

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/30/us-government-should-end-child-labor-home>

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Farmworker Children Under 18 Need Better Protection

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This week, the US Department of Labor (DOL) published its [annual global report](#) evaluating 131 countries and territories on their efforts to end the worst forms of child labor. The 1,365-page report found that while 79 countries had made moderate or significant advancement toward ending child labor, 49 had made minimal or no progress. However, a similar assessment of the situation in the US was conspicuous in its absence.

The US should examine child labor within its own borders with the same scrutiny.

Human Rights Watch and our partners have [reported](#) extensively on the [dangers](#) children face while working in US agriculture, where more child workers die than in any other US industry, according to a 2018 US [government report](#).

Under US labor law, children as young as 12 can work unlimited hours on farms of any size with parental permission, as long as they don't miss school. There is no minimum age for children to work on small farms or family farms. This is glaringly out of step with [international standards](#).

The [child farmworkers](#) my colleagues and I have interviewed described working long hours often in extreme heat to help their families make ends meet. They did backbreaking work tending fields and harvesting apples, pumpkins, tomatoes, corn, and other crops.

Most received little if any safety training. One teenage boy I interviewed lost two fingers in an accident with a mower while working on a tobacco farm.

Changes to US law and regulations to protect child farmworkers are long overdue. Congress should enact [legislation](#) to give child farmworkers the same protections as children working in all other sectors, limiting their hours and raising the minimum age to begin work, and ensure DOL and the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) have the funding necessary to enforce worker protection laws.

New US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh has [pledged](#) to take action to end child labor. Earlier this year, DOL committed \$57 million in new funding to combat forced and child labor. This support for international efforts is critically needed. But this should be matched with stronger domestic action. Under Secretary Walsh's leadership, DOL should use its regulatory authority to update the list of [hazardous occupations](#) off limits to children under 16 to ensure at least the youngest child farmworkers are protected.

The US had made no advancement toward ending child labor in agriculture for far too long.

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