



Written by [Ty Bodden](#) on February 4, 2026

Child Labor Laws or Parental Rights? States Push Back Against Federalized Youth-work Mandates

For more than a century, “child labor” has been used as a political slogan to justify expanding government control over families, workplaces, and the free market. Of course, no civilized society tolerates abuse or dangerous exploitation, but modern “[child labor laws](#)” frequently go far beyond punishing abuse. They treat capable teenagers as wards of the state, substitute bureaucracy for parental judgment, and increasingly invite federal intervention where the [U.S. Constitution](#) authorized none.



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That is why a growing number of state lawmakers are revisiting youth-employment restrictions. The question is not whether children should be protected from genuine harm. It is whether government should presume to seize decision-making authority that belongs to parents — and whether Congress should be granted still more power over local labor rules, family life, and [state sovereignty](#).

Ultimately, this is a [God-given](#) parental-rights issue. The [Ninth Amendment](#) recognizes that the people retain rights beyond those explicitly listed in the [Constitution](#), as they are given by God. Among those retained rights is the fundamental right and duty of parents to direct the upbringing of their children — including whether, when, and under what conditions a mature minor may take on willful and gainful employment.

The Biblical Case for Parental Authority

Scripture makes clear that the authority to raise, train, and direct children is entrusted by God to parents — not the state.

In [Deuteronomy 6:6-7](#), God commands parents to teach their children diligently in all aspects of life, a charge that presumes both authority and responsibility within the household. Likewise, [Proverbs 22:6](#) instructs parents to train up a child “in the way he should go,” while [Proverbs 13:24](#) affirms that discipline — rightly exercised — is an act of love, not abuse. The [Fifth Commandment](#) reinforces this order by requiring children to honor their father and mother ([Exodus 20:12](#)), placing parental authority ahead of civil authority. Scripture further assumes that work and responsibility are formative goods, not evils, as seen in [Proverbs 31:27](#) and [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#).

Nowhere does the Bible grant civil government the power to manage family life or override parental



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judgment absent genuine abuse. To treat capable youth employment as inherently suspect is therefore not only unconstitutional, but unbiblical — replacing God-ordained parental stewardship with bureaucratic control.

Parental Authority Is an Intrinsic Right

According to the [Parental Rights Foundation](#), the authority of parents to direct the upbringing, education, and care of their children is not a government-granted privilege, but one of the oldest liberty interests recognized in law. The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in [Troxel v. Granville \(2000\)](#) that parental control over a child's care and upbringing is "perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests" recognized by the court.

That principle predates the Constitution itself. As John Locke explained in his [Second Treatise of Civil Government \(1690\)](#), parents possess authority over their children because they bear the God-ordained duty to preserve, educate, and prepare them for adulthood — a view later adopted by American law. In [Pierce v. Society of Sisters \(1925\)](#), the court recognized this principle, rejecting the notion that children are "mere creatures of the State." Federal efforts to override parental judgment in youth employment therefore represent not protection, but a direct assault on a right that is natural, constitutional, and deeply rooted in American tradition.

Connecticut's Push for a Federal Power Grab

Connecticut's [HJ217](#) (2024) is the clearest warning sign. Rather than adjusting state-level rules, it ratifies the so-called Child Labor Amendment — a proposed U.S. constitutional amendment passed by Congress in 1924 that would grant Congress the power to "limit, regulate and prohibit the labor of persons under eighteen years of age."

That language is breathtakingly broad. It would treat everyone under 18 as a single class, regardless of maturity, family circumstances, or the type of work involved. Worse, it would "constitutionalize" a new federal police power over youth employment, inviting Washington to override state laws, parental discretion, and local economic reality.

In a [constitutional republic](#), the federal government legitimately exercises [only the powers delegated to it](#). Congress was not delegated a general authority to regulate labor inside the states, and it certainly was not delegated authority to manage family decisions under the guise of "protecting children." Connecticut's HJ217 is therefore a bad bill: It aims to rewrite the constitutional balance rather than protect anyone from abuse.

Good Reforms: Let Parents Decide, Not Bureaucrats

In contrast, several states have taken steps — imperfect, but directionally correct — to roll back overbearing youth-work restrictions and restore parental authority.

