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## The Kids on the Night Shift

By Hannah Dreier

Late on a Thursday in February 2022, Marcos Cux, who had just turned 14, bundled up in green rubberized overalls and a matching jacket that was too big for his slight shoulders. He packed a pair of steel-toed rubber boots and two layers of gloves, because even a small tear could lead to a chemical burn. As others in the house slept, a cousin drove him to his cleaning shift at the chicken slaughterhouse, a half-mile-long industrial complex on a stretch of bare highway in rural Virginia, set behind hedges and a tall metal fence.

The plant, which is run by Perdue Farms, processes 1.5 million chickens a week. Before dawn each morning, trucks haul in birds stuffed so tightly in layers of steel cages that they cannot move. Seagulls wheel around above, drawn by scraps in dumpsters. Workers inside hang the birds upside down in a darkened kill room. Bursts of electricity stun them, and the conveyor line runs their necks past sharp blades. They pass through the defeathering room, where the line plunges into foamy hot water, and then on to other machines that remove feet, heads and guts. Finally, rows of workers slice what remains into packageable parts.

When Marcos and the rest of the cleaning crew got there after midnight, the plant had a putrid smell workers sometimes felt they could taste. They sloshed through water, grease and blood, which drained into a channel that snakes around the plant under grates. Marcos gathered up chicken pieces left by the day shifts, working quickly because the whole facility had to be sanitized by 5 a.m. He took the covers off the channel and began using a pressurized hose to spray the machines down with 130-degree water.

He came from a village in Guatemala to this small town on the Eastern Shore of Virginia several months earlier. Before he left, his family was struggling to pay for electricity and skipping meals in the aftermath of the pandemic. They couldn't afford formula for his infant sister. His parents were growing desperate and knew that while adults who arrive at the U.S. border are generally turned back, minors traveling by themselves are allowed in.

The policy dates back to a 2008 law intended to protect children who might otherwise come to harm on their own in Mexican border towns. In the 15 years since, the carveout has become widely known in Central America, where it shapes the calculations of destitute families. Marcos's parents decided he would go north and find a way to earn money. They borrowed against their land to pay a coyote — technically a human smuggler, but in this case, more like a travel agent — to help him reach the United States

without being kidnapped or hurt. He made his way to an adult cousin in Parksley, a town of 800 people bookended by the Perdue plant and another sprawling chicken operation run by Tyson Foods.

His cousin, Antonia de Calmo, was living in an already-cramped home with her husband and four children in a trailer park called Dreamland, but she agreed to take in Marcos after his mother called in tears and said that they had no other options. Federal law bans minors from cleaning slaughterhouses because of the risk of injury. But with the help of a middle-school classmate who already worked at the plant, Marcos bought fake documents that said he was a man with a different name in his 20s. When he was hired, children made up as much as a third of the overnight cleaning crew at the Perdue plant, workers told me. The work was harder than Marcos expected, but it also paid better than he could have imagined — around \$100 for each six-hour shift, more than he could make in a month back home.



Most residents of the Dreamland trailer park work in nearby poultry plants.



Many get jobs on the overnight cleaning crews, including children.

After he finished hosing down the machines, he started scrubbing blood and fat off the steel parts with chemicals that, if they hit skin, created welts that could take months to heal. Shortly after 2:30 a.m., he thought he saw a bit of torn rubber glove within the conveyor belt of the deboning area and reached in to grab it. Suddenly, the machine came to life. Across the factory, another worker had failed to see Marcos crouched with his left arm deep inside the assembly line and turned it on.

The belt caught the sleeve of Marcos's baggy jacket and pulled him across the floor. Hard plastic teeth ripped through his muscles, tearing open his forearm down to the bone. By the time someone heard his screams and shut off the power, his arm was limp, a deep triangular gash running down the length of it. A rope of white tendons hung from his elbow to his wrist, horrifying the workers who gathered around him. He understood from their faces that something was badly wrong but didn't feel any pain as the wound began gushing blood and he started to lose consciousness.

A supervisor called 911 to report the injury. "We don't know what to do," she said, her voice rising. "It's bleeding out." The dispatcher ran through a list of questions about his condition. "And how old is that person?" the dispatcher asked.

