

FARM WORKER ISSUES: CHILDREN IN THE FIELDS



When you hear the term “farm worker”, what image comes to mind? The stereotype of a farm worker is usually an adult male. In actuality, however, hundreds of thousands of children and teens work as hired farm laborers in fields across the United States.

It's difficult to know exactly how many there are, as precise data on youth farm workers do not exist; however, it is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 farm workers under the age of 18. Additionally, many children are undocumented, and those whose parents have papers may use their parents' social security numbers in order to work off the record. Still, there are many things we do know about children working in the fields.

Exclusion from Child Labor Laws

For one thing, the majority of working children in the U.S. work in agriculture—approximately 70%. Despite their high representation in the child labor workforce, children in agriculture are the least protected by law compared to other sectors.

Since 1938, federal labor laws have excluded child farm workers from labor protections provided to other working children. For instance, unlike other occupations, children over the age of 12 can legally work in agriculture with their parent's permission or with their parents on the same farm.

The only exception is that it cannot be during school hours. For particularly dangerous jobs, all other industries place a minimum age restriction of 18, but for farm workers the minimum age is 16 for especially dangerous jobs.

There is no denying that this is a double standard. As the **Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP)** explains: “This inequity allows youth working on farms to perform back-breaking labor for long hours and in extreme conditions at ages less than 14, when the very same law forbids children this young from working in an air conditioned office.”

Extreme Working Conditions

Farm work is hard work, and it is often done in extreme conditions. In addition to inadequate labor laws, children working in agriculture face exposure to dangerous weather conditions, equipment, and pesticides.

Because their bodies are still growing and they are continually developing mentally, children are even more vulnerable to the harsh conditions faced by all farm workers (link to health and safety). According to AFOP: “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.”

In terms of equipment, using tools designed for the muscle power of an adult can have dangerous consequences. Often times, children operate heavy equipment unsupervised and without adequate training beforehand. Operating large machinery, like tractors, has resulted in tragedy for child laborers. In fact, in 2002, over 70% of all injuries related to tractors and vehicles in the fields occurred while children were operating the machines. Children who work in the fields may also use dangerous tools like sharp knives to perform their duties.

Like other farm workers, children experience heat-related conditions from intense sun exposure. This includes heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, and even death. At a young age they may also be less aware of their body's functions, and thus less able to recognize these conditions when they are occurring.

Children and Pesticides

Sun is not the most hazardous thing children are exposed to, though; exposure to toxic pesticides at an early age can affect farm worker children for the rest of their lives. The Natural Resource Defense Council, in a 1998 report, determined that children are "disproportionately exposed to pesticides compared with adults due to their greater intake of food, water, and air per unit of body weight."

Like general labor laws, laws surrounding pesticides are not adequate to protect youth from great harm. Pesticides are grouped into different categories based on their toxicity, and laws based on toxicity ratings are made to protect the bodies of adults, not the bodies of children who are developing.

Emotional Strain

In addition to the physical strains of farm labor, it's important to also recognize the psychological and emotional strain that agricultural work can have on children. In a job that is inherently unstable, some children are left to cope by themselves as they follow the harvest to earn as much as they can.

Some children migrate with their families, but some migrate alone, and this trend seems to be growing. According to the Department of Labor, most migrant teens in the fields live without any other relatives, and the vast majority are foreign-born. This means young people are immigrating to the U.S. by themselves in order to work and send money back home to their families. AFOP labels this phenomenon as "an increasingly common occurrence."

Until regulations are changed to offer more protection to children working in the fields, and unless comprehensive changes are made to our nation's broken immigration system so that children aren't forced to work in the fields to help their families scrape by financially, youth and young adults will continue to toil in our fields, while endangering their health and wellbeing.

Sources:

- "Children in the Fields," Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP)
- Farmworker Justice
- "Fields of Peril: Child Labor in U.S. Agriculture", Human Rights Watch
- The Child Labor Coalition



Youth & Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry

www.nfwm-yaya.org