Florida's [HB49](#) (2024) removed certain employment restrictions for minors ages 16 and 17, and revised which age groups certain restrictions apply to, reflecting a presumption that older teens can responsibly work with parental guidance.

Indiana's [HB1093](#) (2024) eased restrictions for minors, including allowing 14- and 15-year-olds to work later in the summer and rolling back limits that treated 16- and 17-year-olds as if they were incapable of ordinary responsibility. It also included a targeted change for minors working in agriculture.



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Kentucky's [HB255](#) (2024) moved in the right direction by repealing a state-law provision that prevented state regulators from adopting youth-employment rules less restrictive than federal mandates. In plain English, it reclaimed state flexibility from Washington's one-size-fits-all model.

Arkansas' [HB1410](#) (2023) eliminated the requirement that minors under 16 obtain a state-issued work permit before employment — a paperwork regime that often functions less as “protection” and more as a barrier to entry for families seeking opportunity, structure, and income.

Each of these bills recognizes a basic principle that modern lawmakers often forget: Parents know their children better than the state does. And a capable 16- or 17-year-old — and often a 14- or 15-year-old — can learn discipline, responsibility, competence, and self-reliance through honest work.

Other States Moving in the Same Direction

These reforms are not isolated. [Iowa's](#) youth-employment changes ([SF542](#), 2023) drew [national](#) attention because the legislation expanded permissible work activities and adjusted liability-related provisions, illustrating the same broader trend: states reasserting authority over youth-work rules rather than defaulting to federal dictates.

Whether one agrees with every detail in each state's approach, the pattern is clear. Legislatures are pushing back against a cultural and bureaucratic mindset that treats youth work as suspect, parents as untrustworthy, and government as the rightful manager of family life.

What “Child Labor Laws” Get Wrong

Modern debates frequently suffer from an all-or-nothing framing: Either one supports sweeping restrictions, or one “supports exploitation.” That false choice is used to smuggle in policies that erode liberty.

Teen work is often essential, not optional. Many teens benefit from work that builds trade skills, responsibility, and a healthier relationship with money and duty.

Blanket restrictions punish the responsible and reward the irresponsible. When laws assume every employer is abusive and every family is negligent, they impose costs on good actors, while genuine abusers find ways around the rules. Employers can decide for themselves whether a teenager is capable or responsible enough to perform the job's duties.

Federalizing the issue is the ultimate aim. Efforts such as Connecticut's HJ217 are not about child-labor protections. They are about transferring authority upward — away from parents, away from states, and into the hands of Congress and federal agencies.

Our Founders [rejected centralization](#). Abuse, coercion, and fraud should be punished — at the state or local levels — but freedom, family authority, business rights, and voluntary work should not be treated as crimes.

Real Solutions

If lawmakers truly want to protect minors while honoring liberty and constitutional limits, the path is straightforward:

- *Protect parental authority:* State law should presume that parents — not bureaucrats — have the primary right and duty to decide whether a minor may work, consistent with safety and genuine



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welfare.

- *Target real abuse, not normal work:* Enforce laws against trafficking, coercion, dangerous neglect, and fraud. Do not criminalize ordinary youth employment.
- *Reject federal usurpations:* States should oppose measures such as Connecticut's HJ217 that would hand Congress sweeping authority over everyone under 18. States should [nullify](#) unconstitutional laws, rules, and edicts as duty-bound under [Article VI](#) and the [10th Amendment](#) of the U.S. Constitution.
- *Restore free-market norms:* Reduce red tape (including unnecessary permit regimes), and allow families and employers to arrange voluntary work consistent with common-sense safety.
- *Reassert state sovereignty:* When federal agencies attempt to dictate youth-work policy beyond enumerated powers, states should resist and defend the constitutional division of authority.

Defend Parental Rights and Constitutional Limits

The choice before state legislatures is increasingly stark: Will they affirm the Ninth Amendment's recognition that rights are retained by the people — including the fundamental rights of parents — or will they yield to a federalized model that treats families as subjects and teenagers as government property?

Bills such as Florida's HB49 (2024), Indiana's HB1093 (2024), Kentucky's HB255 (2024), and Arkansas' HB1410 (2023) move in the right direction by reducing unreasonable barriers to youth employment and restoring parental discretion. Connecticut's HJ217 (2024), however, represents the opposite: a dangerous invitation to expand Congress' power over family life and labor inside the states.

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