

Although research found no evidence that child labor exists in the Cook Islands, in 2021, the government made moderate advancement in efforts to prevent the worst forms of child labor. During the reporting period, the government approved the new National Youth Policy for 2021–2026 and opened its first Youth Hub for children, which will connect youth groups across the country in order to empower young people in their communities. Additionally, the Ministry of Internal Affairs collaborated with the United Nations Children's Fund Pacific office to draft a comprehensive report on its cash transfer program, which in part seeks to provide support to families with young children. However, the law does not criminally prohibit the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution.

I. PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Research found no evidence that child labor exists in the Cook Islands. Table 1 provides one key indicator on children's education in the Cook Islands.

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent
Primary Completion Rate (%)		122.4







Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2020, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022. (1)

The Ministry of Education has developed an Inclusive Education policy to ensure that children with disabilities and special learning needs are accommodated within the school system. The Ministry of Internal Affairs provides support for all related educational mandates. (2)

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

The Cook Islands is self-governing in free association with New Zealand. (3,4) Since 1988, no treaty signed, ratified, accepted, approved, or acceded to by New Zealand extends to the Cook Islands, unless New Zealand acted expressly on behalf of the Cook Islands. (3) The Cook Islands has ratified some key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 2).

Table 2. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

Convention	Ratification
 ILO C. 138, Minimum Age	
 ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor	✓
 UN CRC	✓
 UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict	
 UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography	
 Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons	

The government has established laws and regulations related to child labor (Table 3). However, gaps exist in the Cook Islands' legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the prohibition of using children in illicit activities.

Table 3. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	16	Article 30 of the Employment Relations Act (5)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Article 73(2) of the Employment Relations Act (5)

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Table 3. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor (Cont.)

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	No		Article 73 of the Employment Relations Act; Articles 52 and 53 of the Industrial and Labor Ordinance (5,6)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Articles 2–6 of the Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor Ordinance; Articles 109B, 109E, and 109H-I of the Crimes Amendment Act (7,8)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Articles 109b, 109e, 109h, and 109l of the Crimes Amendment Act (8)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	No		Articles 109b, 109e, and 109h of the Crimes Amendment Act (8)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	No		
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	Yes	18	Articles 36 and 37 of the Government of New Zealand's Defense Act (9)
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*†		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No		
Compulsory Education Age	Yes	16	Article 23.1 of the Education Act (10)
Free Public Education	No		Article 22.2 of the Education Act (10)

* Country has no conscription (9)

† Country has no standing military (11)

The Employment Relations Act prohibits children younger than age 13 from being employed. (5) The Act also prohibits a school-age person, defined as ages 13 to 16, from working during normal school hours, working for more than 10 hours a week outside of school hours, or doing work that is not considered light work. However, the legal framework does not determine the sectors in which light work is permitted. (5) The Cook Islands does not criminalize the use of children in illicit activities, particularly in the production and trafficking of drugs. (8) New Zealand is responsible for the defense of the territory at the Cook Islands' request. (9,11) While the Cook Islands provides free education to citizens, permanent residents, and children of permanent residents, children outside of these categories must pay a school fee. (10)

III. ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

As there is no evidence of a problem, there appears to be no need for enforcement actions to address child labor, including its worst forms. However, the Government of the Cook Islands has established institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labor (Table 4).

Table 4. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Organization/Agency	Role
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Enforces labor laws through the Labor Division and provides child services. Leads implementation of the UN CRC. (3)
Cook Islands Police Service	Enforces child labor laws. (3)

Labor law enforcement on the Cook Islands lies with the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Labor Division's four labor inspectors. The Labor Division is responsible for monitoring labor protections and occupational safety and health. (3)

IV. COORDINATION OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS ON CHILD LABOR

As there is no evidence of a problem, there appears to be no need for mechanisms to coordinate efforts to address child labor.

V. GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON CHILD LABOR

As there is no evidence of a problem, there appears to be no need for policies to address child labor. However, the Government of the Cook Islands has established policies related to child labor (Table 5).

Table 5. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Policy	Description
Cook Islands National Youth Policy (2021–2026) [†]	Identifies priority areas for youth, including education and work opportunities, health, and youth risk and resilience. (2, 12) During the reporting period, the government opened its first Youth Hub, designed to provide a safe space for children in need of support and learning opportunities. (13)
National Policy Framework for Children (2017–2021)	Provided a framework to protect the rights of children, with outcomes focused on their health, education, safety, economic opportunities, and international connectivity. Aimed to protect the rights of children by strengthening data collection on children to improve the government's understanding of child abuse and children's experiences in the legal system, and by improving collaboration between the government, parents, and the community. (14) During the reporting period, the government continued to support the National Policy Framework for Children. (2)
United Nations Pacific Strategy (2018–2022)	A multinational strategic framework program consisting of 14 South Pacific nations. Addresses, develops, and implements strategic economic development priorities in the South Pacific, including eliminating child labor and the worst forms of child labor. (15) During the reporting period, the government continued to collaborate with UNICEF Pacific Islands as it continued its review of the Child Protection Policy and Strategic Plan for the Cook Islands. (2) Additionally, in April 2021, the Ministry of Internal Affairs worked with UNICEF to publish its report on the Cook Islands' social cash transfer program, which provides child benefits and other assistance to vulnerable populations. (16)

[†] Policy was approved during the reporting period.

The government has not included child labor prevention strategies in the Cook Islands National Youth Policy.

VI. SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHILD LABOR

As there is no evidence of a problem, there appears to be no need for programs to address child labor.

VII. SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

Based on the reporting above, the following actions would advance the continued prevention of child labor in the Cook Islands (Table 6).

Table 6. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Legal Framework	Ensure that laws criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution.	2012 – 2021
	Ensure that the law prohibits the use of children in illicit activities, including in the production and trafficking of drugs.	2015 – 2021
	Ensure that the law criminally prohibits the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2016 – 2021
	Ensure that the law's light work provisions are specific enough to prevent children from involvement in child labor.	2017 – 2021
Government Policies	Ensure that the National Youth Policy includes provisions to prevent child labor.	2021
	Establish by law free basic public education for all children.	2021

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