



THE BIG READ

CHILD LABOR




# The Teens Who

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## VIDEO

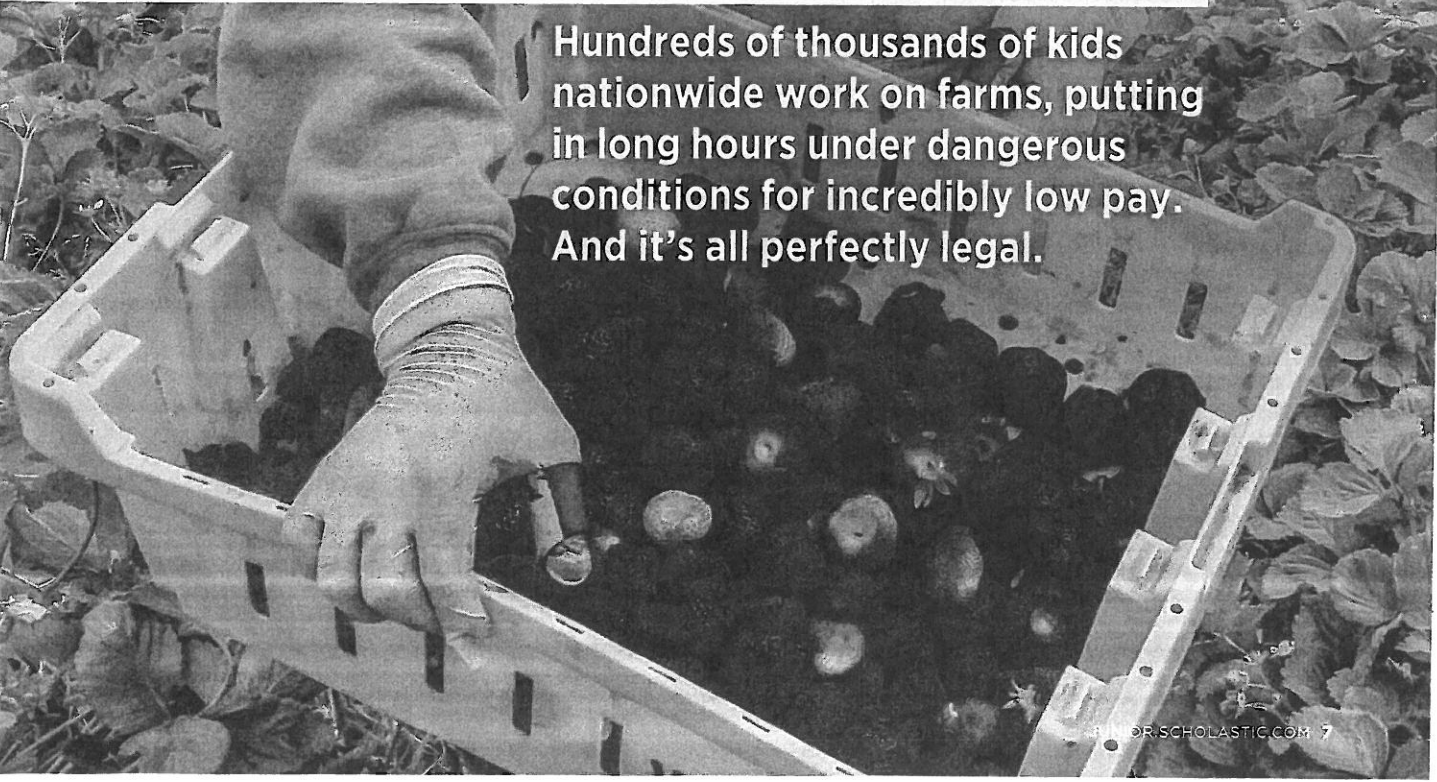
Check out our video at [junior.scholastic.com](http://junior.scholastic.com) to hear an expert from Human Rights Watch discuss child labor—and what you can do to help.

