



in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA

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Part I: The Hidden Problem

"Too Young to Work"

This brief article talks about child workers in their struggle to educate themselves while working.

Source: Dina El Nabli, Time for Kids Magazine, April 1, 2005



Too Young To Work

As many as 500,000 kids in the U.S. are forced to do hard work on farms

Valdemar Balderas was 12 when he started working in the fields of Minnesota and North Dakota. His workday began before the sun rose and ended as it set. He and his parents labored in the heat, weeding sugar beets and clearing rocks from the fields. They rarely got a day off.

Valdemar, now 14, lives in Eagle Pass, Texas. He is still working in the fields. Every April, his family journeys north to begin months of grueling farmwork. "It's hard," Valdemar told TFK. "It's a lot of work. We have to walk a lot in the fields. At the end of the day, I feel so tired."

Together, Valdemar and his parents earn just \$500 a week for their hard work. On average, farmworkers in the United States earn less than \$10,000 a year. "The people who pick the food we eat can't get by and make a living wage without having their children help," says Len Morris, the producer and director of *Stolen Childhoods*, a recent documentary film about child labor.

Forced to Work

An estimated 250 million kids are forced to work in hard, often dangerous jobs all over the world. They mine precious metals, weave rugs and work in factories. As many as 500,000 kids in the U.S. and more than 100 million worldwide labor on plantations and farms.

Many countries don't have laws to protect child laborers. In the U.S., a law called the Fair Labor Standards Act requires safe working conditions and limits the number of hours kids can work. But the law, which was passed in 1938, does not apply to children who toil on farms. Twelve-year-old kids are allowed to work 12-hour days in the fields with their families.

Experts estimate that more than 100,000 children and teens are injured on farms each year. They use sharp knives and scissors designed for adult hands. Many operate heavy machinery and are exposed to poisonous agricultural chemicals.

"If you get hurt, there is no one to help," Santos Polendo, 19, told TFK. He spent 10 years working in the fields. He had to carry 40-pound buckets of onions in sweltering heat. He often suffered backaches, knee pain and headaches. "Sometimes, the heat was so bad, it gave me headaches for a week straight," Polendo says.

Ticket to a Better Future

Migrant families move regularly to find work in the fields. Last year, the Balderas family took Valdemar out of school in April. He did not attend school again until October. When he returned, he struggled to catch up with the help of tutors.

Because migrant children miss so much school, as many as 65% drop out. Sadly, their troubles often go unnoticed. "They're so invisible," says Ellen Trevino, who works with migrants in a program called Motivation, Education and Training (MET). "The rest of us don't go into the fields. We don't understand what they go through."

Last year, the Department of Labor cut funds for migrant-youth programs in 31 states. The programs had provided kids with tutors and resources and replaced income that parents lost when their kids stayed in school.

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs is fighting to restore the money for migrant education and training programs, including MET, and to increase earnings for adult farmworkers. The group is also pressuring Congress to provide kids working in agriculture with the same protection as other working kids.

But for Santos Polendo and other migrant kids, education is the ticket to a better future. Polendo stopped working in the fields two years ago, after his father got sick. He will graduate high school in May and wants to attend college and become an art teacher. One day, Polendo would like to have a family. He hopes his kids never have to work in the fields and "experience what I experienced."