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National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.



CHILD LABOR

Each year, an estimated 300,000 to 800,000 children toil under the hot sun while working on farms across the United States.¹ Though their labor contributes to the U.S. agriculture industry and undoubtedly helps put food on the tables of many Americans, child agriculture laborers do not benefit from their time spent in the fields. Instead, these children are at risk of losing their childhood, their health and their education.

Child Labor Information

- The International Labour Organization defines child labor as work that:
 - Deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and is harmful to physical and mental development.
 - Is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful.
 - Interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely, or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.²
- UNICEF counts **158 million children worldwide** who are engaged in labor and further characterizes child labor as work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work.
 - Ages 5-11: At least one hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.
 - Ages 12-14: At least 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.
 - Ages 15-17: At least 43 hours of economic or domestic work per week.³
- Worldwide, poor and rural children are more likely to engage in child labor than are urban and richer children.⁴
- In the United States from 1992 to 2000, a reported 603 children died as a result of occupational injuries.⁵ In 1998, 77,000 child workers required treatment in hospital emergency rooms and an estimated total of 230,000 children under age 18 suffered work related injuries in the same year.⁶

Child Labor in Agriculture

132 million girls and boys from 5 to 14 years old work in agriculture worldwide, which amounts to 70 percent of all working children.⁷ The exact number of children who work in the fields or travel with their farmworker families is not known. The Department of Labor posits that 6% of all farmworkers were between the ages of 14 to 17 years old, which means somewhere between 180,000 and 300,000.^{7a} The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) has cited estimates as high as 800,000.^{7b} The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) stating that 431,730 youth between the ages of 12 and 17 are hired for agricultural work annually.^{7c} There is no data for children under the age of 12

1770 FM 967 * Buda, Texas 78610 * Telephone 512-312-2700 * Fax 512-312-2600 800-531-5120

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working in the fields but during field visits from 2003 to 2005, the Association of Farmworker Opportunities Program AFOP observed children under 12 working in the fields. They also report that many children work “off the books” by using their parents’ social security numbers, suggesting that the total of child farmworkers may be closer to 500,000.^{7d}

- Three types of child farmworkers exist:
 - A) Those who work on their parents’ farm
 - B) Those who work on local farms part-time or during the summer to earn extra money.
 - C) Those who feel compelled to work out of economic necessity, often migrating alone or with their families from farm to farm.⁸
- A 2002 Human Rights Watch study revealed children in the United States working in agriculture as early as age 12 for routine 12-hour days. During peak harvest season, these children worked 14-or-more-hour days, starting as early as 4 AM.⁹
- Internationally, agriculture is one of the top three most dangerous sectors to work in at any age, along with construction and mining. For children, these risks are even further increased because their bodies and minds are still growing.¹⁰
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention label agriculture the *most dangerous* industry for young workers in the United States, accounting for 42 percent of all work-related fatalities of young workers between 1992 and 2000.¹¹ Fifty percent of these victims were younger than 15 years old.¹²
- Between 1995 and 2002, 907 youth died on farms, or 43 deaths for every 100,000 children.¹³
- The risk of injury for child agricultural workers is four times higher than children in other workplaces.¹⁴

Risks and Effects

The nature of agricultural work exposes child laborers to many risks and dangers, including long hours in scorching heat, hauling heavy loads, exposure to toxic pesticides and injury from sharp knives and other dangerous tools.¹⁵ When children work in the fields, these dangers can become even greater for them than for adults because of their lack of experience and the toll these can have on their still developing bodies. A study conducted by Human Rights Watch found that many young farmworkers are forced to work without access to toilet facilities, handwashing facilities, and adequate drinking water, the three most basic sanitation requirements. The lack of handwashing facilities contributes to pesticide poisoning and bacterial infections, while the lack of adequate drinking water can lead to dehydration and heat illness. Children often work in fields where the temperature is well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁶

- Heat and Sun
 - Farmworkers often perform labor in harsh weather conditions for 10-to-12 hours a day. This means working outdoors under the sun’s harsh and hot rays.
 - The Environmental Protection Agency has confirmed that children are more susceptible to heat stress than adults.^{16a}
 - 80 percent of a person’s lifetime sun exposure occurs before the age of 18 and one bad sunburn during childhood could double the risk of developing skin cancer in the future.¹⁷
 - Excessive heat exposure can even lead to death.
 - From 1992 to 2006, 423 agricultural workers were reported to have died from exposure to environmental heat.¹⁸
- Musculoskeletal Injuries
 - Farm work is characterized by constant bending, twisting, carrying heavy items, and repetitive motions during long work hours, all of which contribute to musculoskeletal injuries.¹⁹