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# Feed America



Hundreds of thousands of kids nationwide work on farms, putting in long hours under dangerous conditions for incredibly low pay. And it's all perfectly legal.



### As You Read, Think About:

Why might some kids have to work on farms?

A few weeks before the end of the school year, Reyes\*, then 15, got up at dawn and packed a bag with clothes, boots, and a raincoat. Then he set out on the 3-day, 1,600-mile trip from his home in Edinburg, Texas, to Hart, Michigan.

It was a journey he'd made every spring since he was 9—first with his family, then on his own. But instead of traveling to see friends or visit relatives, he was going to Michigan to work on a farm, earning money to help his family survive.

While there, Reyes did everything from clearing the land to harvesting asparagus. Many days, it was so hot in the endless rows of crops that after just a few minutes he was drenched in a thick layer of sweat and dirt. His fingers were constantly covered in blisters. He had rashes all over his legs. And his whole body ached.

But by the end of each summer, Reyes had earned a few thousand dollars—enough to help his family pay the bills and buy food, clothes, and other necessities for the coming year.



## Reyes has been traveling from Texas to work on farms in Michigan since he was 9.

"Everybody has to pitch in," says Reyes, now 17.

Nationwide, an estimated 524,000 children and teens work on farms, growing and harvesting the fruits and vegetables Americans eat every day. Like Reyes, many of these young people are migrants, meaning that they move from one place to another to work. Far from home, they often miss days or even weeks of school. Some eventually drop out, making it harder for them to find

well-paying jobs when they're older.

Most shocking of all, say experts, is that it's perfectly legal for kids to labor on farms for hours at a time.

"We don't allow a 12-year-old to work in an air-conditioned office," says Reid Maki, the director of child labor advocacy at the National Consumers League. "Yet U.S. law allows that same 12-year-old to work 10 to 12 hours a day performing backbreaking work harvesting crops ... in temperatures that are often in the 90s and even 100 degrees."

### U.S. Child Labor Laws

In many places around the world, kids have to work to earn money for their families (*see sidebar, p. 9*). In the U.S., child labor was widespread until the early 1900s. At the time, nearly 2 million kids younger than 15 were working long hours in dangerous conditions—many in coal mines or garment factories or on farms. Poor families, especially immigrants, often depended on the extra income their children brought in to survive.

In response to calls to protect young workers, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

**MIGRANT FARMWORKER** Someone who moves from one place to another to find work in agriculture. Many migrant farmworkers in the United States are immigrants and may or may not have permission from the U.S. government to be here. Others, like Reyes, were born in the U.S. and are American citizens. Nearly 20 percent of farmworkers in the U.S. are migrants.



Workers harvest sugarcane in Texas.

That federal law sets rules that govern the age at which young people can be employed, what kinds of jobs they can do, and how many hours they can work. But because family farming was widespread at the time and parents often relied on their kids to help out, agricultural labor was excluded from many of the rules. Those guidelines are still in effect today.

Currently, federal law says kids must be at least 16 to perform most nonfarm-related work. It also restricts kids under 16 to three hours of work on a school day.

But when it comes to farmwork, children as young as 12 are allowed to put in unlimited hours outside the school day. And for kids working on their families' farms—where there is the expectation that their parents are looking out for them—there's no minimum age at all.

### In the Fields, Out of School

For Reyes, working on farms has long been a way of life. And he takes pride in being able to help his family.

Today, he's one of about 300,000 students across the country who migrate to follow the harvest (*see map, p. 11*). Many of them are the children of immigrants, like Reyes. They're often from poor families, and their parents lack the education or training to secure higher-paying jobs. As a result, these kids have to work to supplement their parents' income.

Some leave their homes in March or April and don't return until September or October. Along the way, they might attend different schools. Each time they move, they have to get used to new teachers and classmates. Plus, credits and coursework don't always transfer from one school to another,

## UNDERSTANDING

# Child Labor Worldwide

Globally, about 152 million kids ages 5 to 17 are child laborers. Many of them live in poor communities in sub-Saharan Africa or Asia where there are few high-paying jobs. As a result, kids have to work to help support their families. About 70 percent of child laborers worldwide work in agriculture. Some harvest sugarcane in India, cocoa in Ghana, or cotton in China.

