



in our own backyard

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

Part I: The Hidden Problem

"Young Migrant Workers Toil in U.S. Fields"

This article explores how child farmworkers learn and work.
*By Karen Fanning. Published in SCHOLASTIC NEWS, Online Edition.
Copyright © 2007 by Scholastic Inc. Used by permission.
SCHOLASTIC's material shall not be published, re-transmitted,
broadcast, modified or adapted (rewritten), manipulated,
reproduced or otherwise distributed and/or exploited in any way
without the prior written authorization of Scholastic, Inc.*



Santos Polendo remembers his first day of work like it was yesterday. He was just 6 years old.

"The weather was terrible," says the 16-year-old migrant farmworker from Eagle Pass, Texas. "I had blisters on my hands. My back was hurting. My head was hurting. I never thought I was going to make that my life."

Yet, for the past 10 summers, backbreaking farmwork has been part of Santos's life and that of some 800,000 other children in the U.S. The same poverty that drove young Santos into the onion fields of Texas continues to push generations of other American children into a similar life of hard labor.

Migrant children travel with their families throughout the United States to work in agriculture. They journey from state to state, from one farm to the next, following the crop harvests. They toil, day in and day out, on America's farms, to help their struggling families survive.

Santos, however, is eager to break that cycle of unending labor. With the help of organizations like Motivation, Education, and Training (MET), an organization that services more than 1 million migrants in 48 states, Santos and thousands of other migrant children may no longer have to drag their weary bodies out into the fields.

"We have tutors and instructors here that help migrant children with their assignments," says Roberto Oliveras, MET Youth Coordinator in Eagle Pass. "We provide field trips to college campuses. We tell them through education, through studies, they will be able to do other things, have other choices of jobs. They don't have to be out in the fields. They don't have to migrate."

Lost Education

In many ways, Santos is lucky. His family only works during the summer months. However, many other children are forced to leave for the fields as early as April. Often, they don't return to school until October or even November.

Each May, the school year ends early for 15-year-old Dora Perez so that she can make the 30-hour drive with her family to Minnesota. There, they spend the summer harvesting sugar beets.

"The work starts before school ends, so we just have to go," says Dora, a freshman at Eagle Pass High School. "We don't like going up there, but we need the money to pay our bills. We have to help out our parents. The family does better when everybody's working."

Once they return to school, many migrant farmworkers struggle to catch up with their classmates. In order to make up for the many months of lost education, they are often forced to attend classes after school and on Saturdays.

While most parents like Santos's want a better life for their children, a typical farmworker earns \$7,500 a year or less—hardly enough money to support a family. As a result, parents are faced with a difficult dilemma: keep their kids in school or send them out into the fields.

"The families are so poor, they need their kids' income in the fields," says Reid Maki of the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs. "Farmworkers do not make a living wage. Without pooling the resources of all the family members, they cannot live. They can't get by. They can't pay their rent and utilities, so they desperately need their kids to work."

Year after year, faced with the prospect of falling further and further behind, many children become discouraged and stop attending school altogether. In fact, experts estimate as many as 65 percent of migrant children end up dropping out of school.

"Many of them drop out, not because they don't want an education, not because their parents don't want them to have an education, but because it becomes such a futile endeavor for them," says Ellen Trevino of MET. "They're tired. They're worn out. Everything seems to be stacked against them."

All in a Day's Work

For Santos and Dora, the workday begins at 6 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. There is little time for the usual summertime activities that most American kids take for granted. After returning home from work, they eat dinner, take a shower, and go to bed to rest up for yet another 12-hour workday. Rarely do they get a day off.

In many cases, child farmworkers must endure sweltering temperatures, as there is little shade to shelter them from the heat. Too often, they also suffer from on-the-job injuries. Santos recalls an incident when he accidentally stabbed himself with a pair of scissors. Dora remembers cutting her foot on a hoe.

"I didn't have my shoes on and tripped on it and slashed my toe," she says. "I didn't feel it until I saw that my sock was stained with blood. I had a pretty bad cut. It was real deep."

For Dora, however, there was no trip to the emergency room. Like most farmworkers, she was forced to fend for herself. She wrapped up her foot and rested in the family's car, then returned to work the next day.

Among the many dangers children face on the job are pesticides. Migrant children regularly labor in fields that are sprayed with these toxic chemicals, which can cause skin irritations and breathing difficulties. Their small, undeveloped bodies are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of pesticides.

"We have airplanes spraying pesticides over our heads," says Dora. "We're out in the fields, and all of a sudden, here comes the airplane throwing all the pesticides at us. We get rashes from the pesticides."

A Better Life

With another summer behind them, Dora and Santos are back in school. In the afternoons, both teens attend the MET Youth Center, which provides local migrant children with computer training, homework help, and visits to area college campuses. For Santos, MET has made a difference.

"We have teachers here that can help us," he says. "They helped me with projects, and they helped me to study for some tests. My Cs and Bs turned into As and Bs, and everything was thanks to MET."

Now Dora and Santos can look ahead toward a brighter future, one that includes college. As for Santos, who has already worked in Minnesota, New Mexico, South Dakota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, California, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Iowa in his short life, he looks forward to settling down with a family of his own.

"I've never gotten any rest," says the high school sophomore, who would like to study art in college. "I'm studying all year in school, then in the summer, I have to work. What kind of life is that? If I have kids, I will never even show them a field. They can see a field from a book. I want them to grow up and have a better education than I had and be somebody."