

The Hazards of Child Labor

Committee on Environmental Health

Child labor is the paid employment of children under 18 years of age. Today, more than 4 million children and adolescents in the United States are legally employed.¹

Illegal child labor is also widespread and apparently has increased in frequency over the past decade. An estimated 1 to 2 million American children and adolescents are employed under unlawful, often exploitative conditions—working under age, for long hours, at less than minimum wage, on dangerous, prohibited machinery. Widespread employment of children in sweatshops—establishments that repeatedly violate fair labor as well as occupational health and safety standards—has been documented.^{2,3} Tens of thousands of children are employed in illegal farm labor. Detected violations of child labor laws increased fourfold from 1983 to 1989.⁴

LEGAL CONTEXT

Since 1938, child labor in the United States has been regulated under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).⁵ Under this Act, employment in any hazardous nonagricultural occupation is prohibited for all children less than 18 years old. No child under 18 may work in mining, logging, construction, on a motor vehicle, or with power-driven machinery. The Act imposes additional restrictions on the employment of children under age 16 and sets limits on the number of hours a child may work on school days (no more than 3 hours per day for 14- and 15-year-olds). In agriculture, where legal restrictions are much less stringent, work with power-driven equipment and hazardous pesticides is prohibited only until age 16, and all work on family farms is exempt from legal protection.

Work permits are a central aspect of the administration of FLSA. Permits are issued to children by state and local school systems. School authorities may exercise discretion in issuing work permits based on a student's academic performance. Also, in most states, a physician's signature is required on the work permit certifying that the child is fit for work. Unfortunately, school systems seldom exercise discretionary authority in issuing work permits. Children and adolescents receive little or no counselling and education on the hazards of work. In most states there is also a lack of centralized data collection that

records the number of work permits issued or the industries in which children are employed.⁶

CURRENT SITUATION

Until the 1980s, as a result of strong enforcement of FLSA and generally favorable economic conditions, child labor outside of agriculture was not a widespread problem in the United States. In the past decade, however, a combination of economic and social factors have been responsible for a resurgence of child labor¹:

Increased child poverty. More American children live below the poverty level today than 20 years ago.^{7,8}

Immigration. Unstable world conditions, particularly war and poverty, have led to increasing numbers of immigrants, both documented and undocumented, into the United States. In the past decade there has been more immigration to the United States than in any other 10-year period since 1900 through 1910.³ Immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants and their children, are highly vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace.

Relaxation in federal enforcement. Since 1980, the federal government has substantially relaxed administration of the FLSA. Fewer inspectors are in the field. Regulations limiting the maximum number of hours of work and prohibitions against use of dangerous machinery by children have not been adequately enforced. The previous federal administration's repeal of the federal ban on industrial piece-work undertaken at home (a practice termed "industrial homework"), a prohibition specifically intended to protect women and children from exploitation in the piece-work industry, has further undermined enforcement of child labor laws.³ The recently enacted federal School to Work Act of 1993 contains no mandated provisions for occupational health and safety training of adolescents; such provisions can, however, be added on a state-by-state basis.

HAZARDS OF CHILD LABOR

Although work can encourage the development of discipline, teach a child the meaning of money, and provide valuable role models, employment during childhood and adolescence carries significant risks.⁹ These risks are magnified greatly when employment is illegal or exploitative.¹⁰

Health Risks

Injuries are the leading cause of death in children older than 1 year and the leading cause of potential years of life lost in the United States.¹¹ Approxi-

The recommendations in this statement do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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mately 20 000 American children die of injuries each year.¹²

Work is a major, although until recently, an insufficiently appreciated contributor to the ongoing epidemic of childhood injury in the United States.¹³⁻¹⁵ Recent reports have documented that each year among children and adolescents, the work place accounts for more than 30 000 injuries,⁴ 20 000 compensation claims,¹⁶ thousands of cases of permanent disability,¹⁶ and more than 100 deaths.^{17,18} Injuries to working children include amputations, burns, scalds, scalpings, fractures, eye loss, and electrocutions. Although precise data are lacking, the portion of all adolescent injuries that are work-related appears to be substantial. The estimated number of 15- to 19-year-olds killed each year at work (110)¹⁸ is comparable to the number who die in falls (103), in fires (126), on bicycles (129), and by poisoning (191).¹⁹ A population-based survey of emergency department visits and hospitalizations in eastern Massachusetts found that 24% of all adolescent injuries had occurred at work.²⁰ In contrast, 17% of adolescent injuries treated in a Massachusetts emergency department were due to sports trauma.¹⁹

