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...SPECIAL report

Children of the Fields

Story and photographs by **Gayle Forman**



Maybe you think that child labor is something that only happens in far-off Third World countries. Well, think again. Because it's happening right in the heartland of America, where thousands of kids toil in the fields picking the fruits and vegetables that we all

eat. In fact, according to the United Farm Workers, as many as 800,000 kids under age 18 work in agriculture in this country.

The work is backbreaking and dangerous -- but that's just the half of it. A lot of these underage farm workers must travel the country to follow the crops, which means missing tons of school, not to mention stopping and starting friendships. For these kids, life isn't about group dates at the multiplex and late-night dinners at Denny's; it's about hard work in the fields and a life on the road.

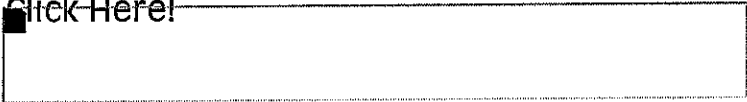
We heard so many intense stories during the time we spent with teen migrant farm workers that we couldn't fit them all into **seventeen**. Check out this exclusive photo gallery, with first-hand commentary, to get a glimpse of what these kids' lives are like and find out what you can do to help.

For more information and reporting

about teen migrants, read "We are Invisible" in the November issue of **seventeen**.

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Sisters Annabel and Jennifer, both 15, pick cucumbers in a field in Western Michigan. The two sisters are from Texas, but they come up to Michigan each summer to pick produce with their families. Once they fill a bucket, they haul it over to the waiting trucks. From there, the cukes go to a packing house, then a processing plant, and eventually end up on your hamburger.

In its quest for the crops, Annabel and Jennifer's family moves several times a year. "I don't like that," says Annabel. "When you start a new school, everyone looks at you and it's hard to make friends."



Because the cucumbers grow along low-lying vines on the ground, Jennifer must stoop all day long to pick them. After a while, this will really hurt your back. "You get really tired and lazy from picking," says Annabel.



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In the midafternoon heat, wearing long-sleeve flannels and hats can be broiling, but such clothes are necessary protection against bugs, thorns, and insecticides. Manuel, 16 [above, in purple shirt, and below], beats the pack in his race to fill his tomato bucket.



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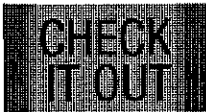
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Manuel dumps his bucketful of tomatoes onto the waiting tractor. Each pail earns him around 60 cents.

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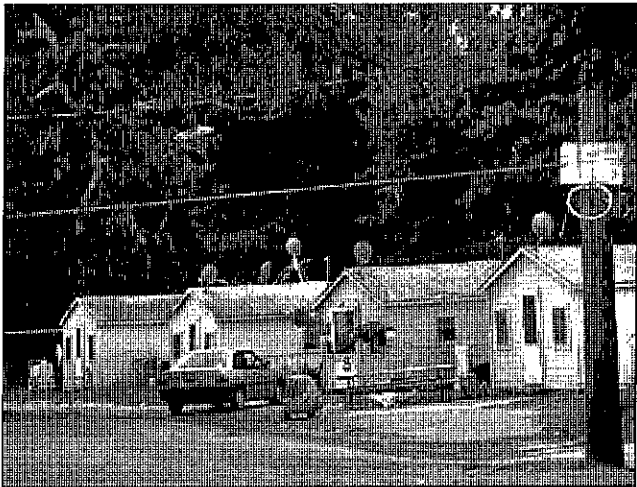
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Many migrants live in camps like this one when they are picking in the fields. These camps, which are usually right near the fields, do feel a lot like campgrounds: You've usually got a bunch of people cramming into a small trailer or cottage, using outhouses and communal showers for the bathroom, and sitting around the campfire at night. A lot of kids say they like hanging out after work with the other teen pickers -- it's the only relaxing part of their day.

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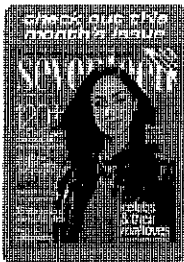
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Juan, 17, sits in the living room/ bedroom of his family's trailer at a migrant camp. His trailer is relatively cushy, with air conditioning, a kitchen, and two TVs. Some migrant families just live in tents alongside the fields and cook over campfires.

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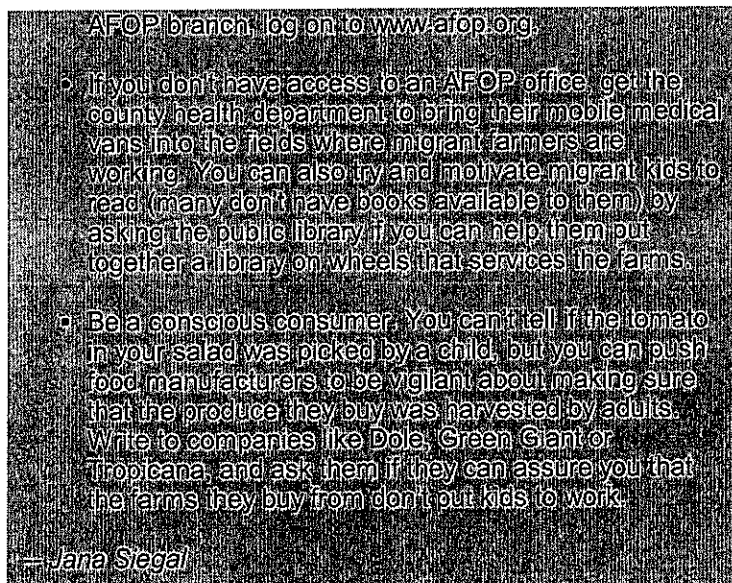


A group of teenage boys heads out to the tomato fields to begin picking. Average workdays start around 6 AM and can last until the sun disappears – around 7 PM. With only a half-hour-long to hour-long lunch break, the days can be grueling. •

What can you do to help?

Inspired to make a difference in the lives of migrant kids? Believe it or not, there are plenty of things you can do to help:

- **Push to change the law.** The first step toward phasing out child labor is making it illegal. Write to your congressional representative and encourage her or him to pass bills like the Young American Workers' Bill of Rights. E-mail your rep (find the address at www.house.gov) or write a letter to: The Honorable [fill in her or his full name here], United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515. Check out www.natconsumersleague.org for more information about federal legislation on child labor.
- **Make a hands-on contribution.** Confused about where to begin? Start by finding out if there are migrant workers in your area. You might be surprised to find out that there are. If there is, you can reach out to the community by volunteering at one of the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs' (AFOP) Head Start programs or health centers. To find the nearest



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