



Children In The Fields  
**THE STORIES YOU  
SHOULD KNOW**

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Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs © 2019



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# INTRODUCTION



*“Child labor and poverty are inevitably bound together and if you continue to use the labor of children as the treatment for the social disease of poverty, you will have both poverty and child labor to the end of time.” – Social worker Grace Abbott*

It’s common knowledge that child labor was abolished in the United States. The year was 1938, when Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA restricts most child labor below age 16; hazardous work for most minors is off-limits until they turn 18.<sup>1</sup> The key word in that statement, however, is *most*. Unfortunately, the FLSA does not treat all industries equally – children in agriculture have never benefited from the same protections of the law that minors in non-agricultural industries have.

As a result, the horrors of child labor exist in the fields in 2019. In this respect, the United States is no different than impoverished countries around the world. In the United States, children are permitted, even compelled, to do hazardous, back-breaking work to support themselves and their families. This work interferes with their development and their education. This work exposes them to chemicals that will impact their health throughout their lifetimes. This work limits their opportunities, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation.

But child labor in the U.S. is all but invisible, and very few people are rushing to correct that misconception. This is because it’s in many people’s interests to keep child labor hidden. It’s in the employer’s interest, because it keeps farmworker wages depressed; it’s in the consumer’s interest, because it keeps grocery costs down; and it’s in the parents’ interest, because ‘many hands make light work.’ (Since it is legal, parents take their children to the fields to make sure the most money is earned.) When children labor in the shadows, they carry these burdens of low wages, low costs, and higher pay on their own shoulders.

That’s why Children in the Fields Campaign (CIFC) is bringing farmworker children out of the shadows and into the light by publishing “THE STORIES YOU SHOULD KNOW.” Throughout this publication, farmworker children tell us, in their own words, **when** they started working, **what** they are harvesting, and **how** they are feeling.

These are the stories of farmworker children like Joel, who works long days in the hot sun, suffering from a headache and impatient to go home. Of Iker, a seven-year-old who has worked since he was five and just wishes the bathroom were closer. Of 16-year-old Jharexy, who harvests onions to help her parents buy gas and pay the bills. Far from the rosy ideal of kids learning skills and gaining a good work ethic, Joel, Iker, Jharexy, and many others are working themselves to the bone just to keep their families out of poverty, putting their own short- and long-term health at risk in the process.

If you think this is unacceptable – good – but it will take more than objection and outrage to fix this problem. For us to address this tragedy, we must all make genuine attempts to understand the problem, push forward sustained campaigns to raise awareness in our communities, and demand changes to the laws in this country. Children in the Fields Campaign believes that the safety and well-being of farmworker children is worth this fight. No longer shall these children and their plight be invisible.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> “Child Labor Requirements in Agricultural Occupations Under the Fair Labor Standards Act.” Child Labor Bulletin 102, U.S. Department of Labor, Wage & Hour Division, Nov. 2016, [www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/childlabor102.pdf](http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/childlabor102.pdf).

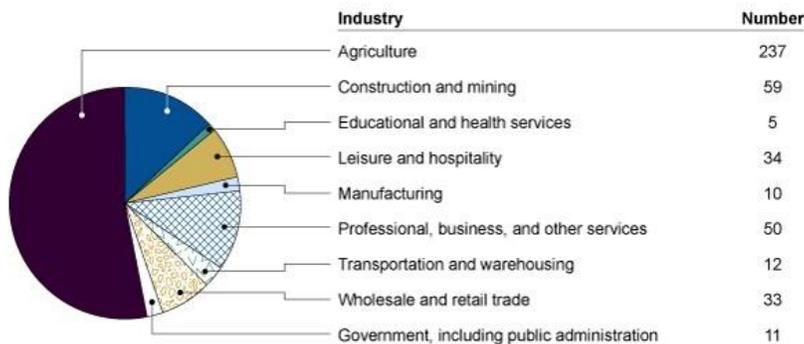
# CHILD LABOR

*in agriculture*

Farms are the most dangerous place to work in the U.S. for children—that’s the conclusion of a recent report by the federal Government Accountability Office (GAO).<sup>2</sup> Released in November 2018, the report bears a wonky title: “Working Children: Federal Injury Data and Compliance Strategies Could Be Strengthened,” but that title shouldn’t keep people from reading it, because its findings—particularly with respect to agricultural child labor—are alarming.

GAO researchers found that between 2003 and 2016, 237 children died while working on farms in the U.S. “More than half of work-related deaths among children in the U.S. occur in agriculture,” commented Margaret Wurth of Human Rights Watch on the report’s findings.<sup>3</sup> “This happens despite the fact that farms employ less than six percent of child workers, highlighting the devastating consequences of weak laws and regulations that don’t properly protect child farmworkers.”

Work-Related Child Fatalities, by Industry, 2003 to 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries data. | GAO-19-26  
Note: The total for fatalities for the period was 452. However, one fatality was excluded because of unpublshable data.

It’s hard to ignore the startling statistics: 52 percent of work-related fatalities occurred on farms—four times the rate of child work fatalities in the next highest sector, “construction and mining,” with 13 percent.

Children working on farms face many dangers: pesticide poisoning, sharp tools, heavy equipment, heat stroke; yet our weak child labor laws for agriculture allow children to work long hours for wages at age 12 and permit 16-year-olds to perform hazardous work—reserved for adults in every other work category.

