

# America's Farmworker Children:

## *Harvest of Broken Dreams*



Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs

*If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all.*  
—Pearl S. Buck

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**AFOP's *Children in the Fields Campaign***

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In order to maintain the voices of the farmworker youth, testimonials were not edited.  
Photos by AFOP Staff unless otherwise noted.



In commemoration of the  
**Year of the Farmworker Child**

## A Letter from the Executive Director

### **The Worst Forms of Child Labor: American Children in the Fields**

Worldwide, it has been estimated that over 200 million children labor in a variety of industries to **supplement their families' meager incomes. About 70% work in agriculture, from the cotton fields of Kazakhstan to brick factories in India.** These facts represent one of the great scandals in the **developing world, so much so that the United Nations' International Labor Organization adopted** Convention 182 prohibiting signatory countries from permitting the worst forms of child labor.

The United States ratified that convention in 1999, as attested by the signature of then-President Bill Clinton.

A careful reading of Convention 182 reveals a problem: there is systemic abusive child labor in the United States, primarily in agriculture. As this excellent publication documents, children, sometimes very young children, are working in fields among dangerous machinery, amidst pesticides, and in heat that sometimes exceeds 105 degrees.

The further problem is that these children have very few protections in the labor laws. While almost every other industry prohibits anyone under 16 (with some industries allowing 14 year olds under strict conditions) from performing work, in agriculture a child as young as 12 can labor from sunrise to sundown and beyond, so long as they are not at work while school is in session.

The results are what one could easily predict: migrant children have one of the highest school dropout rates in the country, their health is compromised by exposure to massive amounts of pesticides, and they suffer injuries from the tools they use and the machinery they work near or with.

It is amazing to me that we as a society pretend this is just a sad reality of migrant life, with no solution, since these children are simply helping out their families. While there is no denying the heroic impulses of the children represented in this publication, it is also undeniable that they should not be bearing this burden in the United States of America in 2011. Their job is to get the best education they can so that they can, once and for all, break the cycle of poverty that entraps their families.

To be consistent with signing Convention 182 the United States needs to remedy this outrageous situation. Following the recommendations on the last page of this report will go a long way toward bringing us, finally, in compliance with the promises we made to the ILO. More importantly, it will save the futures of tens of thousands of children.

**David A. Strauss**  
**Executive Director**





*Child labor laws in the U.S. allow children to work in agriculture starting at the age of 12 with almost no restrictions on hours. Photographed are farmworker youth in North Carolina's sweet potato fields.*

"The first time I worked in the fields, I remember it being extremely hot. The rows and rows of corn plants were taller than me. I stood at the beginning of the row and thought about how long it was going to take to get to the other side and then back again. I never made it to the end. Before I knew it, I collapsed in the middle of the field from dehydration. I woke up in the truck with my parent around me having me drink water."

—Aurelio G.,  
middle school farmworker youth



*Starting at the age of 16, U.S. child labor laws allow children working in agriculture to perform dangerous work, such as climbing tall ladders and operating heavy machinery. Hazardous work is strictly reserved for adults in every other industry.*

**“At the beginning, there were numerous backaches and sore muscles; this pain would go away weeks after I grew accustomed to the long hours of physical work. On hot days, we would try to get to the fields at the earliest possible so that the heat would not be so excruciating. Once the sun fully came out, our water breaks became more constant. I could easily savor the sweat of my face falling on my dry lips. During the winter, the pain was more than or equally as painful as during the summer; your fingers freeze, your knees tremble, you lips shiver incessantly, and the cold never goes away no matter how much movement you make.”**

—Annabel Robles, 18  
AFOP Essay Contest participant





*Farmworker children are four times more likely to drop out of high school than other American children. These children sacrifice their health, education, and childhood to help their families.*

**“Working in the fields has affected my dreams in many ways because in order for my parents to find peace of bread to offer my sisters and me, they migrate from place to place for work. So we have to move from school also. It has been difficult because not all the schools are the same, all of them have different and offer different ways to learn. When we barely adapting to one school we found out we have to move because the season is over. Migrating from place to place has affected my learning process. Sometimes we are in the middle of a semester and I have to move from school, I get completely lost. My old school is not the same as my new school.”**

—Jessica Tapia, 17  
AFOP Essay Contest participant

“Another day my sister Magali was on a machine that we thought was safe until we heard a scream. It was Magali she had her foot in the machines. Her foot was hurt really badly. Her skin came off and she was bleeding really badly. She recovered after two weeks.”

—Jonathan Ortega, 14  
AFOP Essay Contest participant



To the left: *The vast majority of farmworker children do not receive safety training and do not know how to prepare or properly protect themselves for a long day in the fields.*



To the right: *Days typically start early in the morning and last 10-12 hours, 7 days a week. Photo submitted by United I.S.D. in Texas.*

“I remember my first day in the fields I the worst experience of my life. I remember having to wake up at 3:00 am to help my grandmother make breakfast. On our way to the fields I could see all the houses sound asleep with their children dreaming confortably of things they would do when they awoke. I instead being the oldest of my family had to work to help my family.”

