

Q&A: Researcher exposes child labor trafficking as a hidden crime after investigating 132 victims

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Children trafficked for their labor often work in public view in restaurants, laundromats, agricultural fields and water parks, but little

has been known about their plight.

A [new study](#) co-authored by Northeastern University professor Amy Farrell provides insights about these children, those who traffic them and what makes children vulnerable to dangerous work—and conditions that too often rob them of a chance for an education, and leave them exhausted, hungry and sometimes injured.

Farrell, the director of Northeastern's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, answered questions from Northeastern Global News about what researchers discovered in their investigation of 132 victims, as well as their recommendations for a better future for trafficked children.

The research says the average age of victims you studied was 14. Where do trafficked children work?

It's shocking how many different industries where we found children trafficked for their labor. They are all around us. They are on our roofs, they are in our gardens doing landscaping.

They work cleaning dentists' offices, for storage facilities and in restaurants, agriculture and poultry farms. They work in waterparks, hotels and in private homes providing child care and domestic labor.

There was another subset of labor in which children were trafficked called forced criminality. This is a situation where kids work in illicit economies—panhandling, organized theft and drug cultivation, packing and distribution.

When people think about child trafficking of children, they commonly think about [sex trafficking](#). That's not because 90% of the human

trafficking that is identified by the police is for sex trafficking, but because that's where most of the public awareness is.

Child labor trafficking remains very hidden.

We often think of child labor trafficking as a migrant issue. But 42% of the child victims in your study were American. What makes both U.S. and foreign-born children susceptible to trafficking?

Poverty and [housing instability](#) are really big factors.

We find minors in situations where they're working because they need to bring money into the family or because they've left their family and are unhoused and living with a group of other minors who are unhoused.

Housing is super expensive and hard to navigate for [young people](#) who often cannot independently secure housing. Young people need to survive.

In our data, we've also seen cases of familial trafficking where a parent or guardian traffics kids into family businesses or into doing childcare and domestic labor in the home.

We've had situations where sponsors of unaccompanied minors were coercing children into work—sometimes overtly. Other times economic pressure in the sponsor's household forced young people into jobs, in addition to trying to go to school.

There are some well-documented [child labor](#) trafficking cases where minors got sponsored out to nefarious actors who pretend they are going to take care of these kids and end up exploiting them.

Sponsors are needed to handle the influx of unaccompanied minors into the U.S., but much more accountability and oversight of sponsor programs are needed.

Family disruption is another huge piece of this. Lots and lots of young people, particularly those who are U.S. citizens, come from families with histories with the child welfare system.

Those kids, both girls and boys, are particularly vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking. In some ways, it's about who gets to them first.

What motivates child labor traffickers?

It's just about extracting money from them. They're throwaway kids—no one cares about them. They are disposable.

They are going to labor until they run away, get hurt or maybe get arrested. And then there will be more kids right behind them to take their place.

There's not a lot of care to even be sure that they can continue to be exploited because they can so easily be replaced by someone else. So if they get hurt, they don't get medical care.

It's really heartbreaking.

If sounds as if it's very difficult to leave child labor trafficking situations

They leave with nothing on their back—no money but sometimes a lot of debt to smugglers or others who have loaned them money or provided housing. The reliance on traffickers to meet basic needs is one of the

mechanisms that traffickers use to keep kids laboring.

One of the victims we studied came to the U.S. from Guatemala with a group of teenagers as young as 14 or 15, many of whom were exploited in an egg farm.

Although the teen we studied avoided the exploitative farming situation, he ended up being exploited by someone else who had portrayed themselves as a good Samaritan willing to take him in. He was eventually trafficked to a woodworking factory.

It's a really difficult situation, because even when young people get away from a trafficking situation, they are still vulnerable to being abused or re-trafficked by others.

When do labor abuse issues become child labor trafficking violations?

Labor abuses become trafficking crimes when a person is coerced, defrauded or forced into laboring.

Unlike sex trafficking, where proving force, fraud and coercion are not required for children under the age of 18, these elements are required to prove child labor trafficking.

A major finding of this study is that coercion was omnipresent in situations where adults are providing things for kids to meet their daily needs.

For example, adults trafficking child laborers often provided young people with a place to stay, clothes or food. In other cases, adults provide love or acceptance to young people who are seeking their approval and

care.

Fraud was another issue, even for children. People pay money to come to the United States and stay in unsafe jobs to pay off their debts or the debts of their family.

Is child labor trafficking getting worse?

We don't know because we lack comprehensive data. We really have no way of knowing what child trafficking was like 10 years ago in comparison to what it's like today.

This study is one of the first to lay out the kinds of conditions under which a wide cross section of children experience victimization.

Here in Boston we are undergoing a migration crisis where we have lots of families coming into Massachusetts who are not able to work or find stable housing.

That is a situation that is ripe for exploitation of both adults and minors.

What can be done to stop child labor trafficking?

We're not saying kids shouldn't work. We're not saying foreign national kids shouldn't work. Work is often a very helpful and developmentally appropriate activity for young people. What we're saying is kids need to work in situations where they won't be harmed.

One of our recommendations is that if kids experience a violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act or any of the existing wage, hour and work protections, coercion should be assumed if there's an adult involved. More attention is needed to young people laboring in situations where

there is clear labor abuse.

Police and child welfare agencies have a role to prevent trafficking, but the people who may be in the best position to identify child labor violations are inspectors and regulators who ensure workplaces across a variety of industries are safe.

.It is critically important that legal advocates and worker rights organizations are provided with resources to help serve young people who are in precarious situations of workplace abuse.

We also recommend that vocational programs be expanded to provide teenagers with valuable skills in safe, lawful employment and alternative housing be funded for minors to reduce their vulnerability to dangerous forms of illegal employment.

Do you think efforts by states seeking to roll back child labor protections are ill-informed?

It's important for young people to have developmentally appropriate opportunities to work.

But we don't want young people working 12 hours overnight at a factory making potato chips or dog food and falling asleep in school—then dropping out of school and continuing to work at the dog food factory, where what they do is dangerous.

When communities face economic need and housing insecurity that drive young people into dangerous jobs, it is time to step back and ensure we have shored up the safety nets that help children and families meet basic needs without children laboring in exploitative situations.

More information: Understanding the Trafficking of Children for the Purposes of Labor in the United States.

www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/308903.pdf

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