The GAO report makes several recommendations to help improve youth occupational safety. It calls on the Bureau of Labor Statistics to obtain better injury and illness data on child workers, including those toiling on small farms. It asks the Department of Labor (DOL) Wage and Hour Division (WHD) to develop better metrics to determine if child labor enforcement approaches are working, including whether the right workplaces are being targeted, and it recommends better coordination between Wage and Hour and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, Cindy Brown, and Steve D. Morris. WORKING CHILDREN: Federal Injury Data and Compliance Strategies Could Be Strengthened. U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2018, [www.gao.gov/assets/700/695209.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695209.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Wurth, Margaret. *More US Child Workers Die in Agriculture Than in Any Other Industry*. Human Rights Watch, 4 Dec. 2018, [www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/04/more-us-child-workers-die-agriculture-any-other-industry](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/04/more-us-child-workers-die-agriculture-any-other-industry).

GAO researchers found that WHD and OSHA have no system to monitor the progress of investigations from referrals from each other. The memorandum of understanding that guides coordination between OSHA and WHD on child labor investigations has not been updated since 1990. To members of the health and safety community, this is appalling and a sign that coordination is not a priority.

Concerned about the nation’s inadequate child labor laws, U.S. Representatives Rosa DeLauro (D-Connecticut) and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-California) requested GAO study this matter. Following the report’s release, the two members of Congress pointed out that, despite the heightened risk of teen worker deaths, agriculture ranked a distant fifth in the number of WHD violations, suggesting to them the department is falling down on the job of enforcement and needs a new, comprehensive child labor enforcement strategy.

WHD conducted only 239 investigations that led to a “violation” finding in agriculture during the period 2010 to 2016, while two categories “leisure and hospitality” and “wholesale and retail” had 3,079 investigations that led to a violation finding. Yet agriculture has the reputation, rightly earned, of having many labor abuses. Perversely, DOL focuses on the categories in which the most kids work rather than the areas like agriculture and “construction and mining” that are the most dangerous, where the largest number of kids die while working.

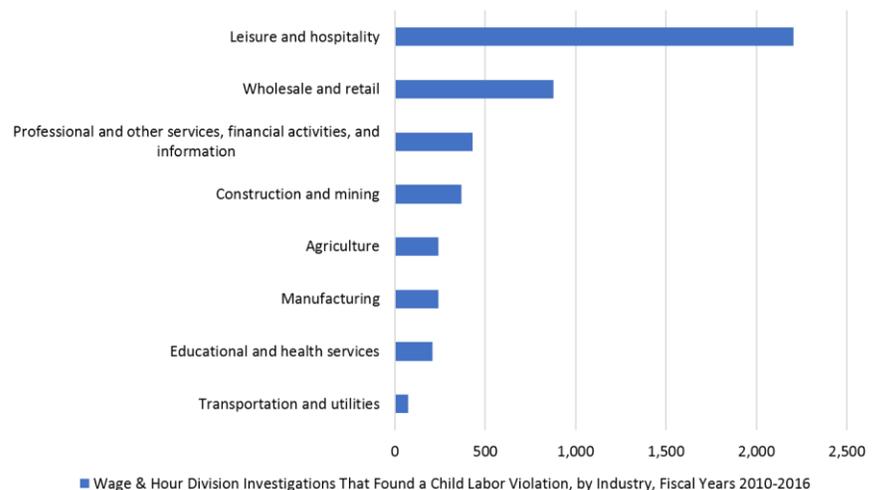
Report authors confirm what farmworker advocates have long known: federal data undercounts farmworker children. For example, although agriculture has 52 percent of fatalities for working children, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that only one percent of the 4,760 injuries and illnesses to all working children across all industries occurred to kids in agricultural. This seems impossible. The actual total must be several times higher.

The advocacy community has been speaking out loudly about the poor data on farmworker children, so confirmation by the GAO researchers who write openly about the data flaws is most welcome. The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Program (AFOP) and the Child Labor Coalition (CLC) worked closely with the offices of Representatives DeLauro and Roybal-Allard to help initiate the report request and were asked by GAO researchers for guidance on how to ensure that the report’s snapshot of child labor in the U.S. was accurate.

In every session of Congress since 2001, Representative Roybal-Allard has introduced legislation, “The Children’s Act for Responsible Employment,” that would apply child labor protections to child farmworkers (although it would continue to preserve a “family farm” exemption for the children of farmers). AFOP and CLC will continue the fight to see this legislation enacted. We are hoping that the GAO’s report will add impetus to efforts to apply child labor laws to all children fairly and evenly.

*Reid Maki, a former AFOP staffer, coordinates the 38-member Child Labor Coalition (CLC), which is celebrating its 30-year anniversary. Follow the CLC on Twitter @ChildLaborCLC.*

Wage & Hour Division Investigations That Found a Child Labor Violation, by Industry, Fiscal Years 2010-2016



Source: GAO analysis of Wage and Hour Investigative Support and Reporting Database data. | GAO-19-26

# CHILD LABOR DATA

## *in agriculture*



When various government entities attempt to calculate the number of children working in agriculture in the U.S., several factors prevent an accurate count, including:

- 1) **Hiring practices:** Farmworker children, like adult farmworkers, may be hired off the books;
- 2) **Multiple pickers on one account:** Children brought into the fields by their parents may supplement their parents' picking with their own. Under these circumstances, the farmworkers' dependents are not recorded as individual workers.
- 3) **Immigration/Mixed-family status:** Children decline to volunteer their information in order to avoid detection by immigration-enforcement officials.
- 4) **Non-comprehensive data collection strategies:** None of the surveys count farmworker children younger than 14 years-old.

As a result, the following surveys count different numbers and varying populations of farmworker children.

### NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH (NIOSH) CHILDHOOD AGRICULTURAL INJURY SURVEY (CAIS)

The Childhood Agricultural Injury Survey (CAIS) publishes demographic information on children in agriculture under age 20. It is a sample-based survey, the information being reported by the farm owner.<sup>4</sup> **The most recent data from 2014 reports that there were over 265,604 total hired youth working on farms across the U.S.,** but this does not include youth hired off-the-books or employed by a third party (i.e. labor contractor).<sup>5</sup>

### THE BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (BLS) CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (CPS)

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly household survey sponsored jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. **It estimates that 103,000 youth age 16-19 are employed in agriculture.**<sup>6</sup> The CPS does not count youth younger than age 16.