—farmworker youth in middle school



According to the U.S. Department of Labor, farmworker children only contribute an estimated \$1,000 annually to their family's income despite spending long hours doing back-breaking work.

Photos on this page by Peter Eversoll.



"We went on our own working in the corn fields. We got our paychecks on Saturday's and only enough money for our bills. We had no money to spend. When I got my check I was excited to waste all my money until I saw my mom burst in tears. I herd the cry of a mother **that didn't have enough money to feed my family and me. That was when I realized that I** had to give away my blood and tears away, all my hard work. I had to give my mother my pay check so she could feed my brother and my little sister. I only ate when we were in school."

—Amanda A.,  
middle school farmworker youth



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“In some places there weren’t any daycares so they took me with them to work and left me under a tree which put me in danger. The fields are not a safe place. I still remember when I was small, I was standing in front of a huge ladder. It was a windy day and the ladder wasn’t strong enough to keep from falling down. It came crashing down and by some miracle it missed me by a few inches. It could have severely injured me or worse. Many workers are in risk of something like that happening to them but they might not be as lucky.”

—Daisy Raya, 14  
AFOP Essay Contest participant



*Farmworker families struggle to afford daycare for their young children and often take them to the fields while they work. Although these children are not working, they are still exposed to the dangers involved with field work, such as heat stress, pesticide exposure and the potential to be crushed by heavy machinery.*



*Migrant housing is located in remote areas and is often occupied without inspection by government officials. Photo on the right by farmworker youth Jose Godinez.*

**"I lived in a house where carpeted floors and air conditioning were luxuries. Hot water did not run through the sinks and showers. Poverty was what I would wear to school every day. The summers were the hottest and winters were harsh and painful. My family depended on planting and harvesting of onions from Texas and Colorado. We ate potatoes in every way you could ever prepare them. When you're hungry, you have to use your imagination."**

—Luis Eduardo Ramirez, 18  
AFOP Essay Contest participant



*Children are more vulnerable to the ill effects of pesticides than adults and can be exposed through take-home exposure, field work and drift from nearby fields getting sprayed.*





*Farmworker families in the U.S. are among the poorest and most vulnerable populations. According to the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey, the total family income averaged between \$15,000 and \$17,499 per year.*



“Sometimes their homes have leaking roofs and destroyed parts of their homes. The farmer should take care of their worker houses so they won’t have trouble living with the farmer. The trailer that I live in has a terrible smell of gas and my mom got sick of all the smell so she went to the doctor.”

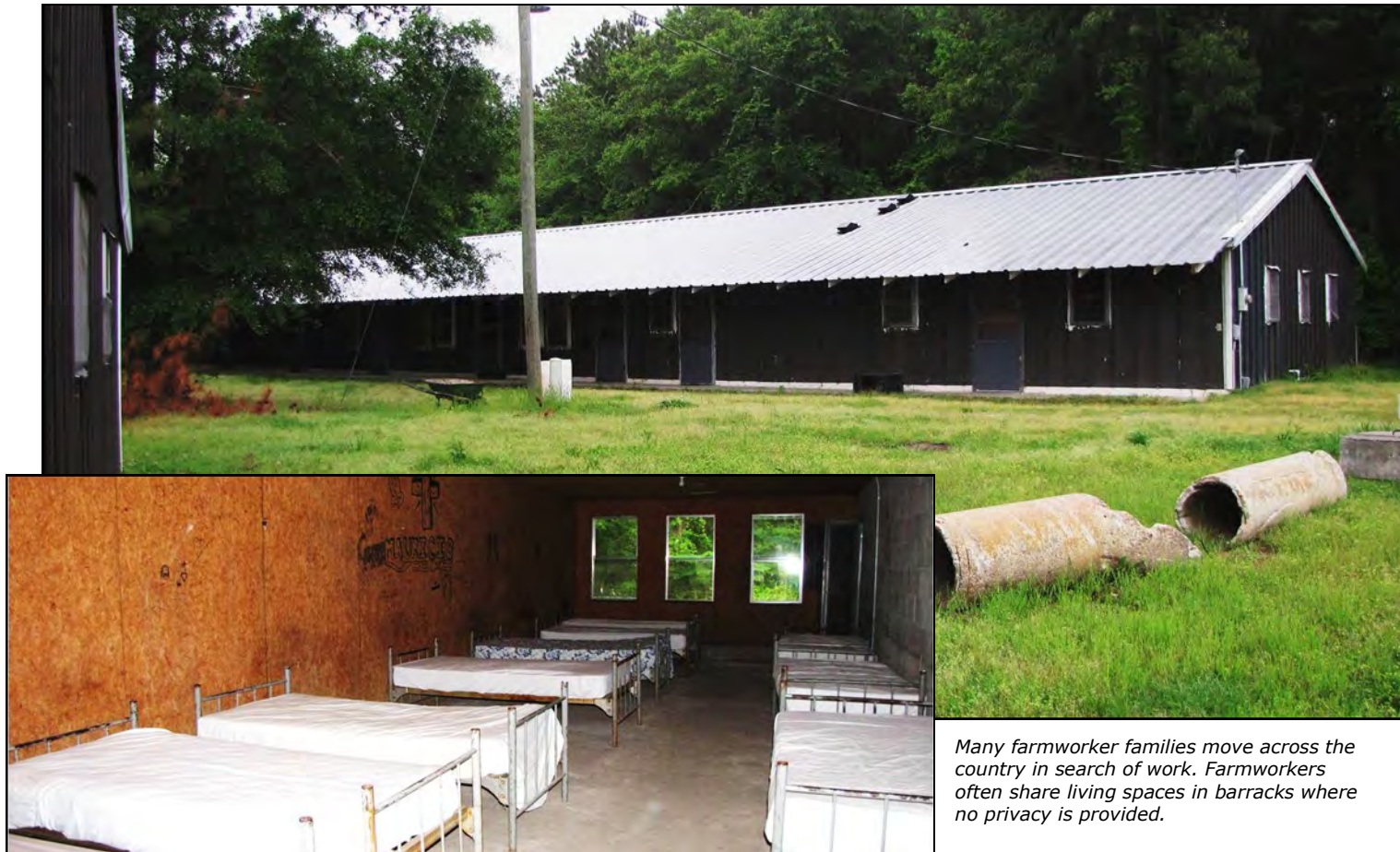
—Jerardo Bocanegra, 11  
AFOP Essay Contest participant



