

More Children Are Employed, Often Perilously

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Body

After nearly disappearing from American life, **child** labor has re-emerged and proliferated in the last decade. Even the recession does not seem to have stemmed the tide, and investigators say many of the **children** are working in dangerous jobs.

Federal statistics indicate that at least four million **children** ages 14 to 18 are legally **employed**. But about half that many other **children** work illegally, either because businesses or family members pay them in cash to avoid taxes and minimum wages, or, **more** ominously, because they work too many hours, late hours, at hazardous jobs, or are under 14 and thus too young to be working at all except on farms.

Children Working Everywhere

No one knows exactly how many **children** work illegally, but Philip J. Landrigan, chairman of the Department of Community Medicine at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, estimated the number at about 2 million. Evidence from a variety of sources -- the Labor Department's strike force, the General Accounting Office, states' investigations and emergency-room records -- suggests that **children** work illegally in the fields, in the garment industry, in fast-food restaurants, on construction sites and in mines, sawmills and gas stations.

On the job, they suffer amputations, burns, deep cuts and electrocutions. At least several hundred a year are killed, according to investigators at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Other **children** work late on school nights, in violation of state and Federal laws, and sometimes fall asleep in class.

Jeffrey Newman, executive director of the National **Child** Labor Committee, a nonprofit organization founded in 1904, said he is seeing a return of **child** labor scandals reminiscent of those that occurred at the turn of the century. "I see the same kind of exploitation that occurred then, in sweatshops, in the fields, in unscrupulous business practices that occur behind closed doors," he said. "It's very sad and it doesn't speak well to our understanding and commitment to **children**."

Dr. Landrigan, who organized a recent conference on **child** labor, laid the blame for the growth of legal and illegal **child** labor on three factors:

***More** and **more** families slipped into poverty in the 1980's and early 1990's and needed income from their **children**'s work;

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*Immigrants flooded the nation, often from countries where child labor is routine, providing a pool of people ripe for exploitation;

*And state and Federal governments cut their budgets for inspecting workplaces, making the discovery of violations less likely.

Mr. Newman said that economic factors over the past decade have contributed to the problem. "There are two times when child labor is really affected by the economy," he said. "When the economy is really in the doldrums or in an extreme recession, businesses often seek out young people because they can pay them less and take advantage of them." On the other hand, he said, "When the economy is up, child labor again begins to climb because businesses need more people and they can hire young people at lower wages."

Historically Defies Regulation

Mr. Newman and others added, however, that a major contributing factor to the increase in child labor has been lax enforcement of state and Federal laws. Federal laws prohibit children under age 16 from working during school hours and limit the number of hours they can work after school and on weekends. Certain jobs, like mining, logging and roofing, are prohibited for anyone under age 18. In agriculture, restrictions are less stringent; hazardous work is prohibited until age 16.

But child labor has a long history that complicates attempts to restrict or regulate it, said Dr. David Rosner, a historian of medicine at Baruch College in New York. "We have very deep-seated social and cultural values that play against serious attempts at protecting kids," Dr. Rosner said.

Many Americans are deeply ambivalent about child labor, he said. "We see work as redemptive and as a morally legitimate method of self improvement."

The General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, recently found evidence in data from the United States Department of Labor that the number of illegally employed minors had almost tripled since 1983, rising from 9,200 to 27,500 last year. But Dr. Charles Jeszeck, an economist who did the analysis, said those numbers grossly underestimate the problem because they derive from woefully inadequate surveillance and reporting systems.

166,000 15-Year-Olds Workers Illegally Employed

Dr. Jeszeck and his colleagues found one indication of underreporting when their search of 1988 census data revealed that at least 166,000 15-year-old children were working too many hours or in occupations, like construction, that are prohibited for children that young. More than half were working in prohibited jobs, Dr. Jeszeck said.

A recent investigation of 4,700 businesses by the Labor Department found that nearly 5,000 minors at 1,300 businesses were working illegally.

Dr. William Halperin, the associate director for surveillance at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, called the magnitude of illegal child labor "astounding." And he said the statistics gathered so far are "the tip of an iceberg," because there is no systematic data collection and many injuries and even deaths are not reported.

One problem is simply discovering violators, given the relatively few inspectors the Federal Government employs for that purpose. For example, Dr. Landrigan said, the National Occupational Safety and Health Administration has 2,000 inspectors, and the Labor Department has another 1,000 wage-and-hour workers, who are responsible for detecting illegal child labor as well as violations involving adults. That combined force equals only a fourth of the 12,000 inspectors who work for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

84-Year Inspection Cycle

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Jay Mazur, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, said that OSHA has so few inspectors that it would take 84 years to get around to inspecting all the workplaces for which it is responsible; it would take 25 years just to visit every high-hazard workplace for a surprise inspection. With such inadequate resources, he said, "we are fighting, to put it mildly, an uphill battle."

New York State, which has some of the toughest laws restricting child labor, also has the nation's only state task force to look for labor-law violations in garment-industry sweatshops. But there are only 15 inspectors assigned to inspect New York City's estimated 4,000 to 6,000 factories where small contractors hire workers to sew clothing. And the inspectors say that when they enter a building, factory owners on one floor quickly warn others in the building, and children are hastily sent away.

Suspiciously Young Workers

Last Monday morning, while New York schools were still in session, two inspectors checked on J. J. Fashions, a 7th floor factory on West 37th street in Manhattan. Wires dangled from the ceiling of the room, where about 50 women and a few men toiled at sewing machines and ironed stacks of bright orange net jackets.

One of the inspectors, Angelo Valdevitt, thought that a few of the workers looked suspiciously young. He approached a solemn, chubby-cheeked girl who was nearly hidden by a rack of clothes and, speaking gently in Spanish, explained that he was not from immigration and was not there to report her if she was an illegal immigrant. Then he asked her name, where she was from and how old she was. The girl, who identified herself as Patricia Flores from Mexico, said she was too nervous to remember her birthday and that she had no identification with her.

One recent study, by Dr. Letitia Davis, director of the Occupational Health Surveillance Program at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, found that annual injury rates for child workers in Massachusetts are 3 1/2 times the adult rate of 8 injuries per 100 full-time workers.

Almost everyone who has examined the issue of child labor has uncovered sad stories of children who were maimed or killed.

Tales of Pain and Death

Congressman Tom Lantos of Calif., the chairman of the Employment and Housing Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, held hearings last year where he heard testimony from Matthew Garvey, who worked in a car wash in Laurel, Md., when he was 13. His leg was ripped off by a blowing machine.

Mr. Lantos also heard from the parents of Michael Hucorne of East Stroudsburg, Pa., who was killed at age 17 while working in a supermarket, illegally operating a machine that compresses cardboard boxes. And he heard from the parents of Kevin Curley of West Pittston, Pa., who was killed at age 15 while working in a bakery. He was cleaning a dough mixing machine, a prohibited job, when he was pulled inside it.

Valerie Wilk, a health specialist with the Farmworker Justice Fund, Inc., an advocacy group, told of 14-year-old Joel Compos, who fell asleep while working in a farmer's field in Washington State at 2:30 A.M. and was run over and killed by a truck.

Graphic

Photos: Angelo Valdevitt, an inspector with the state's task force on labor law violations in the garment industry, talking with a worker he thought might have been under-age at a company in the Garment District; Paul Kalka, an investigator with the Apparel Industry Task Force of the New York State Department of Labor for almost seven

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years, questioning a youthful-looking worker in a garment center workshop in Manhattan. The recession and lax enforcement have contributed to a rise in child labor. (Photographs by Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times) (pg. 22)

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