

# Child Labour

## Details

---

Child labour, according to the International Labour Organisation, is a term that refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. For the vast majority of children who were in institutional Care in the twentieth century, working in the Home was part of daily life. For many, this work took the form of demanding physical labour, for no payment, and at the expense of their schooling or their vocational training. Children who were boarded out or placed in foster care were also required to work in private homes – in many submissions to the Forgotten Australians inquiry, people described feeling like a ‘slave’.

One submission to “Forgotten Australians” described life in the 1950s for ‘senior girls’ in the Dalmar Children’s Home in Carlingford, NSW, and the legacy of her hard work as a child:

*We worked seven days a week arising at 5.45am except on Sunday 6.30am and were expected to start our jobs by 6.15am lights out at 7.30p.m. The entire week was rostered, and every moment of the day accounted for. When I left Dalmar I could not deal with free time, I did not know what to do with free time as I had developed no interests or hobbies. Even when I had my own children I found it very difficult to play with them (Submission 136).*

The type and amount of work that children were required to perform of course varied from institution to institution, and changed over time. The incidence of child labour in institutions tended to decline in the second half of the twentieth century, at the same time as the employment of children became more widely seen as exploitative and unacceptable. However, it is clear that many children’s institutions lagged behind broader society in their attitudes to child labour.

The employment of children in the public sphere was regulated by governments from the nineteenth century, and child rescuers also took an interest in the plight of children engaged in ‘street trading’. In the 1880s, William Forster’s Try Society was established in Melbourne to work with Melbourne’s newsboys, as well as with ‘the army of waifs, too often the children of drunken and dissolute parents, who gain a precarious livelihood by selling matches and other trifling commodities’. By the late nineteenth century, most colonies’ child protection legislation addressed the issue of street trading and other work performed by children outside the home. However, the work performed by children in domestic homes and children’s institutions, understood as ‘helping out’ was subject to very little control or supervision. It was the practice for children to contribute to the day-to-day labour of institutions by performing work like housekeeping, cleaning, farming and gardening. Some older girls worked in Homes to help care for the babies and younger children. Some institutions had children working on commercial enterprises, like laundries and farms, which generated income.

In Western Australia, as early as 1914, excessive labour required from service children was a matter of concern to Boarding Out Committees:

*The Committee commented that service children should be visited as regularly as other children boarded out by the State, as reports are received about the long hours worked on farms...(Minutes of the Perth and District Boarding Out Committee, 4 August 1914)*

The Senate inquiries into Former Child Migrants (2001) and Forgotten Australians (2004) received many submissions containing evidence of the widespread use of child labour in institutions. The 'Forgotten Australians' report stated:

*Some non government institutions appeared to rely upon the labour of children in their care to supplement income. The organisations running these institutions profited from the labour of children through such commercial enterprises as farms or industrial laundries. The profits from such labour were not passed onto the children or their families in the form of wages and were received as an addition to funding (pp.111-112).*

The 'Lost Innocents' report into child migration stated:

*Much of the evidence provided harrowing descriptions of small children undertaking adult tasks . Clearing land, building, looking after livestock while at the same time trying to participate in the little education that was offered. Most institutions required inmates to at least perform daily housekeeping and general operational chores (p.86).*

For many child migrants from Britain, hard physical labour was a part of daily life in Australian institutions. Indeed, at Bindoon in Western Australia, the institution itself was the product of the labour of its boys. In 2001, Senator Andrew Murray spoke of Bindoon's 'manic and brutal regime of slave labour':

*the unpaid hungry, fearful labour force ... relentlessly driven from dawn to dusk in a dangerous work environment where the risk of accident was a reality. With their bare hands they cleared the land, laid the foundations and erected the most magnificent structures for Keaney and the Christian Brothers Order. Education was largely denied these boys, as was an adequate diet and protective clothing. Christian love and care was distinguished not by its presence but by its absence.*

Children's work was sometimes justified by the authorities as providing 'training' to children, so as to give the child the opportunity to develop into a 'useful and reputable citizen' (in the words of the Victorian Children's Welfare and Reformatory Schools Department in 1934). From 1864 in Victoria, neglected children were sent to 'industrial schools', to train them in habits of industry and order. However, industrial schools were abolished in Victoria by the 1880s. The 1872 Royal Commission on Industrial and Reformatory Schools had criticised the training offered in industrial schools, not because of the amount of work children had to perform, but rather on the grounds that 'the trades taught in the schools encouraged children to settle in town and cities "with their inevitable snares and temptations"'.

