



CHILDREN AT WORK

A glimpse into the lives of child farmworkers in the United States

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs

In every child who is born, no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again: and in him, too, once more, and of each of us, our terrific responsibility toward human life; toward the utmost idea of goodness. . .

—James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

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Introduction

Approximately 400,000 children across the United States are working in fields and orchards tending and harvesting fruits and vegetables that end up on our tables. There is an exemption in the federal child labor law (found in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938) for agricultural labor, which allows children as young as 12 to work *unlimited hours* outside of school in fields and orchards, as long as they have parental consent. These children are burdened with an overload of school and work responsibilities, as well as a myriad of health complications due to pesticide exposure, musculoskeletal injuries, and a prevalence of accidents with farm machinery. Despite the agrarian idyll, agriculture is ranked as the most dangerous job in America for youth.

Each year in southeastern North Carolina, just as school is coming to a close, blueberries are at their prime for harvesting. Farm laborers journey from surrounding counties and states to work in the blueberry fields. However, the blueberry harvest is low paid work, often compelling family members to work together to pool their income. On average, each worker earns \$2.50 per one-gallon bucket of picked berries. Depending on the size of the blueberries, it usually takes 30 minutes to fill a one-gallon bucket. Only the fastest workers earn more than the minimum wage.



In June 2008, I traveled to this region of North Carolina to see what conditions were like during the blueberry harvest and to find out more about the prevalence of children working in the fields. Over the course of two weeks, I visited 12 farms and visited with farmworkers, their children, and farm owners. Both farm owners and farmworkers are conflicted over whether or not children should be present in the fields. Shortly before my unannounced visit to one of the farms, the farm owner had called the children under the age of 12 out of the field in order to comply with North Carolina's child labor law. This was an exception. The remaining 11 farms that I visited all had children under the age of 12 picking blueberries, along with many children between the ages of 12 and 17. This booklet is a composite of photos taken from my trip to the blueberry fields of North Carolina.

The text accompanying the photos includes quotes selected from essays that were collected through the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs' 2008 Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Children's Essay Contest. The contest was open to children of farmworkers, between the ages of 10 and 18, throughout the United States. The quotes are printed just as they were received. These are their words; I have not altered their spelling, punctuation, or grammar.

Heather Anderson
AFOP Children in the Fields Project Coordinator



An 8 year-old girl works in the blueberry harvest to help her family make ends meet.

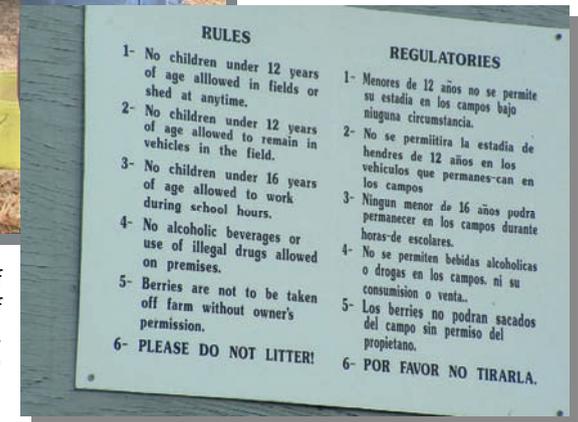


“These are some things that I like and dislike about working in the fields. I’m going to start off with the things I like. I like working in the fields because I know I’m helping my parents earn money. My parents pay my little brother and I once in a while so we can buy ourselves something. We have a choice to work in the fields, and we choose to go. There are also things I dislike about working in the fields. One thing is that we have to work so hard in the sun, and we get paid very little money. Another thing I dislike about working in the fields is that we have to work everyday and we get a lot of sunburns.” —Eduardo Perez, age 10, Michigan



Above: These are the children under the age of 12 who were being sent home in compliance of North Carolina's child labor law. This farm was the exception to the norm, where children of all ages could readily be found working.

Right: A sign posted at the same farm stating the rules for work. (Photo by Adriana Chaisson)



“I will turn thirteen in July fifteen. I will work in the beets. When we work in the beets we have to wake up at five in the morning. We have to get their at six in the morning, and we get home at seven or eight in the after noon. When my mom worked in the potato I had to take care of my sisters. She would leave at five in the morning and get back at nine or ten at night.” —Lorena Guerra, age 12, Minnesota



This ten year-old boy works quickly to fill up his bucket with blueberries.