### US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (USDOL) NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS SURVEY (NAWS)

The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) provides essential information on the demographics of farmworkers gathered through one-on-one interviews with farmworkers. However, the NAWS does not interview farmworker children younger than 14. According to the 2000-2009 report, "Profiles of Youth, Parents, and Children of Farm Workers in the United States," "[T]here is little information about the level or type of workforce participation of children under the age of 14." The same report calculated that only **84,000 youth were working in the field, 10 percent of whom were living with their parents.**<sup>7</sup> This suggests that surveyors primarily counted unaccompanied youth working full-time in the fields, and did not adequately gather information from youth living with their parents and accompanying them to work in the fields.

This huge discrepancy in the number of hired children working on farms – 265,000 by CAIS, 100,00 by CPS, 84,000 by NAWS – does not inspire confidence in the data.

<sup>4</sup> "CDC - Childhood Agricultural Injury Prevention Initiative: Childhood Agricultural Injury Survey Results: Technical Information - NIOSH Workplace Safety and Health Topic." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 10 Apr. 2018, [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/childag/cais/techinfo.html#Limitations](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/childag/cais/techinfo.html#Limitations).

<sup>5</sup> "Tables D-15. National Estimates of Hired Youth." The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Childhood Agricultural Injury Survey, 2014, [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/childag/cais/pdfs/d-15-508.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/childag/cais/pdfs/d-15-508.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 18 Jan. 2019, [www.bls.gov/cps/tables.htm](http://www.bls.gov/cps/tables.htm).

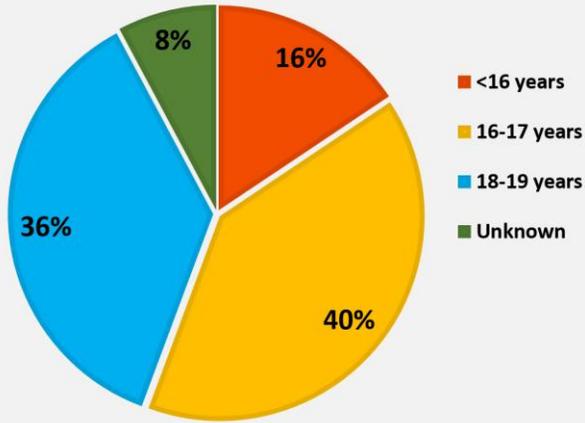
<sup>7</sup> "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2000-2009." *Place of Birth and Length of Stay in US*, U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, Nov. 2014, [www.doleta.gov/naws/pages/research/docs/NAWS\\_Research\\_Report\\_10.pdf](http://www.doleta.gov/naws/pages/research/docs/NAWS_Research_Report_10.pdf).

# 500,000



AFOP's estimate of the number of farmworker children employed in US agriculture

**NATIONAL ESTIMATES OF HIRED YOUTH ON US FARMS BY AGE GROUP (CAIS/2014)**



The most recent data shows that 265,604 hired youth working on farms across the U.S. Although these numbers presumably include children of all ages, farm owners do not report on the number of non-household youth working illegally in their fields, particularly if they are working on a parent's account or hired through a labor contractor. (CAIS)

## 4,036

work-related injuries to children under 20 on U.S. farms in 2014. (CAIS)

However, many cases go unreported due to accessibility, financial means, legal status, and fear of losing job, among other reasons.

## 14%

of 16-year-old farmworker children reported loading mixing and/or applying pesticides. (NAWS)

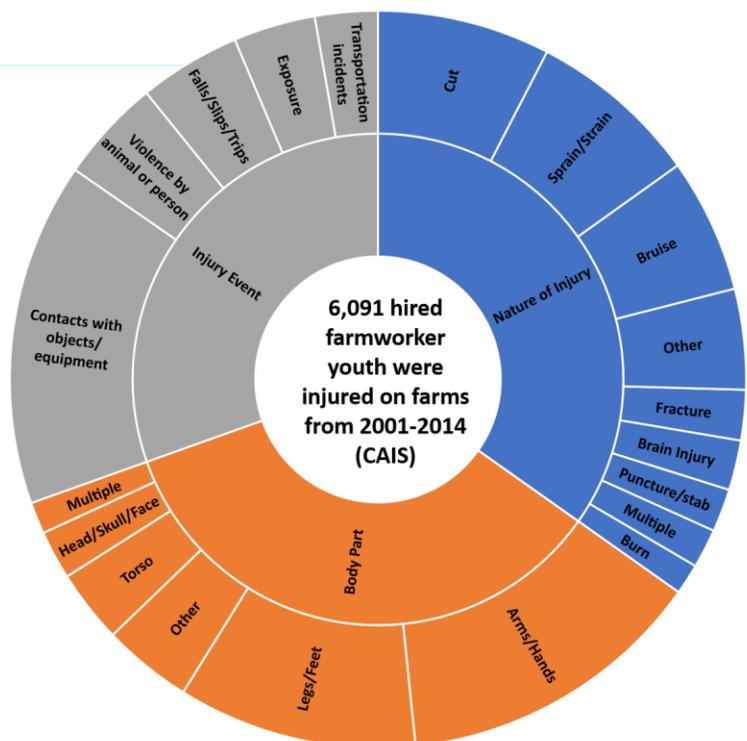
## <\$10,000

Youth farm workers were nearly twice as likely as their adult counterparts to report earning less than \$10,000 from farm work in the previous year. (NAWS 2000-2009)