From the late nineteenth century, farm schools were a popular form of institutional care for children, and were seen as a way to rescue children from the supposedly corrupting environment of the inner city, and train them for a future on the land. Farm schools continued to operate around Australia until well into the post World War Two period. Many submissions to Senate inquiries from people who lived on farm schools contained stories of exploitative and exhausting physical work. But some people recalled farm work more positively – particularly the chance to be out in the open air, and to care for animals.

Work could also be part of the 'reformatory' treatment of children who were in institutions after having committed offences. In 'training institutions' for juvenile offenders, hard work was an integral part of daily life, with a view to improving, reforming or rehabilitating the children placed there. The work performed by inmates at Hay Institution for Girls in NSW, which opened in 1961, consisted of smashing concrete paths; digging; scrubbing; hand sewing leather, and other repetitive tasks, interspersed with physical exercises known as 'practices'.

Boys in reformatories and training institutions usually were treated in a similar way. A former resident of Westbrook Farm Home for Boys in Queensland in the 1950s recalled:

*We were treated as slave labour under the harshest conditions, working from dawn to dusk each and every day in the fields, the quarry, the farm, the kitchens, bathrooms and laundries. I was deprived of proper schooling ... (submission 141)*

Commercial laundries were a feature in some Homes for girls and young women. The institutions run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd around Australia usually had a laundry. One submission to Forgotten Australians recalled a woman's time working in a Magdalen laundry in the 1950s:

*[I was sent] to Hobart to the Magdalene (Good Shepherd) Laundry. This was an awful place and very strange to me. I was only 8 but had to work every day in the laundry from after breakfast until 5pm with a break for lunch. It was a huge laundry and we used to do the laundry for all the hotels, schools and hospitals in Hobart. I worked in the ironing room, sometimes I would iron but mostly I would fold and damp the laundry reading for the presses. They must have made heaps of money from doing all this laundry. From the ages of 8 to 12 while at the Magdalene Laundry I never had any schooling. On occasion though, we would be taken by an 'auxiliary' for an hour and she would read us a story, that was all (submission 182).*

From the late nineteenth century, children's protection legislation allowed for young people of working age to be placed in service or apprenticed at the discretion of the Department. When a ward of state was placed in employment, it was often governed by a 'service agreement' between the employer and the Department. In the nineteenth century, society's career aspirations for neglected children were not high. Young men might be apprenticed to a trade, such as tailoring, shoemaking, baking, smithing or carpentry; others did manual labour in the garden or the farm. Young women were mostly trained to sew, cook, wash and clean to prepare them to be employed as 'useful servants'.

Over time, institutions and government departments began to devote more resources and effort towards the secondary education and vocational training of children in 'care'. The importance of 'aftercare' for children was starting to be recognised by the late 1930s, when 'for the first time, options other than farm work and domestic service were seen as possible', write Howe and Swain in their history of Methodist child welfare in Victoria. However, even as late as the 1950s, young women were still being placed in 'domestic service' after leaving institutional 'care', and young men were sent off to work as farm labourers.

Not all work performed by children in institutions was unpaid, but both Senate reports demonstrated that a very large number of children were underpaid or not paid at all for their labour. Some institutions (and government departments) held children's wages in trusts or bank accounts, but it is evident that this money was not always passed on to the child. One submission from a former resident of Tally Ho Boys' Farm in Victoria stated:

*I had to milk a couple of cows each morning and night including weekends and for this you were paid, not in money but you were given a paper receipt for the work you had done. They called this .Tin Money. And it was placed in your account. We were told that when we eventually left this place we would get what we*

*had in our account but this never happened (submission 432).*

The issue of 'stolen wages' has received some attention in Australia, however this has so far been confined to wages that were not rightly paid to Indigenous people. The Queensland government introduced the Indigenous Wages and Savings Reparations Scheme in 2002. The New South Wales government established the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme (ATFRS) in 2005 to repay to Aboriginal people and their descendants money that was put into Trust Funds and never repaid. In 2006, the Commonwealth Government inquired into the issue of 'Indigenous stolen wages'. A Western Australian government taskforce investigated into the same issue in 2007, and the Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme was established in that state in 2012.

