

Children Harvest Blueberries in North Carolina

Washington Newsline

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By Heather Anderson, Children in the Fields Project Coordinator

It's 107 degrees. The day before it reached 109; someone fainted. Eleven year-old Ruben works beside his three older siblings. They have been picking blueberries since 6:00 am. The sun is unrelenting and the humidity is high. Most of the farmworkers in this field started early this morning to avoid the worst heat later in the afternoon. Ruben wears a bandana around his neck to keep from burning.

The ground is hot and dry; it has not rained in weeks. The soil is turning into a fine powder, covering everyone's shoes and pants in dust as they move from one blueberry bush to the next. The blueberries are suffering from the extreme heat as well; lacking water, many berries are shriveling on the plant. This makes the work more discouraging as it takes longer to find good blueberries to fill up the bucket.

Ruben and his siblings hope to spend the money they earn on school supplies and a few new clothes for the upcoming school year; that is as long as their father has found enough work. If their father cannot find enough work during the summer, then the children's wages will be used to help pay the bills.

This is a common scenario for many farmworker children during the summer months in North Carolina, as well as many areas across the country. Due to an exemption in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, children

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Ruben, age 11, works with his older brother and sisters picking blueberries in North Carolina. (Photo by Heather Anderson)

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are allowed to work in agriculture at younger ages and for lon-

ger hours than in other industries. The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs' (AFOP) Children in the Fields Campaign strives to improve the quality of life of migrant and seasonal farmworker children by advocating for enhanced educational opportunities and the elimination of discriminatory federal child labor laws in agriculture.

One of the goals of the Children in the Fields Campaign is to gather data and stories about child farmworkers around

the United States. In previous years staff have traveled to Texas, Colorado, Washington, North Dakota, and Minnesota to document the experiences of child farmworkers. This June, I traveled to North Carolina, with Adriana Chaisson and Aubrey Avery from Telamon Corporation as my guides, for two weeks to see firsthand the blueberry harvest and talk with farmworker families about children working in the fields.

During my investigation in North Carolina, I found children as young as 6 years old working in the fields. At almost every

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Youth wait in line to empty their buckets of blueberries and receive their pay, \$2.50 per bucket. (Photo by Heather Anderson)

AFOP DVD On Child Farmworkers Now Available

AFOP is currently selling the DVD for \$5. Get your copy while supplies last!

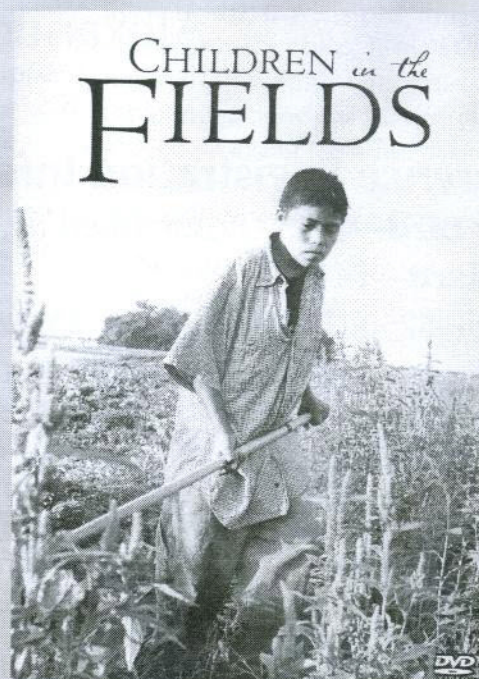
"Children in the Fields is a short documentary about the hidden problem of migrant children working in U.S. agriculture today. Farmworker children, parents and experts share their experiences and the reasons behind this injustice, with recommendations on what you can do to make a difference. Filmed in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Texas, *Children in the Fields* will open your eyes to the plight of a population of American children who, due to unfair child labor laws and their families' poverty, work to help make ends meet."—Back of DVD cover

To purchase a copy of the DVD, please contact:

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farm that we visited, it was common to see children both working and playing in the fields alongside their parents or a relative. Only one farm that we visited had the child labor regulations posted in a conspicuous place. Just before we arrived unannounced at that farm, the owner had requested that all children under the age of 12 leave the farm in recognition of the minimum legal age limit. This was an atypical occurrence.