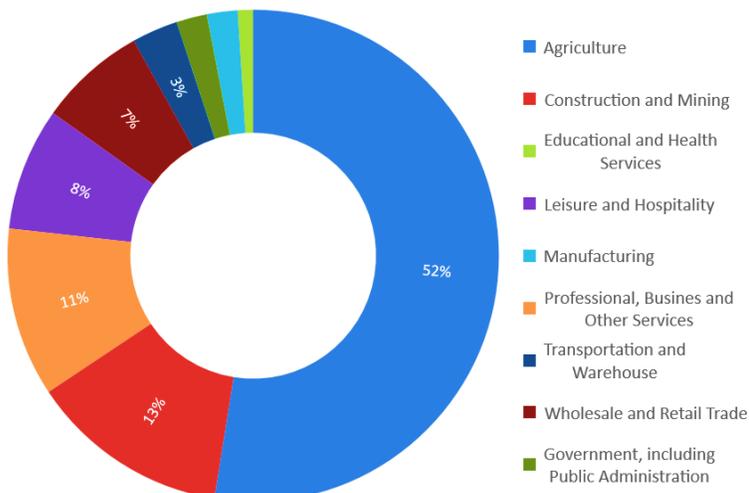
## 1-in-3

One child dies in agriculture every three days. In that time, 99 are injured. (ChildAgSafety.net)

### Injury Characteristics



**Child Fatalities by Industry (2003-2016)**





*Working in the GRAPE vineyards is hot and dirty, and I get headaches.*



# JOEL

Joel is an 11-year-old boy. He has been working in the fields since he was seven, putting in seven days a week during the summer.

Despite not liking farm work, he does it because he is able to spend time with his mom and help his family financially. When we asked Joel what he disliked the most about working in the fields, he responded, "I get dirty all the time, and my head hurts because of the sun. It also gets very hot."

Joel dreams about becoming a mechanic to continue helping his family.

At the moment of the interview, Joel was working on a hot day cutting vineyard grapes along with his mother and uncle. He said he was having a good day because he was about to go home.





*Working in ONIONS is very tiring and I am usually exhausted when I get home.*



# ABIGAIL

Abigail is a 16-year-old girl. She has been doing farmwork for over a year now. She usually works during the weekends when school is in session as well as during summer breaks.

Abigail likes working in U.S. agriculture because she gets to spend time with some of her family. She also enjoys the physical activity. Abigail said, “I work in the fields because I like helping my family and I don’t have to be asking my family for money all the time. I also like saving money, and working in the fields is helping me.”

When we asked Abigail what she likes least of all about working in agriculture, she responded, “[W]hen the weather gets cold. It’s very hard to work in that type of weather. Working in the fields is also very tiring and I am usually exhausted when I get home.”

Abigail’s dream is to attend cosmetology school and have her own hair salon. She said, “I really look forward to that day.”

At the moment of the interview, Abigail was sorting onions while working with several family members in cold, windy, and dusty weather conditions.





Working in GRAPES can get both hot and cold, and the restroom is far.



# IKER

Iker is a seven-year-old boy. He has been doing farmwork since he was five years old. Since he started school, Iker works only during summer break. He also helps his parents on the weekends when school is in session. Iker mentioned that the only thing he likes about working in the fields is when he gets to leave early.

When we asked him what he disliked the most about working in the fields, he responded that he did not like working under extreme weather conditions, hot or cold. Iker also said, “The restroom is far a lot of the times, and I have to walk far. I also do not like that I am away from

home for too many hours.” However, he puts his dislikes aside because he wants to help his parents. Iker said, “I work in the fields because it’s hard for my parents to pay a babysitter during the summer break. I also want to help my parents to work.”

Iker’s dream is to become a policeman one day.

At the moment of the interview, Iker was working with his parents in very hot weather conditions. He was picking vineyard grapes. He looked very tired.





*Working in ONIONS is hard, especially when the supervisors don't treat the workers right.*



# JHAREXY

Jharexy is a 16-year-old girl. She has been working in the fields for over five years. When school is in session, she usually works on weekends. During summer breaks she works seven days a week.

Jharexy mentioned that she doesn't like doing farmwork because she has had supervisors who don't treat workers right. In addition, the restrooms are not clean and they don't provide soap. Her drive to work is very long.

When we asked if there was anything she liked about working in U.S. agriculture, she responded, "I like ... that I am working doing a job that other people prefer not to do. I can do that job and get paid for my work. It benefits me because I can help my family with money." Despite

disliking farmwork, she does it because she can help her family. Jharexy said, "I work in the fields to help my parents with the bills and gasoline, to help with the basic [things] my family needs. I also help my younger siblings to buy their school supplies and school clothes, including my own."

Jharexy's dream is to become a dental assistant and have a job she loves going to every day, a job in which she can continue to earn money to help her family.

At the moment of the interview, Jharexy was picking onions with her dad and aunt in windy and very hot weather conditions. She looked exhausted.





