

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

The Surge in Child Labor

*A growing number of companies in the U.S. are illegally hiring children
— and putting them to work in dangerous jobs.*

Source: TheWeek.com, October 20, 2023

How many children work illegally?

The exact number is not known, but officials have recorded a sharp rise in child labor law violations. Over the past fiscal year, Labor Department inspectors found 5,792 children working illegally — up 50% over the prior year and 470% since 2015 — and levied more than \$8 million in fines against employers. Many of these children are migrants fleeing poverty and violence in Central America, and many are engaged in dangerous work. This summer, at least three 16-year-olds were killed in industrial accidents: One became entangled in a conveyor belt at a Mississippi poultry plant; another was caught in machinery at a Wisconsin sawmill; another crushed between a semi-truck and a trailer at a Missouri landfill. In February, a Wisconsin-based company was fined \$1.5 million for employing more than 100 kids ages 13 to 17 at meat packing plants across the U.S., where they cleaned bone saws, head splitters and other gear with caustic chemicals. Regulators have also found 10-year-olds working late shifts at a McDonald's and an 11-year-old operating a forklift in a Kentucky warehouse. Jose Vasquez, a 13-year-old migrant, told The New York Times that he works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, at a Michigan egg farm. "I'd like to go to school," he explained, "but then how would I pay rent?"

Why are more kids working?

Two primary forces are at play: a shortage of adult workers and a spike in migrant child arrivals. More than 250,000 unaccompanied minors have entered the U.S. over the past two years. Since 2008, federal law has let migrant children live with sponsors while their cases wind through the immigration system, a policy designed to stop desperate kids being left alone in Mexican border towns. But critics say that because officials are under pressure to release children from federal custody, many are handed over to sponsors who exploit their young charges by making them work long hours. Many of these children also owe large sums to smugglers; still more are under pressure to send money back home. "It's not that we want to be working these jobs," said Kevin Tomas, who at 13 worked overnight shifts for an auto-parts manufacturer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "It's that we have to help our families."

What does the law say?

The Fair Labor Standards Act, signed in 1938 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, sets the minimum age for most employment at 14. It also bars children under 16 from working more than three hours or after 7 p.m. on school days, and prohibits anyone under 18 from working dangerous jobs, such as mining and manufacturing. But with lax enforcement by overstretched regulators and fines that max out at around \$15,000 per child, some firms have decided there's little risk to hiring minors. Children have even been found working for American companies linked to some top consumer brands.

What jobs were those children doing?

A Reuters investigation found children as young as 12 working for Alabama firms supplying auto parts to Hyundai and Kia. The New York Times reported on children making clothing for J. Crew, deboning chicken sold at Whole Foods and packing Cheerios. "Sometimes I get tired and feel sick," said

Carolina Yoc, a 15-year-old from Guatemala who works eight-hour night shifts at a Michigan cereal plant. "But I'm getting used to it." The child workers are supplied by third-party employers, absolving the big-name companies from direct responsibility. Meanwhile, staffing agencies are being pushed to fill grueling jobs that few adult Americans want; some agencies turn a blind eye when youngsters present fake identification. "Hyundai wouldn't want to ever directly hire children," said David Weil, a former top federal labor official. "But when you set up a system like that, and then you go into a labor supply shortage, you get this kind of outcome."

Are officials cracking down on employers?

After the Times published its report in February, the Labor and Health and Human Services Departments launched a joint task force to investigate and prosecute violations. The Biden administration has vowed to better vet the sponsors migrant children are released to and monitor children after they leave federal custody. And Democrats in Congress have introduced bills that would stiffen penalties for employers who violate labor laws. But amid federal clampdown efforts, some states are trying to make it easier for companies to hire under-18s.

How many states are softening regulations?

Over the past two years, at least 16 states — most of them GOP led — have proposed or enacted laws that roll back child-labor protections, according to the pro-union Economic Policy Institute. A law passed in Iowa in May allows children as young as 14 to do certain tasks in industrial laundries and meat coolers, and 16- and 17-year-olds to work in roofing, excavation and demolition. Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders in March signed a law ending requirements for 14- and 15-year-olds to get state permits to work and have their ages verified. Proponents of such laws say we should enable teens who want to work at a time when employers desperately need them. The Iowa law will "allow young adults to develop their skills in the workforce," said Gov. Kim Reynolds. But critics say such measures open the door to further exploitation. They "make it easier to illegally hire children," said Seema Nanda, the Labor Department's chief legal officer. "No child should be working in dangerous workplaces in this country, full stop."

A conservative push to get kids working

The national campaign to loosen child-labor regulations is being driven by the Foundation for Government Accountability, a Florida-based think tank that helped shape the new laws in Iowa and Arkansas. Calling teens "a critical source of labor," the conservative group says states must "eliminate unnecessary hurdles" and "leave the decision-making to parents." Working prepares "teens for lives of meaning and contribution," argues FGA vice president Nick Stehle. Such arguments have long been popular with some conservatives. In 1982, then-President Ronald Reagan sought to let 14- and 15-year-olds work longer hours. Running for the GOP presidential nomination in 2011, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called child labor laws "truly stupid" and said poor kids should work as school janitors. And in 2019, just weeks after being tapped by then-President Trump, conservative pundit Stephen Moore withdrew from consideration for the Federal Reserve board in part because of anger over his past support for child labor. "I'm a radical on this," Moore said in 2016. "I want people starting work at 11, 12."

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the surge in child labor? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.