Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative started working in the slums of Mumbai in 1994 with the mission of “Every Child in School and Learning well” focusing on making quality education accessible to all children. While working on this mission, Pratham came across many children who were found to be in different kinds of difficult circumstances. Many of the children in the city worked as child labourers in industries like zari, leather, gold polishing, hotels, rag pickers and some of them were street children, child beggars on signals and railway platforms. This led to a grim realization that the goal of universalization of primary education and ‘every child in school’ could not be achieved without reaching out to these vulnerable children who were not only victims of fate but also victims of our neglect. Thus the Outreach program was started in Mumbai in April 2001 with the vision of ‘No Child working and every child in School’.

The target population of the outreach program was out of school children like: child labourers, street children, children begging or selling things, children in Government Institutions, rag pickers, children on platforms and pavements. The idea was to give these children a basic right to childhood.

The program was designed initially to reach out to these vulnerable children in terms of providing them with basic literacy by teaching children at their place of work or wherever they are, but in the hind sight we always aimed at complete withdrawal from work and proper rehabilitation of the child. Education being a non-controversial issue was used as an entry point and a strategy to reach to these children and gain a better understanding of their situation.

Keeping in mind the magnitude of the problem, in 2005, it was decided by Pratham to convert outreach program into specialised unit called Pratham Council for Vulnerable Children (PCVC) to reach out to the unreached children. As rapport was established with employers and children, the outreach’s major role became to rescue children out of workplaces. This was facilitated through raids as well as through convincing employers to send children back to their hometowns and not employ children for work in general. This work was done in coordination with the Police and Labour Department. Simultaneously, Drop-in Centers were started in these communities which encouraged children to take some time off work and visit the centers. These centers were also open to other out of school children in the community as well as to several children working on dumping grounds or rag-picking.

Until 2005, though painfully aware of the extremely exploitative situation that children are in, rescue and rehabilitation work was not being carried out except in extreme situations. However,
the cruel death of a 12 year old boy, Afzal Ansari, a child labourer and a student of the Pratham educational class who was working in the zari unit of Govandi triggered the initiation of the entire movement against this inhuman practice.

As a response to this tragedy, Pratham approached the Honorable Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra and the Labour Minister. They were informed of the sad demise of Afzal and the data of many more children working in similar exploitative situations was shared. The strong grass root presence of Pratham helped to strongly and successfully advocate the issues of this section of the society. The magnitude of this issue was also brought to the notice of all the stakeholders like the officials from the Labour Department, Police, Department of Women and Child Welfare, Department of Health and all the likeminded NGOs of the city. Pratham appealed to all these stakeholders to come together and step into active rescue-and-rehabilitation mode. This led to the formation of Task Force consisting of the important Government departments and NGOs including Pratham.

As a member of the Task Force we played an important role in the rescue and repatriation of child labourers. From here, a major milestone was established in the journey of PCVC as an organization, as the Task Force initiated during this process was taken up as a State mandate to be implemented in all states for the rescues of child labourers. The coming together and accepting responsibilities of all concerned departments was an excellent model of convergence which was further adopted nationally across states.

Due to this initiative more than 45,000 child labourers (around 2,200 through legal intervention, around 20,000 through convincing the employers) were rescued from in and around the city. Majority of these children were from the States of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and some from Rajasthan and Gujarat. The children were repatriated to their respective villages.

From here, PCVC also started working on the railway terminals for keeping a track of children who were entering the cities for work as well as for facilitating repatriation for those leaving the city for their home towns. Dialogues with the Railway Administration were conducted to facilitate the entire process of repatriation of rescued child labourers by arranging special bogies and railway coaches for taking children home. Special help desk was also set up at the railway station to provide help to children in distress found on railway platforms.

With steady progress in Mumbai and owing to experience at grassroots level, PCVC initiated the state chapters in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.
A link was found between these cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Surat and States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Rajasthan; where the former being the receiving areas and the latter being the source areas. Hence, Pratham started working in these source areas in order to prevent children from entering into the labour force. Here the focus was to provide education, residential care for children hailing from very vulnerable backgrounds and age appropriate vocational training in the source areas so that they do not migrate to cities. On the other hand we also worked with the local government authorities and communities so as to make them take the onus that no child from their village is being pushed into child labour. Large scale education programs were started with the help of the Central Government in the states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Over the years, PCVC evolved, strengthening its interventions at various intervals. These programs included setting up residential shelters, child rights protection desks, drop-in centres, support classes, disability camps, etc.

With the entire process of raids, rescues and rehabilitation in place, further steps were taken to establish inter-state connections between the receiving cities and source states. This was done with an aim to further simplify and efficiently complete the circle of rescue and safely reuniting a child with family.