*Working in PUMPKINS makes my back hurt, and summers get really hot.*



# LUIS

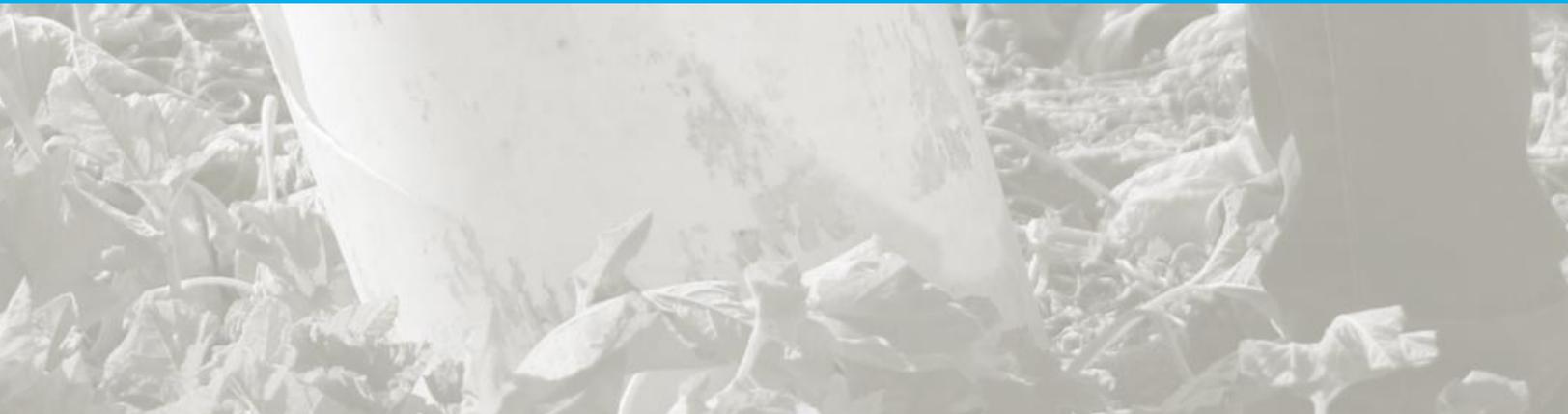
Luis is an 11-year-old boy. He has been working in the fields since he was nine years old. Luis usually works five days a week through summer break. While in school, he works on the weekends.

When asked if he likes farmwork, Luis responded “No,” because, he said, his back hurts a lot. He also dislikes working because summers get really hot, and restrooms are far away from where he is working. He mentioned he does like making money and meeting new people.

Luis stated that he works to be able to buy his school supplies and clothes. He also said that he does it to help his mom, who is a single mother. “I feel that if I can help her work, she will be less tired at home,” he said.

Luis dreams of becoming a doctor so he can help people who are sick.

At the time of the interview, Luis was picking small pumpkins with his mother. He was very shy and did not want to speak much.





*Working in the vineyards gets too hot;  
I am always dirty and tired.*



# DULCE

Dulce is an 11-year-old girl. She has been doing farmwork since she was eight. She usually works every day during summer breaks and on weekends when school is in session.

Dulce told us she dislikes fieldwork because it gets extremely hot and uncomfortable in the summer. She said, "I am always dirty and tired." She works in the fields, though, because her mom is sick and she feels the need to help her with money. Dulce said, "It feels

good to know I can help my mom and give her the little money I earn."

Dulce's dream is to attend college and become a teacher one day.

Conditions were very hot where Dulce was working, and the job required a lot of standing up and bending down. She was picking vineyard grapes with two of her family members.



# CHALLENGES FARMWORKER

## EDUCATION

School can be particularly challenging for the children of migrant farmworkers. The school year can be disrupted by multiple moves across the country as the families follow the harvest seasons for work. Some children are pulled out of classes before the school year ends, or can be enrolled in a new school months after the school year has already begun.

The interrupted school years can keep children from succeeding academically, often causing them feelings of frustration and discouragement, as well as creating learning barriers that are difficult to overcome. Without the appropriate support and interventions, migrant students are pushed out of school. In fact, farmworker youth have a high school dropout rate four times the national rate. Without an education, they are often trapped in the same generational poverty their parents faced.

## INAPPROPRIATE CLOTHING

Children that work and live in agricultural settings can be exposed to pesticides in many ways, especially when not wearing adequate clothes while in the fields. Because they often do not know the adverse health effects of pesticide exposure, many farmworker children work in shorts pants, flip-flops, short sleeves, and, at times, even barefoot. Cost is also a factor: farmworker children are hesitant to wear their “good” school clothes for fear of getting them torn or dirty, which could lead to bullying. The lack of adequate coverage can cause increased pesticide exposure through the skin, which can result in acute pesticide poisoning or long-term health effects.

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<sup>8</sup> “Agriculture.” National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris, [humantraffickinghotline.org/labor-trafficking-venues/industries/agriculture](http://humantraffickinghotline.org/labor-trafficking-venues/industries/agriculture).

<sup>9</sup> “Labor Trafficking in the Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Industries.” National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris, 0 Mar. 2015, [humantraffickinghotline.org/resources/labor-trafficking-agricultural-and-animal-husbandry-industries](http://humantraffickinghotline.org/resources/labor-trafficking-agricultural-and-animal-husbandry-industries).

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING & SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Agricultural work is low-pay, the jobs are often unpredictable and irregular, and many of the workers either have tenuous immigration status or their visas are tied to their employer, making for an environment that is ripe for exploitation with no recourse when farmworker children’s rights are violated.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) recorded 5,042 reports of potential human trafficking cases across all industries in the United States in 2014. 31 percent of those cases involved minors.<sup>8</sup> NHTRC states that “victims of labor trafficking have been found among the nation’s migrant and seasonal farmworkers, including children as young as five or six years old who harvest crops and raise animals in fields, packing plants, orchards, and nurseries.”<sup>9</sup>

These same exploitative conditions lead to a high incidence rate of sexual harassment in agriculture, made worse due to the fact that it is a male-dominated industry. Farmworker women and children – in particular, girls – report rampant harassment in the fields by foremen and other workers who are able to take advantage of them without penalty because of the isolated nature of their work environment and worker fear of reprisal were they to report it.<sup>10</sup>

Some girls deal with these dangers by dressing deliberately as boys, hiding their hair, breasts, and faces so as not to attract attention in the fields. Others stick with trusted family members so that they are better protected from would-be predators.

<sup>10</sup> Cultivating Fear | The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment. Human Rights Watch, 15 May 2012, [www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/15/cultivating-fear/vulnerability-immigrant-farmworkers-us-sexual-violence-and-sexual](http://www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/15/cultivating-fear/vulnerability-immigrant-farmworkers-us-sexual-violence-and-sexual).

