverty and that this family context gives rise to a pattern of internal migration that flows from rural to urban areas as these families search for new opportunities to improve their standard of living.

The findings show that school dropout rates for working children are relatively higher than those for other children in the country. They also show, however, that this problem is less serious than the conditions of physical and psychosocial deterioration and disadvantage under which working children must struggle in order to participate in the formal educational system.

It should be noted that a large percentage of child workers (12 per cent) begin working before the age of 6 years, constituting a significant loss of opportunities for these children and their families, in addition to a high opportunity cost for society as a whole.

The study identifies two main types of risks that are inherent in child labour in the urban informal sector:

- a) risks associated with the type of work performed by children; and
- b) risks present in the social and geographic context in which children work.

The types of urban work that boys and girls perform may be classified as high, moderate or low-risk activities. The high-risk activities are those considered to be among the worst forms of child labour. In El Salvador, these activities primarily include: cooking and distributing food, carrying heavy loads, peeling fruits and vegetables, and shining shoes. Boys and girls who engage in these activities have long working hours—in many cases working every day of the week—and are exposed to burns, cuts, and physical deformations.

Lastly, the fourth section presents the main conclusions and recommendations formulated by the research team in order to facilitate the development of programmes aimed at eliminating child labour in the urban informal sector. It is important to note that the objectives set by such programmes should be medium to long-term in scope, given the complexity of the phenomenon, and that they should be considered as part of a national process involving all sectors and actors who can contribute to this cause. Nevertheless, there is a need to generate short-term options for the development of educational programmes geared to the needs of child workers, as well as to establish the necessary basic conditions for their academic success.

The full text of this report is available in Spanish at
<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipecc/simpoc/elsalvador/ra/urbano.pdf>