No recommendations in the Forgotten Australians report related to the money that had never been paid to children and young people in institutional care or in employment contracts while wards of the state.

[Click here to see the full Find & Connect glossary](#)

## Gallery

---



**Boys making hay at the Northcote Training Farm, Glenmore, near Bacchus Marsh, Vic**

**Description:** This photograph was taken at Northcote Training Farm school, Glenmore, Victoria. It shows three boys in overalls (presumably residents of the training farm) forking hay onto a small cart.

---



## Magdalene Laundry Australia 2008 Tour of Abbotsford Convent Victoria Australia

**Description:** This video of a 2008 tour of the Abbotsford Convent, Victoria, was previously uploaded in 6 parts, and has since been re-uploaded as a single video. [Description taken from Youtube]: This video is a tribute to my mother, her two sisters and three brothers who were all put into Catholic Institutional care in 1921. My mother and her sisters were taken in by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at their Abbotsford Convent. Neither my mother nor her sisters were Magdalen inmates The Magdalen inmates were in the section of the convent called Sacred Heart and my mother and sisters were in St Josephs section. Sacred Heart was known informally as the Penitentiary because it was in effect a prison with bars on windows and high cast iron gates to prevent escapes. The Magdalens were made to work up to 50 hours a week, for no pay to keep one of the biggest commercial laundries in Melbourne running. Income from the laundries made possible all the other pastoral work of the 'Mother House' that was the Abbotsford Convent and in the South Pacific region, for 100 yrs. [Former Description taken from YouTube]: This video was taken in Nov 2008 at the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. It is a present day guided tour with a tour guide. This first of six videos features the tour intro with a general introduction from the Arch-Bishops Office at the Abbotsford Convent. The camera work and production were undertaken by Paul Curwood, the son of a former inmate who endured this home between 1928 and 1931. In its heyday and for many decades the laundry at the convent was one of the biggest commercial laundries in Melbourne, serving many public hospitals and church clergy. It was a big money earner for the Catholic Church and the Good Shepherd nuns. As late as 1970 it was totally staffed by unpaid young women who had fallen foul of the law or the social morality of the time. These young women had the misfortune to end up enslaved by the nuns until they were eighteen years old. The girls self esteems were systematically disempowered by the nuns. All inmates became severely institutionalized. Some stayed in the nuns 'care' until their deaths. The women who were released were often crushed characters who never realized their full potential. These are the stolen generations: different types of 'stolen generation' when compared to the Australian Aborigines. These unfortunates, numbering thousands, have never been apologized to ,or compensated for, their enslavement. Who said slavery was not a twentieth century practice in the civilized Western World?



## Construction of the administration building at Bindoon, Western Australia

**Description:** This photograph shows a boy shovelling building material within the half-constructed walls of the administration building of Bindoon. Another boy is standing above him on some scaffolding. This webpage this photograph was published on is no longer in operation. This URL was taken from The Wayback Machine and is dated 22 November 2012.



## Girls working in the garden, watched over by officers, Hay Institution for Girls, 1965.

**Description:** This image was included in the National Museum of Australia's Inside blog, originally provided by Community Services New South Wales, Human Services.



## Milking, Fairbridge Farm, 1954

**Description:** This is a digitised copy of a photographic print and is part of the group of three images called 'Dairy cows and milking at Fairbridge [picture]' held at the State Library of Western Australia. The image shows a boy milking a cow at Fairbridge Farm School.



**Girl ironing,1953**

**Description:** This is a digitised copy of a photoprint and is part of the Government Photographer collection held at the State Library of Western Australia. The images shows girls ironing on tables at the Beagle Bay Mission in 1953.

---

## More info

---

### Related Entries

#### Related Events

- [Inquiry Into Child Migration, Parliament of Australia \(2000 - 2001\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Parliament of Australia \(2003 - 2005\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Stolen Wages, Commonwealth of Australia \(13 June 2006 - 7 December 2006\)](#)
- [Inquiry into the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Reports, Parliament of Australia \(2008 - 2009\)](#)

#### Related Glossary Terms

- [Reformatory \(1830s - 1960s\)](#)
- [Industrial School \(c. 1864 - 1970s\)](#)

### Resources

- *Reports upon the Roman Catholic Orphanages for the Year Ending 30th June 1884, 1884*
- 

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/child-labour/>