# CHILDREN FACE

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## HEALTH HAZARDS

Agriculture is one of the most dangerous professions in the United States, and children who live and work on farms encounter the same agricultural safety and health risks as adult farmworkers – including pesticide exposure, heat stress, sun exposure, dust, and zoonosis (disease that is transmitted to humans from animals) – but are more likely to be injured or to fall ill.

Children are not miniature adults. Their reproductive, neurologic, and immune systems are still developing, and certain exposures may impair growth. Early exposure to certain neurotoxic pesticides, for example, can have lasting effects on the brain development of children. Pound for pound, kids breathe more, drink more, and eat more than adults, so when exposed to pesticides, they take in more. Children’s bodies metabolize, detoxify and eliminate substances differently than adult bodies. In the case of exposure to extreme temperatures, children are also more vulnerable. Their unique physiology makes children more susceptible to temperature extremes and their health effects. Children are more prone to dehydration and heat illness than adults.

## ERGONOMICS

We must understand two concepts: 1) agricultural work is hard physical work, and 2) children are developing. When combined, the results can be tragic. Farmworker children are at increased risk of suffering from ergonomic problems like back pain, arthritis, scoliosis, and other conditions, because of the nature of what agricultural work requires. Some of the activities that can cause farmworker children long-term suffering include: bending and kneeling all day; carrying, dragging and pushing heavy buckets, sacks, or objects; using dull, rusty tools; prolonged standing; and prolonged work in high temperatures. Because their bodies are still developing, children should not be permitted to do the same work as an adult. Severe ergonomic health problems can shorten their life spans.

## FINANCIAL PRESSURE

The financial pressures of low-paid agricultural work are so great that they are felt by the entire family. Farmworker children report “choosing” to start work alongside their parents when they are as young as five or six years old. But, before we criticize or applaud that choice, we must first consider the paucity of options that are being presented to them. Children know without even being told that they could either live in crushing poverty, or contribute their time and energy to the very industry that is oppressing their parents. So – naturally – they often “choose” the latter.

One former farmworker child gives the following account:

“There was a level of guilt experienced as I witnessed the financial burden of my parents. That financial burden was passed down and I felt pressured to follow my parents to the fields.

My dad began working in the fields as soon as my parents found out they were pregnant with me. They have worked in agriculture ever since, experiencing varying levels of success. However, during the Recession of 2008, we found much of the progress we had experienced was slowly nowhere to be felt. Soon, I found myself surrounded by fields of blueberries and strawberries too guilty to stay home, too poor to have a babysitter. I’d help fill buckets of fruit and it would be counted as my parents’, without the supervisor knowing I was there. I stopped going after a while, my parents reassuring me they would find a way to make ends meet themselves. Yet as I finished my senior year of high school, undocumented and unsure of my family’s financial ability to send me to college, I began working even more. Though stable now, the pressure is still sometimes there as an underlying uneasiness that wills me back. My younger siblings feel it, too, as they start applying to college.”



*Working in ONIONS takes hours of bending down & working on my Knees.*



# MIGUEL

Miguel is an eight-year-old boy. He has been working in the fields for over a year now. Miguel usually works during the summer break, but sometimes he also works after school.

Miguel said he sometimes likes farmwork because he gets to be outside. However, he doesn't like the back pain that's caused from bending over to pick onions all day. Despite the pain, he said, "I work in the fields to help my family. I like helping them."

Miguel dreams about going to college and becoming a scientist one day.

While being interviewed, Miguel was working in the onion harvest. He was pulling onions out of the soil alongside his mother. He said he was tired because he had been bending down and on his knees all day.





*I have to wake up really early to pick GRAPES. The mornings are cold and the days feel long.*



# ALONDRA

Alondra is a 13-year-old girl. She has been doing farmwork during school breaks since she was 10. In the summer, she works seven days a week.

Alondra mentioned that the days feel longer when she works in the field. Usually Alondra has to get up very early in the morning, which makes her really tired throughout the day.

When asked what she likes about farmwork, Alondra said, “I can’t think of anything that I like about working in the fields. It’s not something I like doing.”

Her dream for her future is to go to college and become a social worker. “I see myself helping other people,” she said.

During her interview, Alondra was picking vineyard grapes with her mom in the extreme heat. She was sore from the day before and still had a long day ahead of her.





Working in the fields in the summer is very hot. I get home tired.

**WARNING**  
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# YESENIA

Yesenia is a 7-year-old girl. She has been working in the fields for over a year now. Yesenia usually works on the weekends after school, but during summer break she works six days a week.

Sometimes Yesenia likes farmwork because she gets paid for it and can help her mother. Other times she doesn't like it because she has to wake up very early during summer break and the weather is very hot. She said, "I get home tired."

Yesenia's dream is to become a nurse to be able to help others in need.

At the time of her interview, Yesenia was working with her mother picking onions. She looked and felt very tired and was ready to go home. Yesenia said that she had a long day at school and did not want to work that afternoon.





*Working in PEAR orchards takes balance and care on ladders; I have to climb them quickly to reach all the best fruit.*



# MIRANDA

Miranda is a 13-year-old girl. She has been working in the fields for over four years. Usually Miranda works during school breaks and after school. She dislikes working in the fields, especially having to wake up so early and work in the extreme heat. Even so, she said she enjoys earning her own money to pay for her own needs.

When asked why she works in the fields, Miranda answered, "I work in the fields because my family can't pay for everything. We are five in my family and my parents' rent is expensive."

Despite all the challenges her family goes through, her dream is to one day become an immigration attorney.

At the time of the interview, Miranda was working the pear harvest with her mother. She was using a tall ladder balanced against the trees to be able to climb up and reach all the pears. She was very quick and efficient in her work.