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"When I was small, we first visited Arkansas and from there we moved on in search of job opportunities and I have been to Missouri, Minnesota, and Wyoming. During these travels, it was hard **to find a place to stay and most of the so called 'apartments' we unsuitable for** living, We constantly ate on the floor, bought used appliances, and spent most of the time pumping the restroom because the water system did not function properly. Most of the windows were broken, the doors did not close, there were holes on the walls, and the only visitors we had were the little creepy-crawlers wondering around."

Dulce Loera, 17  
AFOP Essay Contest participant



*Many farmworker families move across the country in search of work. Farmworkers often share living spaces in barracks where no privacy is provided.*



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"My experians as migrent has been ugly becaus some time we can't find a house to stay so we have to stay in the truck which is not cool or if we do find a house there is no hot water. When its coold we still have to take a bath with coold water if not we stay all dirty. Allso working in the fields is really hard depending were we are working at."

—Ashley M.,  
farmworker youth in middle school

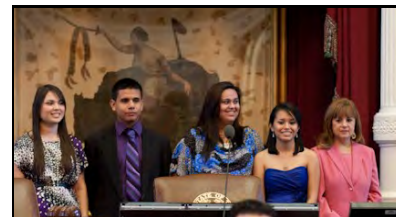
*Farmworker lavatory facilities often include communal sinks, open showers, and outhouses. Photos below were taken in occupied farmworker camps in Ohio.*





## AFOP's *Children in the Fields Campaign*

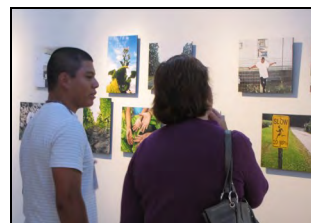
The *Children in the Fields Campaign* strives to improve the quality of life of migrant and seasonal farmworker children by advocating for enhanced educational opportunities and the elimination of discriminatory federal child labor laws in agriculture. Since 1997, the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP) has worked with the Child Labor Coalition, National Consumers League, and other advocates to publicize the plight of this hidden population.



*Texas youth council members attend the Texas Capitol proclamation for "Year of the Farmworker Child."*

In July 2009, the *Children in the Fields Campaign* embarked on a new phase of its work, initiating a grassroots campaign of community organization and educational outreach thanks to a generous grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Regional coordinators in the farmworker communities of California, North Carolina, Texas, Michigan, and Ohio have formed community coalitions and farmworker youth councils in order to build support for educational programs for farmworker children, document the living and working conditions that they endure, and raise awareness about the persistent issue of child labor in our agricultural system.

As many as 500,000 children are currently working in agriculture in the U.S., yet their voices are rarely heard and their struggles are rarely understood. The *Children in the Fields Campaign* is working to help them share their stories and become leaders in their own communities through farmworker youth photo exhibits, student-led conferences, and educational materials such as this one. In addition, AFOP hosts an annual Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Children Essay and Art Contest; excerpts from the essays were used in this publication.



*North Carolina youth council members hosted a photo exhibit.*

The images and words in this book illuminate the struggles and hopes of our nation's most marginalized population and demonstrates the potential that exists for young people who are given the opportunity to work hard in the classrooms and not in the fields.



*California youth council members were featured in the local paper.*



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## What You Can Do

**We must act now to ensure farmworker children are being afforded the same protection as other children.**

- Learn about where your food comes from and educate others about the plight of farmworker children
- Support educational programs for farmworker children
- Advocate for more protections for children who work in agriculture
- Support fair food and fair living wages for all farmworkers

Additional resources available on our website:

**[www.afop.org](http://www.afop.org)**

For more information on the *Children in the Fields Campaign* or AFOP's Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Children Essay and Art Contest, please contact:

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**Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs**

Advocate. Educate. Train.

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