“It was at the age of 11 that my dad handed me my first scissors; of course on other occasions just playing around I cut pieces of fern to help him, but this time it would be totally different. My mother taught me to differentiate between the ripe, unripe, and the burnt fern and my father taught me how to tie the bunch of fern together. It took a couple of tries to get the perfect bunch of fern but still, it would take me weeks to get the hang of cutting bunches of fern for long hours at a time. Soon, the number of bunches I made would make a difference in the help I provided my parents.

There were days that I grew tired of cutting fern, reluctantly I would get up in the morning, get dressed, and prepare for a long hot summer day of cutting fern.” —Annabel Robles, age 18, Florida



“The thing I like about picking blue berries is that you can eat one when no ones are looking. The thing that I don’t like about working in the field is that are too much mosquitoes and the hot sun, the heavy thing you have to carry. The green color you get on your hand and fingers.” —Zulay Roblez, age 11, Michigan

A young boy waits to empty his blueberry buckets and to get paid.

“**The sun** is blazing on my skin its hot so hot I feel as if I am going to faint but I know I can’t stop working I feel like crying but that wont help me in anything. I keep on picking cucumbers trying not to work hard because there is a 99% percent chance that once we are done with our fifty rows there will be another twenty to fifty more rows waiting for us. We will keep on working until we cannot see the cucumbers any more. Sometimes I want to scream at the top of my lungs because the next day will be just the same. I hate the fact that no one thinks we can be anything but migrant workers but I know different. That is the only thing that keeps me striving daily.” —Veronica Rodriguez, age 15, Michigan



A family of four siblings (ages 18, 11, and twins, age 16) work together in 107 degree heat.



Waiting with Mom
for a ride home
after a long day in
the fields.

“I would like to become a teacher to make my family proud, especially my parent who work very hard for us. My dad works for 24 hour shifts. My dad drives a tractor that sprays the pickles with nutrients. He is in the sun all day long. His hard work puts food on the table. My mother takes care of us instead of work in the fields. I appreciate all they do, but I want to do better than they did and help myself and my family have a better life.” —Melissa Martinez, age 11, Michigan



“Working in the fields is difficult because one has to put up with the sun and heat in the body, sweating, and you also suffer from hunger, thirst. One doesn’t eat well; you just eat a little to curb the hunger. Also, you suffer humiliation from the contractor or managers in charge of the group. And in cold seasons you have to put up with the heat just like the cold.” —Maria Villa, age 12, Idaho

Girl, 6, works with her brother, 9, and her parents.



“What I feel about in the fields is exhausted because of working to much in the fields and I go picking blue berries and I only made fourteen buckets and that’s when I get exhausted and my parents make more buckets than me and my little brother just sleeps or plays under a picked blue berries tree and eats chips and drinks juice... But my parents get tired just like me and my little brother and when we finish All the buckets we got we have to go with a man to put all the blue berries in Boxes and then we go pick out more blue berries until seven a clock.

Then we get to put all the blue berries we got into the boxes again until The man says it is time to go home and to come again tomorrow.” —Jason Izaguirre, age 12, Michigan



“Migrating with your family is really horrible; because once you get here you have to work in absolute concentration, even though in the fields you have to face hunger and thirstiness. Also, when it rains you get all wet and dirty but you still have to keep working. There is a lot of animals like snakes that can harm you.” —Lucia Aguilar, age 13, California

This page: Boy, 11, works with his siblings. If his father finds enough work, then the kids’ money goes for school supplies; if not, then it will contribute to paying the bills.

Opposite page: Boy, 9, works alongside his mother.

“All of the moving was because we didn’t have a place to live there were some times when my parents, brother and I had to sleep in this old car that we had because nobody wanted to let us stay in their house so we had to stay in our car. Since we didn’t have any money to rent a house we had to deal with what we had. So when my dad would leave to work my mom, my brother and I would then come out from our car and we would spent the rest of our day in the park because we didn’t have anywhere else to go.” — Maria del Carmen Toro, age 17, California



This boy, age 10, picks blueberries to help his family. On average, they earn \$2.50 per bucket.