*When working in ONIONS I have to use this sharp knife to cut the onion tops off.*



# ARIANA

Ariana is a 12-year old girl. Since age ten, she has been working in the fields during school breaks and sometimes after school. Ariana likes farm labor because it helps distract her mind, and she does it to help her parents financially. However, she said, “I don’t like that it gets too hot outside and we still have to work in the fields.”

Her dream is to go to college one day and become a professional.

At the moment of the interview, Ariana was harvesting onions with her mother and brother, which required her to use a sharp knife.





*Working in CORN fields is too hot; it makes my body really tired.*



# FERNANDO

Fernando is a 14-year-old boy. He has been working in the fields six days a week during school breaks for over four years. Despite not liking the work, he finds it quiet and peaceful.

When we asked Fernando what he likes the least about farm labor, he replied, “[T]hat it’s too hot and it makes my body really tired. In the fields, a lot of people smoke, and the smell of the smoke gives me headaches.”

Regardless, Fernando works to help his parents earn money to help them buy school supplies and also to help

with anything that is needed at home. He said, “It makes me feel good [to help].”

Fernando’s dream is to have a good job where he is respected and receive a better pay than what he earns now. He said, “I want to be an architect.”

At the moment of interview, Fernando was working in the corn fields with his mother. He was very optimistic about his future.

# PRODUCE HARVESTED

## by farmworker children

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Farmworker children encounter many difficulties when working in the fields. Here is a compilation of some of the challenges they face while working in particular crops. *References can be found on page 37.*



### BLUEBERRIES

Pickers spend the majority of their work hours in a stooped position carrying heavy buckets. Children usually tie the buckets to their body to avoid having to lift/drag them along the rows of bushes. Due to the delicate nature of the fruit, workers use a repetitive motion while maintaining a light touch so as not to bruise the berry, creating potential for chronic arm and hand cramping, muscle strain, and spasms. They are in constant danger of lacerations from sharp leaves and bushes, as well as dermatitis from constant chemical and plant exposure. Berries are usually picked in hot and humid weather, putting young workers at higher risk of a heat-related illness, especially when wearing the proper protective clothing.



### ONIONS

Onions fields get so hot that some harvests are being laid waste by drought. This same heat exposes workers to the increased possibility of heat-related illness, not to mention the unrelenting threat of bug bites and mosquito-borne diseases. To do their work, onion harvesters must use shears that are either extremely sharp or overly dull due to wear and tear – both dangerous to the picker. Spending long hours in a stooped position, repeatedly cutting, dragging burlap sacks, and transferring onions in hot fields/sheds causes not only musculoskeletal pain, but also the lasting odor of onions on the skin. As in many other crops, workers are exposed to pesticide residues in the soil.



### GRAPES

Grape harvesting is usually conducted during warm months. Rising temperatures, however, have been making work conditions even more uncomfortable. As is the case with most piece-rate work, taking the necessary precautions to stay healthy is often outweighed by the need to pick fast to make money. Rapid repetitive movements in hot weather as well as lugging crates to and from distant temperature-controlled trailers lead to musculoskeletal problems. By nature, grape orchards are dusty and the workers are faced not only with inhaling dust and pesticide residues, but also with getting those particles in their eyes while picking or pruning. Pruning shears are often sharp and have the potential to cut or scar workers should they lose their grip. The same can occur if the shears are dull from constant use and improper maintenance.



## TOBACCO

Tobacco harvesting takes place in the summer, and those crop-filled fields are generally ten degrees warmer than everywhere else – many days topping 100°. Not only is it a hot and humid environment, but there is a cocktail of pesticides routinely sprayed until harvest because of the crop's pest appeal. Workers are also subject to nicotine poisoning, known more commonly as green tobacco sickness. It is difficult to wear protective clothing and harvest tobacco leaves without damaging the crop, and the plant secretes tar that penetrates to the skin. Some workers climb ladders and balance on beams in drying barns, in order to hang tobacco leaves on rungs in the rafters.



## CORN

Corn harvesting accidents often involve combines. There is the danger of limb/digit amputation and loss of life due to the sheer power of heavy machinery. Respiratory problems can arise from the use of fumigants on crops to stop the growth of mold in wet weather, but also from dust in dry weather. Entrapment and suffocation are potentially fatal hazards when moving or storing corn in bins.



## PUMPKINS

Harvesting pumpkins poses challenges, because they are so heavy and grow on the ground. Picking this produce involves workers stooping or bending for long hours while keeping an eye out for heavy machinery whose operators may not be aware of the presence of workers. Pumpkins require the use of sharp knives or shears to cut through the vines, and, because of consumer demand, they entail care when handling, which is difficult due to their size. Although harvested during fall months, it's often still warm and sunny, and pumpkin patches offer little to no shade for workers.



## PEARS

Pear harvesting and pruning, like all orchard work, can result in respiratory-related problems for workers constantly exposed to the pesticide residues found on the leaves, fruit, and in the soil. Pears are harvested before they are fully ripe, which means, once formed on trees, harvest season ramps up to make sure the fruit doesn't ripen on the vine. Workers must work at a fast pace and handle fruit with care to avoid bruising, nicking or skinning. Ladder falls are always a possibility, and workers must also be vigilant of heavy machinery that may be present in the rows, moving bins to coolers.



## PEACHES

Peach pruning is slow-paced, although it involves sharp tools and is often done during winter months to prepare the trees for a high yield. Once summer arrives and trees blossom, the pace quickly escalates, and harvesters work long hours to meet market demands. Farmworkers often suffer heat-related illnesses, cuts, scrapes, dermatitis ladder falls, and back injuries from lifting and carrying heavy loads.