On the other 11 farms I visited over the course of two weeks, children were a common part of the scenery, with fingers stained blue-black from picking berries. Many parents feel compelled to bring their children with them to work due to the low wages. On average workers are paid \$2.50 per bucket of blueberries. The fastest adult workers may fill 30



Six year-old girl works picking blueberries with her family. (Photo by Heather Anderson)

buckets in a ten-hour day. However, many of the children harvest fewer than 10 buckets a day.

AFOP estimates there to be over 400,000 children working in agricultural jobs nationwide. Currently, the federal child labor law permits children as young as 12 to start working with their parent's permission. A 12 year old is also allowed to work unlimited hours as long as it is outside of school hours. In all other industries the protections are much stronger. In other industries, the standard minimum age is 16, and strong protections are in place limiting hours and monitoring safety of certain jobs for 14 and 15 year olds.

Many child farmworkers start working before they reach age 12. Because of the low wages of farmwork, along with the seasonal and migratory nature of the job, many parents find it difficult to make ends meet, bringing their older children to the fields to help supplement the meager household income. Young children are often brought to the fields because their parents cannot afford daycare. In North Carolina, daycare may cost as much as \$100/week per child—one-quarter to one-half of a parent's wages for the week. Telamon Corporation does offer free daycare services through their Migrant HeadStart program; however, space is limited.

Whether working or playing, children face



An estimated 400,000 children work in agriculture in the United States, exposed to dangerous conditions and long hours. (Photo by Heather Anderson)

many hazards by being in the fields. The drastic consequences of beginning work at an extremely young age are exemplified in the life of a young mother I met in North Carolina. Elisia, age 26, has four children, ages 11, 10, 6 years old, and 19 months. As a child, Elisia's family followed the harvests, traveling around the states. She started working with her parents when she was eight years old picking sweet potatoes.

Because Elisia's parents were constantly traveling and working, they were unable to enroll her in school for three consecutive years. She returned to school in the 5th grade, but by the 7th grade Elisia was so far behind, she felt compelled to drop out. Now she is frustrated that she is not qualified to do any work other than farmwork, which is all she's known.

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Elisia wants her children to receive a good, consistent education so they will not have to follow in her footsteps. She has now settled in North Carolina and no longer migrates. Telamon Corporation is working with Elisia to earn her GED to help her obtain an office job that would be more stable and provide better pay. Her three older children still go to work with her in the blueberry fields, but only on the weekends when school is in session and during the day during summer break.

Other families have similar experiences. Oscar, age 11, said he would like to drop out of school so he can earn more money, but his parents won't let him leave school. Oscar currently harvests blueberries, cucumbers and sweet potatoes with his parents. Their family



A 2 year-old girl waits and plays by the car while her mom works, because daycare is often unaffordable on farmworker wages. (Photo by Heather Anderson)



Children often work in the fields to help supplement their parents' income. (Photo by Heather Anderson)

has also settled in the area, never traveling more than 1 ½ hours to work, so the children will be able to receive an education.

One boy I met was 13 years old and suffering from kidney problems. He had been working in the fields with his mother and 11 year-old brother all week in the heat. He was noticeably shorter and smaller than his younger brother. His mother was seeking help for him to have surgery, but when we tried to follow-up with them three days later, the family was gone. The blueberry harvest had slowed and the family had migrated north for more work.

In addition to the migratory lifestyle affecting children's education, the safety and health of the children working and playing in the fields are a major concern. Children are often exposed to pesticides, large machinery, and dangerous tools. Children often work in sandals or bare feet, increasing their risk for injuries and pesticide exposure. Several of the children inter-

viewed gave accounts of encountering poisonous snakes while they were working. These are hazards that children in other industries don't typically face.

Struggles like those that Elisia, Oscar, Ruben, and their families face are far from abnormal. The field investigations that AFOP has conducted have shown that chil-

dren are still working in agriculture, even while they are protected from working in other industries. This work is having a negative impact on their health, education, and future. The Children in the Fields Campaign advocates for the equalization of the law that would protect farmworker children, keeping them on the path toward a brighter future. ☪



This 9 year-old boy carries buckets to and from the rows where his family works. (Photo by Heather Anderson)