- Because children are still developing physically, this exertion places an even greater stress on their bodies and can result in long-term consequences. Adolescents also undergo growth spurts, which may decrease flexibility and increase their susceptibility to a variety of musculoskeletal injuries, such as bursitis, tendonitis, sprains, and carpal tunnel syndrome.²⁰
- Pesticides:
 - The Human Rights Watch found children who reported working in freshly sprayed fields, and even working while the fields were being sprayed. Children interviewed reported symptoms of exposure including headaches, fever, dizziness, nausea, rashes and diarrhea. In severe cases, pesticide exposure can lead to convulsions, coma and death. Long term effects also include cancer, brain damage, sterility or decreased fertility, and birth defects.²¹
 - Pesticides' health threat is greater to children than adults because of their small body mass and state of rapid physical and cognitive development.²²
 - Children can have less-developed metabolic systems than adults and break down pesticides at slower rates. Also, they can engage in hand-to-mouth behaviors that increase their risk of ingesting pesticides.²³
 - Not one of the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch had received training about the dangers of pesticides, safety measures, or what to do in case of exposure. Some did not even know what pesticides were.²⁴
- Hazardous Tools and Machinery
 - Farmworker labor routinely requires the use of knives, hoes, ladders and other tools, as well as work on or around heavy machinery. 27,600 injuries, or 3.1 injuries every hour, occurred to youth who lived on, worked on, or visited U.S. farms in 2004.²⁵ The most common types of injuries were broken bones, cuts, sprains, and the most commonly injured body parts were arms, hands, feet and ankles.²⁶
 - In 1998, children under the age of 16 suffered 3,069 non-fatal injuries from tractors, 3,035 machinery-related injuries, and 5,444 vehicle-related injuries on farms. More than 70 percent of the tractor and vehicle-related injuries occurred while children were operating the machines, and virtually all of the machinery-related injuries happened while children were operating the equipment.²⁷
 - Other injuries include falls off of ladders or other elevated surfaces; being entangled, crushed or dismembered by machinery; and cuts and sprains from using farm tools designed for adult hands and strength.²⁸
 - The majority of the 907 child deaths on U.S. farms from 1995 to 2002 were due to machinery (23%)²⁹
 - Child farmworkers' relative inexperience increases their chances of accidents and injury, as well as the fatigue that comes from long hours of hard work in harsh conditions.³⁰

Education Deprivation

- Child farmworkers may attend three to five different schools per year as they migrate from farm to farm.³¹ This disrupts school work and social integration.
- Constant mobility makes it hard for farmworker children to complete their education. On average, the highest grade completed by farmworkers is seventh grade with only 13% of farmworkers completing 12 years of schooling.^{15a}
- According to a five year examination of the National Agricultural Workers Survey results, more than a third of farmworkers ages 14 to 17 dropped out of school. While 17 percent of these young farmworkers went to school at a grade level lower than their age peers. Likewise, the children of farmworkers were educationally disadvantaged. One quarter of school-aged children of farmworkers were behind in grade or had dropped out of school.^{15b}

Child Labor Laws

Children working in agriculture do not receive the same protections provided to other working youth. The following are a list of laws that govern youth employment in agriculture and how they compare to children working in other occupations under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).³²

- Children ages 16 and above may work in any farm job at any time including performing hazardous work. Children in other occupations can not perform hazardous work until age 18. *(For a list of all work consider hazardous under the FLSA see page 6 here <http://www.dol.gov/esa/whd/regs/compliance/childlabor102.pdf>)*
- Children working in agriculture can work unlimited hours outside of school hours. Children working in all other occupations have strict limits on the amount of time they can work outside of school.
- The standard minimum age for children being able to work in agriculture is 14. The standard minimum age for children being able to work in all other occupations is 16.
- There are many exceptions to the standard minimum age for children working in agriculture. As a result, many children even younger than 12 are permitted to work in the fields as long as they have their parent's permission, with no restrictions on hours except that they cannot work during school hours. Children working in all other occupations are permitted few exceptions to the standard minimum age. As a result, most children under age 16 who work are 14- and 15-year-olds in retailing, with strict limits on hours, such as not more than 3 hours on a school day and not more than 8 hours on a non-school day.
- Children who work in agriculture, who work more than 40 hours, are not entitled to overtime pay. Children working in all other occupations are not allowed to work more than 40 hours a week.
- Children who work in the fields are exempt from minimum wage provisions in certain cases. Children working in all other occupations are required to be paid minimum wage.
- Though child agriculture workers risk their health, life and education when working on farms, they are often severely underpaid or paid nothing for their labor.
- Growers often pay farmworkers piece rate wages. This works well for stronger quicker workers, but hurts slower ones. This is especially true of children who are generally slower than adults. As a result, many children can make as little as \$2 to \$3 an hour.³³ The National Agricultural Workers Survey found that agricultural workers aged fourteen through seventeen earned just over \$4 an hour, on average.³⁴
- In some cases, children who are entitled to minimum wage earnings work alongside their parents but are not paid any wage. This is common when parents are paid on a piece-rate basis. Parents, because of their desperate need for higher wages, allow their young children to work with them so that they plant or harvest more crops and hence receive a higher rate of pay per hour worked. Where employers are aware that children are working in this way, they are required by law to pay the children for this work. However, often times these children are not paid at all.³⁵

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- ⁵ NIOSH (2003). Unpublished analyses of the 1992–2000 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries Special Research Files provided to NIOSH by the Bureau of Labor Statistics Morgantown, WV: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Division of Safety Research, Surveillance and Field Investigations Branch, Special Studies Section. Unpublished database.
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