## APPLES

Apple picking is fast-paced and requires a great deal of strength. Orchard workers spend most of their time running up and down unbalanced ladders leaned precariously on trees, and reaching out of a safe range all while wearing an asymmetrical sack to hold the apples. Reaching, climbing, and leaning puts workers in danger of ladder falls, sprains, and broken bones. Carrying tons of apples up and down ladders and through orchards to fill large bins creates general overall pain related to ill-distributed weight and unrealistic work speed. Chemical hazards also threaten harvesters, since most orchards receive multiple pesticide applications, which leads to repeat exposures due to constant agitation of the leaves while picking.



## SWEET POTATOES

Sweet potatoes are a root vegetable that grow underground, which means that workers spend their days stooped over, up to their elbows in dirt, as they dig carefully around to gently pull a tuber from the ground, taking care not to nick it with a spade. Hustling a 30-pound bucket back and forth to a moving trailer or faraway bin requires finesse to avoid skinning or bruising. Rapid movement at a hectic pace also creates the opportunity for musculoskeletal injury.



## STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries grow close to the ground, requiring constant stooping and squatting, which causes musculoskeletal damage. Repeatedly landing in the top three of the Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen list (produce that tests high in pesticide residue), strawberries are sprayed often, exposing workers to high levels of pesticide residue. Smaller hands are preferred to avoid bruising the delicate fruit. Most injuries and hazards occur when workers are moving hastily. Unfortunately, that is what is required when working piece-rate in order to earn a living wage.



## TOMATOES

Tomato fields are hot, putting workers at risk of heat-related illness. Also, tomatoes are sprayed with numerous pesticides, exposing farmworkers to toxic residues that remain in the soil, on the leaves, and on the fruit itself. Workers repeatedly go from the kneeling/squatting position to standing up and hauling 35-pound buckets of tomatoes to bins at the end of rows or a moving target in the form of a tractor/trailer that makes its way through the field. Pickers and packers are working at a fast pace lifting, sorting and stacking uneven loads for prolonged periods. Moist, humid conditions lead to the possibility of skin-related illnesses and exacerbate effects of pesticide exposure.

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# CONCLUSION

On June 27, 1997, seventeen-year-old migrant farmworker José Antonio Casillas collapsed and died while riding his bike near his home in rural Utah. Emergency responders found white foam streaming from his nose. According to José's uncle, the day before he died the boy had been soaked with pesticides sprayed from a tractor; a week earlier he had also been sprayed while working in a peach orchard. After the second spraying he showed symptoms of severe pesticide poisoning, including vomiting, sweating, diarrhea and headaches. He had received no training from his employer regarding pesticide dangers and the symptoms of exposure, and reportedly slept in his pesticide-soaked clothing the night before his death.<sup>11</sup>

Stories like this one and the others we have presented in this book grab our attention, because they reveal a different narrative than the one we're used to hearing and believing. Every child should have a childhood, but many farmworker children do not. Children should be safe from unnecessary harm or danger, but many farmworker kids are not. Many people think, say, or even debate that child labor does not exist anymore in the United States; but, here, we present incontrovertible evidence that it does.

Unfortunately, it is very much still the case that farmworker children such as Joel, Abigail, Iker, Jharexy, and many others do not experience summers or weekends like other kids. Instead, they operate more like adults: getting up early, packing their lunches, and spending countless hours pruning, picking, cleaning, and otherwise harvesting America's food. They are exposed to life-threatening pesticides, work on and near dangerous equipment and with sharp and rusty tools, and are permitted by law to perform hazardous tasks years earlier than their peers who work in non-agricultural industries.

Organizations like AFOP are working to change all of this. Through our in-house National Farmworker Training Program (NFTP), our members provide a plethora of health & safety trainings, such as pesticide safety, heat stress, and tractor safety, that give farmworkers the education they need to be safer on the job. We developed a training geared specifically towards children called *Jose Aprende Sobre los Pesticidas*, or "Jose Learns about Pesticides," which is delivered directly to kids in migrant housing, migrant Head Start centers, and in agricultural fields across the country. This training empowers kids to prevent pesticide residues from being carried into their families' homes. Furthermore, AFOP members provide job training through the National Farmworker Jobs Program, which helps farmworkers gain more economic stability with more sufficient, year-round incomes.

When systems are in place that perpetuate inequality, however, that is a strong current to swim against. Farmworker children will always be out in the fields as long as the law allows for it. That's why we participate in the Child Labor Coalition, which advocates for that law to change. Once it does, we still have more work to do, since the economic pressure to work will be there as long as farmworker parents are trapped in poverty.

What can you do about it? Our choices and our voices, whether at the ballot box or in the grocery store, can directly improve the plight of farmworker children. Buying organic means that children are less likely to be exposed to toxic pesticides throughout the growing and harvesting of that product. Selecting a bag of apples or oranges with the Fair Food or Equitable Food label ensures that farmworker kids are not exploited throughout the supply chain of that apple or orange.

There are many more ways to get involved in our campaign and advocate for farmworker children. See the next page for ideas.

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<sup>11</sup> Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs, "Did Pesticides Kill José Antonio Casillas?" *Washington Newslines*, July 1998.

# GET INVOLVED

## WHAT YOU CAN DO...

AFOP invites you to join in assisting farmworker children to obtain the same opportunities enjoyed by other children in the United States. Here are some ideas for how you can get involved:

- ◆ **Donate** to our cause, so we can continue fighting injustice.
- ◆ **Urge** your state and federal elected representatives to support legislation that will correct the inequities in the Fair Labor Standards Act and protect child farmworkers.
- ◆ **Support** measures and programs, like NFJP, 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 championing 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.
- ◆ **Follow** us on social media →  @CIFCampaign  @CIFCampaign





**ASSOCIATION OF FARMWORKER OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS**  
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