Toxic Hazards and Chronic Illness

Working children can be exposed occupationally to toxins such as benzene (from pumping gasoline), pesticides (from lawn care and agriculture), and asbestos (from construction and maintenance work). Exposures in childhood and adolescence may result in serious diseases in adulthood. Given the wide range of exposure to toxins, some cases of adolescent asthma might be related to occupational exposures to dusts or formaldehyde,²¹ some instances of neurological dysfunction or behavioral impediment may be due to occupational exposure to solvents and pesticides,²² and some leukemias or lymphomas may result from occupational exposure to benzene.²³

Risks of Agricultural Child Labor

Agriculture is the least regulated sector of American industry. Children on farms are permitted under the FLSA to operate heavy equipment at younger ages than in other sectors of American industry. In rural areas, farm labor is a major cause of morbidity and mortality among children.^{24,25} Serious injuries occur on family farms as well as in commercial agriculture. Fatal injury rates among farm children have been calculated to be 13.7/100 000 among 10- to 14-year-olds and 16.8/100 000 among 15- to 19-year-olds. For every death there are an estimated 102 injuries among 10- to 14-year-olds and 154 injuries among 15- to 19-year-olds.²⁶ Agriculture has surpassed mining as the most dangerous occupation, accounting for 61 fatalities per 100 000 workers in 1981.²⁷

Hazards to Education and Development

Another serious consequence of child labor is interference with school attendance and performance. Employed children risk not having enough time for homework and being tired on school days. Teachers of children in areas where preholiday employment is

common or industrial homework is escalating have reported declines in the academic performances of previously good students.¹⁰ Child labor also interferes with the normal, necessary play of children. Child labor can expose children to undesirable role models and to adverse habits such as smoking, drinking, and drug abuse.²⁸

PREVENTION

Recommendations to Government Agencies

1. *Enforcement*—Enforcement of the FLSA and state child labor laws needs to be strengthened.²⁹ The exemptions in the FLSA that allow young children in agriculture to work with pesticides and heavy machinery need to be stricken from the law. More field inspectors are needed. Hazardous jobs, such as farm labor, lawn care, and fast-food delivery services, need to receive special attention by inspectors. The federal initiative to relax certain labor regulations that protect children at work, particularly the regulations limiting industrial homework, needs to be reversed.
2. *Data Collection*—Better data need to be collected by state and federal agencies to define the extent and severity of the problem of child labor and its associated injuries and illnesses. These data permit identification of particularly dangerous industries and occupations.³⁰
3. *Work Permits*—In most states, the work permit system needs to be substantially revamped.⁶ Federal, state, and local authorities need to monitor the issuance of work permits more closely. Centralized data systems need to be established to track the number of permits issued, the ages and grades of the children who receive them, and the industries and specific occupations in which these children work.
4. *Education*—Programs about the hazards of child labor need to be developed with leadership provided by federal health, education, and labor agencies for dissemination to children, parents, teachers, and the business community.²⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PEDIATRICIANS

1. Pediatricians need to recognize that many children and adolescents work. Pediatricians need to become knowledgeable about the industries in their area and about the hazards associated with working in those industries. Industries that engage in illegal employment practices are especially hazardous for children and adolescents.
2. When pre-employment physical examinations are performed on children and adolescents for work permits, physicians should inquire about the type of work intended. If the work is in clear violation of the law, or involves toxic or hazardous exposures, the physician should advise against such employment.
3. Traumatic injuries to a child or adolescent may be work-related.²⁰ Other conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome or organophosphate pesticide poisoning also may be work-related. A brief occupational history needs to be obtained on every

injured child when the cause is not validated.³¹ Moreover, a child may be reluctant to reveal that work was the source of the trauma because of fear of losing a job, reprimand, or even deportation. Pediatricians may wish to conduct surveys of medical records of trauma patients in their practice to assess the possible frequency and patterns of work-related injury.

- Pediatricians are encouraged to work through the American Academy of Pediatrics to address the problems associated with child labor. Pediatricians are extraordinarily well positioned to speak out against the abuses of child labor, to urge strengthening of regulation and legislation, and to insist on the need for mandated occupational health and safety training of children and adolescents who propose to enter the work force. Pediatricians need to serve as advocates for working children.

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