

Job injuries among youth prompt calls for better safety standards

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Dozens of American youth under the age of 20 die on the job each year while thousands more are injured, often due to poorly regulated work environments, according to a new report released by the Colorado School of Public Health.

"We don't tend to think of child labor as a major issue in the U.S. but we should," said the study's lead author Carol Runyan, Ph.D., MPH, and professor of [epidemiology](#) at the Colorado School of [Public Health](#).

"Laws governing the employment of youth ages 14 to 17 in this country are often very lenient and in the case of family farms virtually non-existent."

Runyan, who led a group of American and Canadian scholars and public health professionals on the project, is now calling for stricter oversight of [working conditions](#) for the young including those employed in [agriculture](#).

"Work can help [young people](#) develop skills, explore career options, earn money and gain self-esteem," she said. "But without adequate safeguards in place, work can also be dangerous for youth."

The report, published last week in *Public Health Reports*, found that 88 youths under age 20 died from work-related injuries in 2010 while 20,000 missed work in [private industry](#) due to occupational-related illness or injury.

Young people comprise a significant part of the U.S. and Canadian labor force. More than 17.6 million workers under age 25 are employed in the U.S. In Canada, nearly three million workers between ages 15 and 24 were employed in 2010.

Runyan said that while work holds many positives for young people, it can also expose them to unsafe tasks and environments with limited [supervision](#).

"For example, a recent national U.S. study reported that 26 percent of workers younger than 18...worked at least part of the day without an adult supervisor and as many as one-third of them reported not having any health and safety training," Runyan said.

Working youths are at risk in many ways. They can be burned in fast food restaurants, cut by sharp tools in grocery stores, robbed at retail businesses, fall from roofs at construction sites or be involved in traffic collisions. But one of the most dangerous occupations, Runyan said, is farm work.

"From a fatality standpoint, farm work is the most dangerous occupation for kids," she said. "In farm work, youths are working around heavy equipment, digging and cutting with sharp implements. There are deaths almost every year from young people suffocating in grain bins."

Youths working on family farms have practically no legal protections and often drive while underage and operate tractors and other heavy equipment.

Runyan began her research while director of the University of North Carolina Injury Prevention Research Center. She now directs the University of Colorado's Pediatric Injury Prevention, Education and Research Program.

Runyan and colleagues John Lewko, Ph.D., of Laurentian University in Ontario and Kimberly Rauscher, ScD, of West Virginia University, are using the report to advocate for stronger federal monitoring of youth worker safety, including assuring that children working on farms are better protected. They are also encouraging more research into preventing workplace injuries among young people.

Runyan also stressed the need for parental involvement.

"We need to make sure that the jobs our kids take are safe," she said. "But ultimately it's not the responsibility of 15-year-olds to ensure their safety –it's the responsibility of employers."

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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