

Underage Migrants Found Working Dangerous Jobs Across America, According to Investigators

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In the News

In a *New York Times* front-page exposé last week, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Hannah Dreier, broke the news of widespread violations of child labor laws in all 50 states across America. She based her report on court and inspection records as well as interviews with hundreds of attorneys, educators, caseworkers, law enforcement officers and migrant child workers.

Dreier's investigation found children as young as 12 working hazardous jobs 12-17 hours a day in slaughterhouses, meatpacking plants, dairies, food processing plants, hospitality, service and manufacturing, construction and agriculture. Popular brands, including Frito-Lay, General Mills, Quaker Oats, PepsiCo, Ben & Jerry's and Fruit of the Loom, produce Cheetos, Cheerios, Lucky Charms, Chewy and Nature Valley granola bars, ice cream and socks, packaged by children like these, that end up on shelves at WalMart, Target, Whole Foods and other stores near you. Suppliers of auto parts for Ford, General Motors, Hyundai and Kia, all reportedly utilize underage workers.

On some jobs, minor child workers have suffered serious injuries, including amputations, breathing problems from dust and spice particles, burns, and even death after falling from roofs. *The New York Times* found a dozen cases of underage migrant workers killed due to dangerous working conditions since 2017, the last year the Labor Department reported any.

At Union High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a ninth-grade social studies teacher, Rick Angstman, said, "It's the new child labor. You're taking children from another country and putting them in almost indentured servitude."

"Ten years ago, there were far fewer children, maybe 6,000 children a year [crossing the border]," Dreier said in an interview with NPR. "Now we're seeing 150,000 a year." Nearly half are coming from Guatemala, which has been especially hit hard by poverty.

As it became more difficult for adult migrants to successfully enter and remain in the United States, desperate parents began to send children, to ease economic pressure with one less mouth to feed at home, and in the hopes that the children might be able to earn money they could send back to support the rest of the family.

Since 2008, the federal government has allowed unaccompanied non-Mexican underage migrants to live with sponsors while they await resolution of their appeals for asylum, which can take several years. The policy springs from legislation intended to protect children who might be

at risk of human trafficking if turned away or deported to fend for themselves in Mexican border towns.

Dreier makes it clear that the minors she spoke with during her investigation did not cross the border illegally. "These are not undocumented children," she told journalist Amy Goodman in an interview. "They're not children who snuck in, and nobody ever found out about them, and now they're sort of living a subterranean life. These are children who had turned themselves in at the border, usually asked for asylum, and were released to live with somebody who the government thought would protect them."

Federal data reveals that two-thirds of migrant children are released to relatives other than their parents, to acquaintances or even to strangers. The appearance of a high concentration of migrant children sponsored by non-relatives in certain locations can be a red flag that they are expected to work in local businesses.

Dreier points to the labor shortage in the United States as another factor contributing to the rise in migrant child labor. NPR host, Ayesha Rascoe, said big-name companies typically use subcontractors who depend on employment agencies to find and vet workers. "And so it seems like everything is being outsourced, and that makes it easier for companies to pass the buck," Rascoe observed.

"Too often, companies look the other way and claim that their staffing agency, or their subcontractor or supplier is responsible. Everyone has a responsibility here," said U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh.

Employers that struggle to find and retain staff often do not require the agencies to verify the ages of job applicants. Minor applicants desperate for work may try to hide their ages by using false identification or heavy makeup, or an adult may submit the application and show up for an interview, while a child using the same name later appears for orientation.

The U.S. Department of Labor reports that since 2018, it has seen a 69% increase in children being employed illegally by companies.

The federal government was ill-prepared to handle the influx of unaccompanied minors attempting to cross into the United States, and pushed to move them out of shelters or detention centers as quickly as possible. Caseworkers say that led to inadequate vetting of potential sponsors by overworked Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) staff, increasing the potential for more trafficking or exploitation of children.

Sponsors are required to send migrant children to school, but many never enroll, and others who work extended hours end up dropping out when the pressure is overwhelming. Caseworkers estimate that two of three minor migrant children work full time. HHS is supposed to follow up on minor migrant children after they have been placed with sponsors, but in the last two years, the agency has lost track of more than 85,000 children.

