

Study finds adolescents working in dangerous environments despite child labor laws

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A recently published study by a researcher in the West Virginia University School of Public Health found that more than half of young worker deaths in North Carolina resulted from employers violating the child labor laws.

"This is in line with prior work we have done on child labor violations on a national level," said Kimberly Rauscher, M.A., Sc.D., lead author of the study and assistant professor in the WVU Department of Occupational and [Environmental Health Sciences](#) and faculty affiliate with the WVU Injury Control Research Center. "From our prior results, we estimate that annually as many as 888,000 youth may be employed in violation of the Hazardous Occupations Orders, the laws that limit the types of jobs and tasks that youth under age 18 can perform."

In the North Carolina study, medical examiner records were used to identify work-related deaths among children and [adolescents](#) ages 11-17 between 1990 and 2008 and associated child labor violations. Investigations from state and federal Departments of Labor were used to determine inspection activity, identify [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#) violations and confirm child labor violations.

The study also found that few of the fatalities were investigated by the agencies that enforce the child labor laws and OSHA standards.

"This is very problematic because if these agencies do not investigate the employers involved cannot be held accountable," Dr. Rauscher said. "Legally, it is the employers' responsibility to ensure that their young employees are working within the bounds of the child labor laws. It is not the child's responsibility."

In reference to another prior study where Rauscher and colleagues looked at parent and teen knowledge of the child labor laws, Rauscher stated, "We were shocked to find that while most knew that the child labor laws existed, they knew next to nothing about what the laws were."

In addition to the parents of adolescents, the public at large is unaware of the magnitude of this issue. "This issue simply does not get the attention it deserves. Rarely does it make it into the media, and therefore there is a real lack of public awareness of the problem. Researchers who focus on youth employment know it's a problem, but the average person, who does not read research journals, is really completely unaware," Rauscher said.

Next, Rauscher would like to look at the issue of fatalities involving child labor violations on a national level to see whether such violations and lax enforcement exist outside of North Carolina.

"Since there is nothing so unique about youth employment in North Carolina, and the child labor laws are federal laws overseen by a federal enforcement system, there is no reason to expect that the violations and lapses in enforcement we saw in North Carolina would not also be seen elsewhere," she said. "Perhaps by examining this question nationally we could draw more attention to the issue. But I think that even this small study should shock people, especially parents of working teens who have every expectation that when they send their children off to earn their first few dollars that they come home safe and sound."

The study, "Adolescent Occupational Fatalities in North Carolina (1990-2008): An Investigation of Child Labor and OSHA Violations and Enforcement," appears in *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*. It can be viewed [online](#)

Provided by West Virginia University

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