The good news, however, is that the number of child laborers worldwide has decreased by nearly 40 percent since 2000. Experts say that's largely the result of international efforts to strengthen—and enforce—existing child labor laws.



These kids work at a construction site in India.

so some migrant students end up having to retake certain classes.

At the same time, many of them are simply too exhausted to concentrate on schoolwork because they're spending hours each day in the fields before and after class and on weekends. It can be hard for them to find time to study for tests or do homework. Sometimes, they skip school altogether or drop out—even though they're not supposed to.

### Low-Paying Work

Despite young farmworkers' contributions, many of their families continue to struggle financially.

One reason is that federal law allows agricultural workers of all ages to be paid less than the national minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. Instead, they're often paid by how much they harvest: \$16 for a crateful of onions or \$3 for 72 bunches of kale, for example.

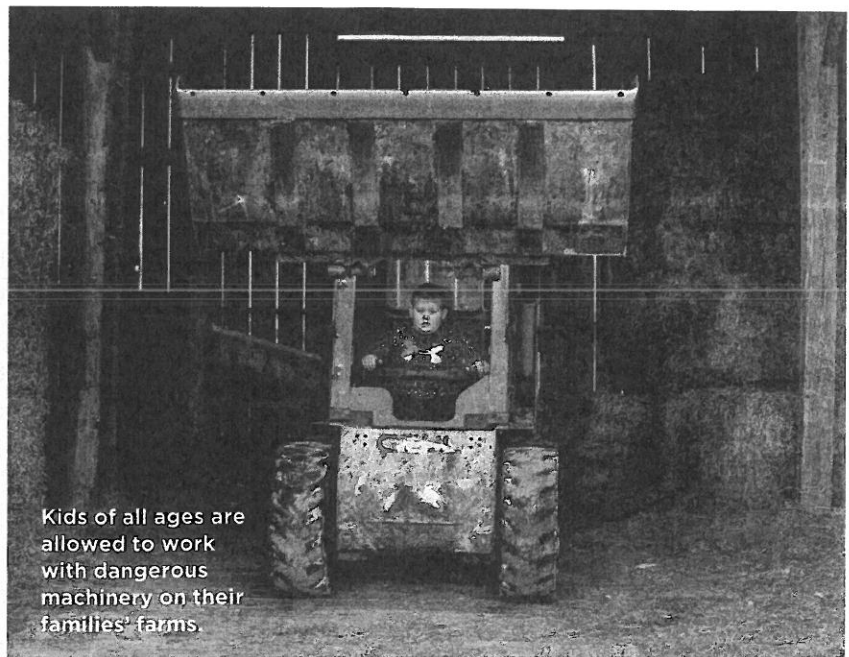
Those rates are supposed to equal or exceed the minimum wage when you factor in the number of hours worked. But that's often not the case. So to earn as much as possible, multiple generations—kids, parents, and grandparents—often labor side by side in the fields, sharing the workload and their earnings. →

## A Dangerous Job

Farmwork is also particularly hazardous. For one thing, workers can be exposed to pesticides for long periods of time, which can cause dizziness, nausea, brain damage, and certain types of cancer. In addition, some children aren't given adequate breaks or enough water to drink.

Many also work long hours, which deprives them of the sleep their growing bodies and minds need. Reyes, for example, would often start his day at 5 in the morning and wouldn't go to bed until midnight. "We wouldn't have any time to sleep," he says. "You feel exhausted."

Plus, some kids have to use sharp tools and dangerous machinery, such as chain saws, hay balers, or forklifts. The federal government categorizes such tasks as "hazardous." For all other industries, the minimum age for performing this type of work is 18. For farmwork, however, it's 16—and there are no age restrictions for kids



Kids of all ages are allowed to work with dangerous machinery on their families' farms.

who work on their families' farms.