The departments of Labor and Health and Human Services have announced the establishment of an Interagency Task Force to Combat Child Labor Exploitation "to improve information sharing among agencies ... to apply additional scrutiny in the sponsor vetting process ... to initiate investigations where child-labor violations are most likely to occur ... to use all available enforcement tools, including penalties, injunctions, stopping the movement of goods made with child labor, and criminal referrals where warranted."

The Department of Labor further called on Congress to authorize more funding to provide adequate staffing to facilitate their investigative capabilities, oversight and enforcement work. The department also requested that Congress provide protection for whistleblowers who report child labor violations, and increase penalties for companies that use child labor.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S. *The New York Times*](#)
['Alone and Exploited': NYT Exposé Shows Migrant Kids in U.S. Forced Into Brutal Jobs for Major Brands. *Democracy Now!*](#)

[Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services Announce New Efforts to Combat Exploitative Child Labor. *U.S. Department of Labor*](#)

[Hundreds of Migrant Children Work Long Hours in Jobs That Violate Child Labor Laws. *NPR*](#)
[Six Strategies to Protect Immigrant Children From Exploitation and Labor Trafficking. *Theyoungcenter.org*](#)

The Big Questions

1. How can you ensure that your own purchases do not inadvertently or unwittingly contribute to the suffering of poor families and child workers?
2. If you suspect child labor violations, what would you do with that information? To whom would you report it?
3. What resources are available to protect children and enforce labor laws? What role, if any, might Christians play in educating the public, government officials and industry leaders about the problem of child labor?
4. How high is the welfare of migrant children on your church's priority list? What activities and ministries give evidence of your church's commitment to the care of children who may be at risk of exploitation?
5. How might your church become or create a safe haven for child laborers or whistleblowers of companies that violate child labor laws?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Samuel 17:15, 17-20

... but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. ... Jesse said to his son David, "Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers; also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See how your brothers fare, and bring some token from them." Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel were in the valley of Elah fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. ... (For context, read [1 Samuel 17:12-20, 32-37](#).)

In the previous chapter, the prophet Samuel had anointed David, the youngest of eight sons of Jesse, to become the next king of Israel ([1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)). We're told that David helped the family by watching over his father's sheep. He also played the harp for King Saul to soothe his troubled mind. We don't know whether he was paid for his music therapy sessions, but, if so, it might have been a welcome source of a little extra income for the large family. To be a contributing member of the family would likely have been a source of pride for the youngest brother.

At the time of the incident recorded in chapter 17, David's father Jesse was already advanced in age. He may have been less able to meet all the family's needs, so whatever work his sons did to make life easier for the whole family would have been appreciated. The three eldest brothers had joined the army. Meanwhile, David, the youngest, juggled playing music for the king with caring for his father's sheep at Bethlehem. In between those responsibilities, David was also assigned the task of bringing food and supplies to his brothers and their company on the battlefield.

When David heard about the giant Goliath's threats against the army of Israel, he volunteered to take him on. King Saul objected that David was unable to go up against such an experienced warrior, since he was "just a boy" (v. 33), but David recounted how his experience keeping his father's sheep had prepared him for battle (vv. 34-37).

In [an address at a conference](#) on November 19, 2021, Pope Francis differentiated between "the small domestic tasks that children ... perform as part of family life, to help parents, siblings, grandparents or other members of the community" and child labor, which he said "is the exploitation of children in the production processes of the globalized economy for the profit and gain of others."

"It is the denial of children's rights to health, education and harmonious growth, including the possibility to play and dream [and] a violation of human dignity" that robs children "of their future, and therefore, humanity itself," said the pontiff.

Questions: How did household chores or side jobs figure in your own experience growing up in your family? Was work a source of pride, an opportunity to develop skills, a way to contribute to the well-being and success of each member and of the family as a whole, a source of frustration, pain and exhaustion, or something else? Did you feel exploited? Did you resent, welcome, enjoy, or feel ambivalent about work responsibilities? What factors contributed to how you felt about your chores? How do you feel about those responsibilities now, as you look back?