The supervisor did not respond. "Even if you had to guess?" he asked.

"Um," the supervisor said, her voice shaking.

Another moment passed, and the line went dead.

Still no response.

“Like, 20s? 30s?” he asked.

“Um,” the supervisor said, her voice shaking.

Another moment passed, and the line went dead.

When the paramedics arrived, a dispatcher reported “massive amounts of bleeding,” and Marcos was flown to a trauma unit in Baltimore for emergency surgery. He lay in the hospital for two weeks as medical staff wondered why the paperwork for this boy with long eyelashes and a round baby face said he was an adult man named Francisco.

**The morning after** Marcos’s injury, workers in Dreamland began talking about a child whose arm had been nearly torn off at the plant. Word soon spread through town. There were reasons that supervisors, teachers, federal inspectors and even police officers had said nothing for years about children working at the slaughterhouses. Everyone understood that the children were under extraordinary pressure to earn money to pay off their travel debts and help their families back home. They were living on a remote stretch of peninsula with few job options — if the plants shut down because of a labor scandal, the local economy could collapse. Now, with an eighth grader in the hospital, many wondered if they had been wrong to keep quiet.

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The Perdue Farms plant in Accomack County, Va., and the nearby Tyson plant, are the area's largest employers.

For most of the last century, Parksley was an almost entirely white agricultural community, with a migrant labor force that cycled in and out with the rhythms of the tomato and corn crops. That started to shift when the two plants opened in the 1970s, just as American consumers were developing an appetite for boneless, skinless, nugget-size chicken. More processing steps required more workers, and the companies, which now produce one in three pounds of poultry consumed in the United States, became the area's biggest employers.

It was dangerous, grueling work, and half the plant employees quit each year. The managers found a solution to chronic turnover by looking to migrant seasonal workers, who now settled in Parksley and other nearby towns in Accomack County and worked year-round at the plants.

In recent years, poverty worsened in Central America, and the work force changed once again. More than 300,000 migrant children have entered the United States on their own since 2021, by far the largest such influx in memory. Most have ended up [working full time](#), fueling a resurgence in child labor not seen in a century, with children living far from their parents and working illegally in all 50 states. At slaughterhouses, it is no longer only Spanish-speaking adults seeking jobs but also children, most of them from Guatemala, which is one of the most impoverished countries in the region.

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# ‘If companies like this looked too closely at who was working, no company would be able to keep going.’

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The pandemic was especially crushing to the agricultural highlands where Marcos’s family raised animals on a small plot of land. The odd jobs that kept them afloat disappeared during the shutdowns, food prices soared and then his father fell ill. When his parents told him he would be going to the United States to work, he was initially excited — he pictured a land of skyscrapers and shopping malls.

After crossing the border, Marcos spent a few weeks in a shelter run by the Department of Health and Human Services. The agency is responsible for releasing migrant children to adults who will protect them from exploitation while their cases move through the immigration system, a process that takes years. So many children were crossing in the early days of the Biden administration that the shelters filled up, and children were sometimes held at jail-like facilities run by Customs and Border Protection.

H.H.S. [urged shelter workers](#) to send children to their sponsors more quickly.

Children usually arrive in the United States with some idea of who might take them in: either a parent or sibling or, about half the time, a more distant relative or family friend. While parents and siblings often support the children who come to live with them, other adults are more likely to take children in only on the condition that they work and pay rent. Of the dozens of children who have been released to sponsors in and around Parksley during the past three years, more than 90 percent have gone to adults who are not their parents.

Marcos gave the shelter staff Antonia’s phone number, and the agency contacted her and sent a list of requirements for sponsors. The first was to provide Marcos with food and shelter. Another was to send him to school. Nearly last on the list was a pledge that he wouldn’t work. Antonia agreed to them all, but she had no intention of keeping Marcos from working. She knew that was why he had come. She, her husband, her oldest daughter and most people she knew worked for the chicken plants, and it seemed likely that he would find a job there, too.

Marcos and Antonia said H.H.S. officials never came to check up on him after he arrived in Virginia. But they decided to enroll him in school anyway, just in case. “I had to go to school, but I only came to help my family,” he told me in one of many conversations in Spanish during the past year.

