



in our own backyard

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

Part I: The Hidden Problem

Facts and Figures

More statistics on child farmworkers and information about the extent of the problem.

*Source: Farm Worker Conditions, National Farm Worker Ministry,
<http://www.nfwm.org/fw/childlabor.shtml>, and*

*Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farmworkers,
Human Rights Watch, 2000*



Between 300,000 and 800,000 child farmworkers are laboring under dangerous and grueling conditions in the United States. These children often work 12-hour days, and during peak harvesting season, may work 14 hours a day or more, seven days a week. Some are paid as little as \$2 an hour.

Farm work is the most dangerous occupation open to minors in the US. Child farmworkers risk pesticide poisoning, heat illnesses, injuries and life-long disabilities. They account for 8% of all working children, but suffer 40% of work-related fatalities among minors.

A report from Human Rights Watch documents the failure of the US government to protect children working in agriculture. The report, entitled "*Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farmworkers*," draws on scores of interviews with child farmworkers and farmworker advocates. Key findings include:

- Child farmworkers frequently work long hours at young ages. Human Rights Watch interviewed children who worked ten hours a day at age twelve, and others working twelve or more hours a day at age fourteen, sometimes beginning at 3 or 4 a.m.
- Child farmworkers are routinely exposed to dangerous pesticides, suffering rashes, headaches, dizziness, nausea and vomiting. Long-term consequences of pesticide poisoning include cancer and brain damage.
- Children working in agriculture suffer a high rate of injuries from knives and heavy equipment. An estimated 100,000 children suffer agriculture-related injuries annually in the United States.
- Young farmworkers are often cheated from receiving their rightful wages, and many earn far less than minimum wage (currently \$5.15). Some interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported earnings as little as two dollars an hour.
- Girls are routinely subjected to sexual advances by farm labor contractors and field supervisors. Many do not speak English, do not know that sexual harassment is illegal, and fear losing their jobs or other retaliation if they report the abuse.
- Long hours of work interfere with the education of children working in the fields. Only 55 percent of farmworker children in the United States finish high school. Of the dozens interviewed by Human Rights Watch, nearly every one had dropped out of school for at least one extended period of time.
- Many young farmworkers are forced to work without access to toilet facilities or handwashing facilities. Being unable to wash hands greatly increases children's risk of pesticide poisoning.
- Employers often fail to provide adequate drinking water for workers, even though temperatures may exceed 100 degrees. Child farmworkers risk heat illness, and may experience dizziness, headaches, nausea and vomiting.



Picking apples, North Carolina. © David Peele. Courtesy of [IIECL](#).

➡ Between 300,000 and 800,000 adolescent farm workers are laboring under dangerous and grueling conditions in the United States. These children often work 12-hour days, and during peak season, may work 14 hours a day or more, seven days a week. One-third of those interviewed by Human Rights Watch (an international human rights organization) reported earning significantly less than the minimum wage. Some workers were paid as little as \$2.00 an hour." (*Fingers To The Bone: United States Failure To Protect Child Farm Workers.* Human Rights Watch. New York. June 2000.)

➡ Agriculture is the most dangerous occupation open to minors in the United States. When children work in the fields, occupational injury presents an even more significant risk than for adults because of their lack of experience. Children working in agriculture in the U.S. represent only 8% of the population of working minors, yet account for 40% of work-related fatalities among minors. An estimated 100,000 children suffer agriculture-related injuries annually in the United States. (Ibid.)

➡ Under existing U.S. law, adolescent farm workers can work at younger ages, for longer hours, and under more hazardous conditions than children in other jobs. The Fair Labor Standards Act sets age 12 as the legal limit for farm work, with exemptions available for children as young as 10 or 11. Studies have shown that many children under age 12 continue to do farm work. This double standard amounts to discrimination against child farm workers, the majority of whom are Latino. (Ibid.)

➡ Even when children do not work, they may be at risk. Because child care facilities are rarely available, many farmworker children are present in the fields and thus are exposed to pesticides on plants and in the dirt. Children have a smaller body mass than adults and their



metabolisms differ from those of adults. As a result, it is thought that the consequences of pesticide exposure may be more severe for children. (www.ncfh.org)

Photo - Jocelyn Sherman

➡ Children of migrant farm workers have high rates of parasitic infections, malnutrition, and dental disease. They are also less likely than other children to be fully immunized. ("United States Farm worker Fact Sheet." Student Action With Farm workers. Durham, North Carolina.)

➡ Changing schools often is hard on migrant children emotionally. Children are more likely to drop out of school if they change schools four or more times. The Migrant Head Start Program, a federally subsidized educational program, has proven to be very beneficial to children who move frequently but, as with most programs, the need outweighs the resources. However, there is some hope in recent years. Despite the deep emotional ties and traditions that bind the farmworker family, it appears that more students are now being allowed to stay behind in school when other family members migrate. Educators who work with migrant children say that 55 percent of migrant children graduate nationwide, compared with only 45 percent just a few years ago. (www.ncfh.org)

➡ Additionally, differences in the acculturation levels of parents and children place a strain on the family. Due to their superior English language fluency, some migrant children refer to themselves as negotiators for their parents, a role requiring skills well beyond those expected for a child's age. www.ncfh.org

➡ There are an estimated 900,000 migrant students. About 50% finish high school. ("Changing School With the Season," *Christian Science Monitor*. February 15, 2005)

➡ In order to help support their families, many farm worker children drop out of school and work alongside their parents in the field. The average migrant child may attend three different schools during one academic year. For many migrant children, it takes roughly three years to advance one grade level. ("United States Farm worker Fact Sheet." Student Action With Farm Workers. Durham, North Carolina.)

➡ By the time they reach first grade, fifty percent of migrant children will have fallen below national scholastic averages. The majority of farm worker children will never graduate from high school. (Daniel Rothenberg, *With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today*.)