If you have children, grandchildren or other young people in your care, what are your hopes and expectations of them with regard to work? What do you want them to learn about the place of work in their lives and in the human experience in general?

2 Kings 5:1-3

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." (For context, read [2 Kings 5:1-16](#).)

It would be easy to miss the child worker in this account of the Syrian army commander Naaman's encounter with the prophet Elisha. Most of the chapter is devoted to Naaman's healing from a skin disease, with relatively few words describing the young girl who had been taken captive from the land of Israel, whose name we don't know. Yet she is the linchpin who makes Naaman's healing even possible. Had she not spoken up, he probably never would have heard about the prophet who could cure him of his disease. But because of her, Naaman not only was healed, but he also came to know the God of Israel as the God of all the earth.

Questions: What are the chances, do you think, that the young girl was rewarded for pointing Naaman in the direction of the prophet who could cure him? What may have motivated her to do something good for the people who held her captive, presumably separated from her family and community?

While we aren't told what happened after Naaman returned home, we do know that the commander had a new understanding of the God his wife's servant girl worshiped. How do you imagine the couple's conversations with their servant girl changed upon Naaman's return?

Acts 16:16-19

One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. (For context, read [Acts 16:16-24](#).)

We don't know the age of the female slave in this passage (she may have been a child), but we do know that her owners profited from her ability to tell fortunes. It's also not clear what it was about this situation that annoyed Paul: whether it was the content of what the girl said, her persistently stalking them, the fact that her owners were exploiting her, or something else. In any event, Paul put a stop to it, ordering the spirit of divination to come out of her.

When the girl was no longer of any use to her owners, they turned on Paul and Silas, identifying them as outsiders, "Jews [who were] disturbing our city and ... advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe" (vv. 20-21). The crowd and the civic authorities humiliated, beat and jailed them to punish them for their insolence.

Questions: How is this incident similar or dissimilar to the predicament faced by child migrant workers described in the news article? How might Paul's decision to act provide a roadmap for how Christians might respond to the needs of migrant children today? What risks might Christians who object to the exploitation of migrant children for profit face? How should Christians relate to companies that exploit migrant child laborers?

Proverbs 22:16

*Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself,
and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss. (No context needed.)*

Proverbs 24:11-12

*... if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death,
those who go staggering to the slaughter;
if you say, "Look, we did not know this" --
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it?
And will he not repay all according to their deeds?*

(For context, read [Proverbs 24:10-12](#).)

Proverbs 31:8-9

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out; judge righteously;
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (No context needed.)*

These three passages from Proverbs present a spectrum of attitudes and actions toward the poor and people at risk.

Proverbs 22:16 speaks about those who deliberately act against the poor in favor of the rich, to enrich themselves.

Proverbs 24:10-12 depicts those who present a flimsy excuse of "plausible deniability," suggesting that they shouldn't be held liable for people who suffered, since they didn't know anything about it.

Proverbs 31:8-9 urges those who have means and ability to speak for the rights of those who are unable to speak for themselves.

Questions: Which of these passages speaks to you most powerfully today, and why? What, if anything, do you think God's Spirit is calling on you to do in response?

For Further Discussion

1. Consider this, from anthropologist and advocate for human rights and children, Dr. James Loucky, who has studied border issues and familial economic structures for half a century:

"Reports of thousands of children from Central America arriving at the southern U.S. border made headlines in 2014, but migration by children and youth is hardly new. Many likely carried their baby, Jesus, hundreds of miles seeking refuge from state violence. Accounts and pictures across history and from around the world today confirm that refugee and migration flows typically include young people. What is new, or at least rashly unleashed, is the demonization of young people along with their parents, and the compounding dangers and difficulties this means for those on the move as well as for humanitarian responses.

"My own decades of involvement with Maya communities in Guatemala and extending across a continental diaspora has confirmed how responsibilities for helping are part of an ethic of reciprocity that children learn from an early age. Like parents, children also come to sacrifice their own security and health in order to provide remittances for parents or kin in home communities.

"Such values are not just laudable, but are skills of utmost value to new societies, should their futures lie in places beyond their birthplace. Such understanding is essential for shaping effective and humane migration policies. Affirming the full capacity of everyone, and that we ought not divide children into 'ours' and 'theirs,' is required if we are to meet the existential climate and resource challenges that we share.