“I **have** worked in the fields. It’s very hot to work all day. Worst of all you can’t go to the bathroom. You have to wait until you get home or just go in the bushes. OH! Wait — don’t forget to bring toilet paper and a bag and some germ-X.

The most difficult work in the fields is to bend over all day and pick up squash. The men pick up the squash from the vines and they throw them in a tub. The women wash the squash and box them. Then they send the squash to the stores. From washing the squash you get a rash on your arms.” —Erika Justo, age 10, Georgia



Girl, 2, plays near the car in the field while she waits for her mom.



Above: Boy, 9, works picking berries with his parents and runs full buckets to the foreman for payment.

Right: Girls, ages (L to R) 8, 5, 4, 8, play in the fields when their parents don't need them to help.



“I remember when I was young, once I heard one of the workers screamed and as I turned around I saw her jump back as the snake tried to bite her. She had just cheated death as many more had before her. The last hazard that I know of is the chemicals that are present in the fields. Just recently my hand had little bumps because of the chemicals it was so bad I couldn't make my hand into a fist and it gave me a bad rash, hurt and itched.” —Luis Guerrero, age 15, Florida



“The thing I didn’t like about working in the beats is that you get all sweaty from walking a lot and the other thing I hated so much is that the sun was so hot I felt like I wanted to faint or something it felt bad so when it was are break time we would take that opportunity to go find a shade. It felt do good being under the shade after being in the sun for hours.” —Claudia Mendez, age 14, Idaho

Boy, 13, works with his mom and brother, 11, harvesting blueberries.





Boy, age 15, shields his face and neck from the hot sun.

“Working in the fields is a tough thing to do it might seem easy but it is really not that easy, but somebody got to do it. I have worked in the Tomato, Blueberry, Oranges, and watermelon. I would say the hardest of all was the tomato the reason why I would say is because we had to stand next to this machine while the machine was picking the tomato we had to make sure there was no rotten ones that went into the basket and no green ones neither and the pressure is on because if there are the boss would come and yell at everybody and especially us kids. That we better do our work right or we can look for some other place to work yes I remember all the words they said with detail. After the boss yelled at us our parents were next and it was not a good thing but we had to work harder then ever. The machine was moving faster than ever and it was just so hard to get all the green tomato out and the rotten ones out... I am not planning to go back hopefully I don’t have anything to do with field work again.” —Maria Pineda, age 15, Michigan

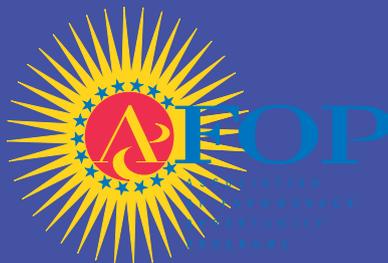
Conclusion

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP) is a national association of nonprofit and public agencies that serve the nation's migrant and seasonal farmworkers with employment and training programs and assist them with immediate and emergency needs. Our mission is to improve the quality of life of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families by providing advocacy for the member organizations that serve them.

Since the late 1990s, one vital part of that mission has been to target child labor in agriculture. Increasingly, members and our national staff noticed the large number of children that are present in the fields. While many of these children work in the fields to help sustain their families and keep them from financial crisis, the reality often does more damage than repair. Educationally, these children are at a disadvantage; additionally, they are vulnerable to long- and short-term health effects. Two-thirds of farmworker children drop out of school. Their presence in the fields often directly leads to the continued cycle of poverty in which farmworkers and their families live.

What can you do? AFOP invites you to join with us in assisting these children to obtain the same opportunities enjoyed by other children in the United States. We ask you to urge your state and federal elected representatives to support legislation that will correct the inequalities in the Fair Labor Standards Act and protect child farmworkers. Support measures that will increase the wages of farmworker parents, so they do not feel compelled to bring their children to work. Volunteer your time and support to champion educational programs that help migrant children. Contact your local media outlets to educate them and your fellow community members about the plight of child farmworkers. Please visit our website at <http://www.afop.org> to learn more.





Suggested Donation: \$5.00. Your donation will go toward the Children in the Fields Campaign efforts to continue helping farmworker children.