Marcos began attending eighth grade in the Accomack school district, where more than 1,000 of the county’s roughly 4,700 students were learning to speak English. Marcos borrowed \$800 from Antonia to buy fake papers from a man in a nearby trailer, and at

13 he was hired onto the overnight sanitation shift. Each morning, Antonia picked him up from the plant at 6:30, and 20 minutes later, he was waiting in front of Dreamland for the school bus.



Marcos, who until recently wore a mask in school, in Sandra Ellenberger's class at Arcadia High School. The class is full of migrant children who teachers think might make it to graduation.



In the English-learners program, a 10th grader who worked nights at a poultry plant did schoolwork that included an English vocabulary worksheet.

While teenagers work legally all over America, Marcos's job was strictly off limits. Federal law prohibits 14- and 15-year-olds from working at night or for more than three hours on school days. Older teenagers are allowed to put in longer hours, but all minors are barred from the most dangerous occupations, including digging trenches, repairing roofs and cleaning slaughterhouses.

But as more children come to the United States to help their families, more are ending up in these plants. Throughout the company towns that stud the "broiler belt," which stretches from Delaware to East Texas, many have suffered brutal consequences. A Guatemalan eighth grader was killed on the cleaning shift at a Mar-Jac plant in Mississippi in July; a federal investigation had found migrant children working illegally at the company a few years earlier. A 14-year-old was hospitalized in Alabama after being overworked at a chicken operation there. A 17-year-old in Ohio had his leg torn off at the knee while cleaning a Case Farms plant. Another child lost a hand in a meat grinder at a Michigan operation.

In Accomack, cleaning staffs once worked directly for the slaughterhouses. But years ago, the plants started delegating this work to outside sanitation companies, which pay less and allow brands to avoid accountability for problems. The largest such U.S. contractor, Packers Sanitation Services Inc., says on its website that it can "take the



liability and risk off your facility's record." The Biden administration has pledged to start fining brands for violating child-labor laws, but so far it has imposed penalties only on subcontractors.

A 2022 study led by a researcher at Washington State University found that many adult workers would be willing to take meatpacking jobs if they paid slightly better, around \$2.85 more an hour. But in Parksley, the only people eager to join the poorly paid night shift were immigrant women who wanted to be available to their kids when they got home from school. When children like Marcos began to arrive, far from their parents and under pressure to make money, there seemed to be a perfect match between the needs of the plants and the needs of the newcomers.

"They have to work," says Miguel Cobo, assistant manager of the sanitation shift at Perdue. And the plants need people to clean. "If companies like this looked too closely at who was working, no company would be able to keep going." Cobo and the other supervisors had agreed to let the children leave early so they could get to homeroom. "It's a circle — they help us, and we help them."

**Marcos woke up** alone in a hospital room in a tangle of intravenous tubing and beeping machines. He knew that children were not supposed to work at the plant, and now he understood why. But he worried about what his parents would do if he didn't recover — they still owed more than \$6,000 for his journey north. He believed he had to get better and persuade the bosses to hire him back.

Doctors were able to save Marcos's arm, and with two more surgeries and six months of physical therapy, he started to be able to move it again. But skin grafts from his thigh gave his forearm an uneven, quilted appearance, and his fingers were still frozen in a claw. Fayette Industrial, the Tennessee-based cleaning company that had been hired by Perdue, covered his medical bills.

One afternoon last September, a few weeks after his third surgery, he stood on his porch with Antonia and looked out over Dreamland, wondering how things had gone so wrong. "It's really not how I thought it would be," he said.

Built in the 1970s, the trailer park is now entirely Spanish-speaking and has effectively become company housing for slaughterhouse workers. Green jackets used by the cleaning crews hang from porches and clotheslines, and residents leave hard hats with sanitation-company logos outside their doors. The plants in Accomack County are not just the area's primary employers; they are major supporters of the community. Children go to school with backpacks donated by Perdue and study in math-and-science centers funded by the company. Tyson gives thousands of pounds of chicken and dry goods to first responders and food banks that families rely on as nearly one in three children in the community live in poverty. Perdue buys trucks for the volunteer Fire Department and donates hundreds of whole chickens to its cookout fund-raisers. When Parksley got its first library this summer, the Perdue Children's Room was its centerpiece.