"At the least, we are called to know something of the braided histories of North and Central America, for guidance as to why millions of lives have been and continue to be interconnected. Perhaps we start by talking to congregants and families around us and in our midst."

2. Respond to this, from Ven. Bronwyn Pagram, an Australian Anglican archdeacon, in her article, ["Cherish Children: Help End Child Labour"](#): "Children have been included in family activities since time immemorial. Participating in work that does not damage health or personal development, or interfere with education, can be valuable for growth and maturity. Children develop social, emotional and productive skills, and perhaps even contribute to their family's welfare.

"The problem of 'child labor' arises when children are forced to work in such a way that they are deprived of their childhood, potential and dignity, and their physical, intellectual and emotional development is harmed. Child labor can interfere with or deny the possibility of attending school.

"Although much child labor takes place in the family unit, doing subsistence and commercial farming and herding, in some places this is in the added context of debt bondage or hereditary slavery."

3. *The Wired Word* team discussed how to respond to the exploitation of child migrant workers. One team member suggested: "Always look at labels in clothing, shoes, etc., to find out where the product is made. Then do a bit of online research to see if Country A, B or Z has a history of child labor issues. If so, don't buy the product."

Another team member asked, "Then does that mean we shouldn't buy products with 'Made in America' labels that were sewn on by child migrant workers laboring 12-hour days? Or drink milk from producers that employ children from other countries? How would we even know who is exploiting poor children and their desperate families, when the Labor Department stopped

reporting the numbers in 2017? Are there any countries or companies with clean hands?"
What do you think?

4. How would you resolve [this problem](#), posed by *New York Magazine* writer Eric Levitz:

"Today, there are roughly two job openings for every unemployed American. Meanwhile in Central America, gainful employment is hard to come by. ... So in one part of the western hemisphere, there are too many well-paying jobs and too few workers. In another, there are too many workers and few good jobs. ...

"The U.S. has marginally increased opportunities for such prospective immigrants to work legally in the U.S. but not by anywhere near the amount necessary to meet labor demand. For this year, Congress has capped H-2B visas, which allow international workers to take seasonal positions in the U.S., at 130,716 for nonagricultural workers. Two months into the year, U.S. employers have already requested 142,000 visas for the coming spring and summer."

5. React to this: Robert Carey and Terri Gerstein identify several factors they say contributed to the exploitation of child migrant workers in America in their article, [How Did Children End Up as Factory Workers in America Again?](#) Among those factors are underfunding and understaffing of labor and immigration agencies, lack of interdepartmental coordination of policies and "enforcement of existing child protection and labor laws, and outdated statutes that allow large corporations to skirt workplace responsibility by using intermediaries." In addition, Carey and Gerstein point to anti-government sentiment, dismantling of health and safety regulations, decline of labor unions and "shrinking of government agencies." Some states don't have any labor investigators at all, they say.

What should be the respective roles, if any, of government, business, family, the church and the general public, in protecting children from exploitation in the marketplace? How should all of this fit into our nation's policies regarding immigration?<https://investor.vanguard.com/my-account/log-on> Or someone else?

How should policies regarding child labor be developed to ensure that minors are not exploited for profit?

Responding to the News

Discuss ways you can cooperatively research where items you purchase originate, to determine, as best you can, what safeguards companies have in place to guard against child labor and other forms of labor exploitation and slavery. Search for ways to support companies that are committed to "fair trade" principles that are in accord with your own ethical standards. Lobby your national, state and local legislators to enact robust laws requiring companies and supply chains to be certified child-labor-free.

Prayer Suggested by [Malachi 3:5](#); [James 5:1-5](#); [1 Timothy 5:17-18](#)

O God, who positions yourself on the side of the most vulnerable and against those who oppress workers, widows and orphans, and against those who thrust aside the alien, help us to treat others fairly and compassionately, knowing that you hear the cries of laborers who are exploited for profit. Guide industry leaders, legislators, government officials and consumers to make wise decisions regarding migrants, especially those who are underage, so that we do not add to their

desperation, but instead inspire them to hope in you. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

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