According to the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, roughly 33 children are hurt in agriculture-related accidents every day. And since 2009, more kids have been killed while working in agriculture than in all other industries combined.

## Protecting Young Workers

Experts say that one of the most effective ways to prevent young people from having to perform dangerous work on farms would be to pay adult farmworkers higher wages. That way, families would be able to survive without their kids getting such jobs—and young people could instead concentrate on school.

Critics of raising wages say that would mean higher prices at the grocery store. But they likely wouldn't be as high as people might expect, say experts. According to research from the University of California, Davis, Americans would each need to pay just \$21 more a year for their fruits and vegetables to increase farmworkers' wages by 40 percent.

"Companies keep trying to scare

people: If we pay people a fair living wage, it's going to skyrocket prices," says Norma Flores López of the East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, a group that helps migrant farmworkers and their families. "In reality, it's not."

Many people also say that federal laws are needed to protect young farmworkers. This past summer, U.S. Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard of California reintroduced a bill that would raise the minimum age for kids to be allowed to work on most farms to 14—and prevent them from working more than three hours on a school day, the same as for other industries.

In addition, experts say, it's important to raise awareness about how food is produced in the U.S. They point out that Americans have become increasingly concerned about animal welfare in the food industry and have begun to eat less meat. Yet many people don't think twice about where their fruits and vegetables come from. That needs to change, say experts.

"You go and have your salad, but don't realize someone's breaking their back to harvest that," says Juan Anciso, a professor at Texas A&M AgriLife Extension.



## How YOU Can Help

Inspired to help young farmworkers and their families? Visit [junior.scholastic.com](http://junior.scholastic.com) for information on what you can do, such as pushing for new laws and raising awareness.



**This map shows the number of migrant students in each state.**  
**The top five states are highlighted.**

**This map shows the number of migrant students in each state. The top five states are highlighted.**

**Number of migrant students**

- More than 10,000
- 5,000 to 10,000
- 1,000 to 4,999
- Fewer than 1,000
- Data not available

**Callout boxes:**

- WA:** Migrant students 19,400. Major crops apples, carrots, raspberries.
- CA:** Migrant students 93,700. Major crops grapes, lettuce, strawberries.
- TX:** Migrant students 32,600. Major crops cilantro, corn, grapefruit.
- FL:** Migrant students 25,800. Major crops oranges, tomatoes, watermelons.

**Other states and locations marked:** OR, ID, MT, ND, MN, WI, MI (Hart), NY, NH, ME, VT, MA, RI, CT, NJ, DE, MD, DC, PA, WV, VA, NC, SC, GA, AL, MS, AR, OK, NM, CO, UT, NV, AZ, HI, AK, Edinburg.

*Alaska and Hawaii are not drawn to scale or placed in their proper geographic positions.*

**Scale:** 0 to 200 MI, 0 to 300 KM.

**Compass rose:** N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W, NW.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, 2016-17

NOTE: Data includes young people who migrate for work or to accompany their parents.

1. Which state has the most migrant students?
2. What are the main crops harvested there?
3. How many migrant students are in Texas?
4. How many migrant students are in your state?
5. What major crops are harvested in Oregon?
6. True or false: There are more migrant students in Kansas than Utah.

7. Which states in the Northeast have fewer than 1,000 migrant students?
8. Which state along the East Coast has the most migrant students?
9. In which direction did Reyes travel to get from Edinburg, Texas, to Hart, Michigan?
10. How many straight-line miles separate those towns?

Reyes, for one, is determined to finish high school. He wants to go to college and is considering becoming an architectural engineer so he can build a better house for his parents.

car broke down, and his little sister is quickly outgrowing her clothes.

"I've suffered a lot," says Reyes. "But you know what: I need to help my family. If I don't do it, who's going to?" ♦

**Write About It!** What factors might contribute to young people having to work on farms? Explain your answer, using facts from the article as supporting evidence.



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