



# in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF  
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA  
<http://www.ourownbackyard.org>

## Part I: The Hidden Problem

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

Questions and answers about child labor from Human Rights Watch.

*Source: Human Rights Watch,*

*<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/farmchild/qna.htm>*



## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What are the biggest problems faced by child farmworkers?**

Child farmworkers often begin working by age twelve or thirteen. They routinely work twelve-hour days, sometimes for as little as \$2 an hour. They risk serious illness, including cancer and brain damage, from exposure to pesticides, and suffer fatalities at five times the rate of children working in other jobs.

### **Aren't there laws to protect child farmworkers?**

There's a double-standard in the law. It allows child farmworkers to work at younger ages, for longer hours, and under more hazardous conditions than kids working in other jobs. For example, you have to be at least fourteen to get a job at Burger King, and can only work for three hours on a school day. But in agriculture, children can work at age twelve (and sometimes even younger) with no limit on the number of hours they work, as long as they don't work during school hours.

Even the weak laws that exist aren't well enforced. Although an estimated one million child labor violations occur in US agriculture every year, only a tiny fraction are ever uncovered by the Department of Labor. In addition, penalties are typically too weak to discourage employers from using illegal child labor.

### **If kids want to work at age 12, what's wrong with that?**

Kids who work at such young ages are likely to fall behind in school, and often drop out. Only 55% of child farmworkers ever finish high school. As a result, many can never get better paying jobs and end up working in the fields all their lives.

### **Why are child labor laws different for child farmworkers than for kids in other jobs?**

The law on child labor (the Fair Labor Standards Act) was first drafted in 1938, when many families lived on farms, and children who worked in the fields were usually helping their parents farm land that they would eventually inherit. But today, farming is dramatically different. Only about 1.5 percent of U.S. residents now live on farms, and mechanization, specialization, fertilizers, and other technical innovations have led to the phenomenal growth of large-scale agriculture. Where once most children in agriculture were working on their own family farms, now most are working as hired hands for commercial enterprises. Unfortunately, the law hasn't kept up with this new reality.

### **Aren't most child farmworkers here illegally? Why should they get legal protections?**

The majority of child farmworkers are either US citizens or legal US residents. But regardless of whether they are documented or not, all children have a right to basic standards of health and safety, and freedom from exploitation.

**Why should we strengthen child labor laws in agriculture if the existing ones aren't enforced?**

We need to do both - strengthen enforcement of existing laws and make sure that all young people who work are protected equally.

**What if farmworker families are so poor that the kids have to work?**

Most farmworker families are very poor. Adult farmworkers working full-time earn only about \$7,500 a year. This creates pressure for children to join their parents in the fields to add to the family's income. To break the cycle of poverty, all farmworkers should receive fair wages, and children of farmworkers should be able to stay in school and get a good education, so that they have more job options when they're ready to enter the workforce.

**Won't this raise the cost of our groceries?**

Regulating the hours and ages of children working in agriculture shouldn't affect grocery prices. Ending wage exploitation in agriculture might, but all of us should be willing to pay a little more to make sure that the food we eat wasn't harvested by workers who were denied their rightful wages.

**How can I help?**

Write your member of Congress and Senators, and urge them to support amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act to ensure that children working in agriculture receive the same protections as other working children.