Perdue donates hundreds of chickens to the Parksley Volunteer Fire Company's barbecue chicken fund-raiser.

Almost all the Dreamland families are originally from Mexico or Central America, but the park offers two kinds of childhoods. Some children hurry home from school, eat a rushed dinner and then go to sleep as early as possible so they can get up for work. Others, mostly children living with their parents, spend the hours after school hanging around outside their trailers, playing on rope swings or splayed on couches they drag onto lawns. Several have part-time jobs cutting grass or babysitting. But if they work, it's not to pay debts or help with rent. Their parents take care of that and admonish them to finish their homework so they will not end up at Tyson or Perdue.

Seven months after his accident, Marcos had become a rarity in the community: a 14-year-old living far from his parents but not working. "They won't take me back because of the accident," he said of the sanitation company. He still couldn't lift his arm well, and often it hung limp at his side. It was approaching 90 degrees, but he wore long sleeves to hide his scars.

After his injury, Marcos missed a month of eighth grade. Students who had been on the shift told their teachers what happened, but when a school counselor called Antonia, she said Marcos had fallen at home. "I was nervous to say anything more because of his age," she said. She refused to show school administrators Marcos's medical records. They were under his false name, which Dreamland residents who use fake papers because they are underage or undocumented tend to call their "stage name."

Marcos thought about returning home. “I came only because things were so desperate,” he said. But if he went back, there would be no way to pay off his family’s debt, and they would lose their land. So he returned to school instead. He started paying closer attention in class and studying English at night. Many Dreamland children drop out between middle school and high school, but to his own surprise, Marcos was now in his first weeks of ninth grade.

He felt guilty, but Antonia understood the bind he was in. “He wanted to help his mom and dad, but he can’t do anything now,” she said. “And once you come, you can’t go back because of the debt.”

As Marcos and Antonia talked, they looked over at the neatly painted trailer where Cobo, the assistant manager at Perdue, lived. Two nights earlier, he was on duty when a young woman got her leg jammed in a pallet jack and had to be taken out in an ambulance. He was also working the night Marcos was injured and had taken a photo of the boy’s mangled arm to show the other shifts as a warning. He felt pity when he saw Marcos now. He had sponsored a young relative who worked nights at the plant while attending school, and he understood the strain the children were under. He had not said anything about Marcos’s age to the bosses because he didn’t want to cause problems for the other young workers.

After Marcos’s injury, the priest at the Catholic church near Dreamland announced a collection for him during Mass. He knew that many children in the congregation worked overnight but didn’t see his role as extending beyond bearing witness. A police officer who coached softball at the high school discussed the accident with a teacher but didn’t get involved; it didn’t seem like a law-enforcement matter.

A Spanish-language Catholic service frequented by many migrant families, including some children who work in the poultry plants.



Short of someone calling in a tip, the Department of Labor, which is in charge of enforcing federal child-labor laws, was unlikely to find out what had happened. The department has 750 investigators overseeing fair labor standards at 11 million workplaces, including 3,000 slaughterhouses. Even when inspectors do catch child-labor violations, the maximum penalty per child is \$15,000, and they usually fine only the subcontracted companies, not the brands themselves. Lawmakers have been pushing to increase the maximum fine, but [Congress is gridlocked](#), with each party drafting its own bills and refusing to vote for legislation introduced by the other side. (Perdue and Tyson said in statements that they have no tolerance for child labor and were taking steps to eliminate violations at plants nationwide. A spokesman for Fayette said the company was unaware of any minors on staff and learned of Marcos's true age only after he was injured. The company said it is taking steps to protect against child-labor violations.)

Because Marcos had been hospitalized, Fayette, Perdue's sanitation provider, was required to notify the Occupational Safety and Health Administration about the accident. Federal officials passed the information to Virginia's state office to investigate. It was assigned to a compliance officer who advertised on his LinkedIn profile that he started working at 14, first as a dishwasher at a bar and then in construction. The officer opted to let the company do a self-inspection. A few days later, Fayette's safety director sent back most of the information the officer had asked for. One detail was left out: the injured worker's age. The director indicated that the accident had been caused by "poor

training.” Less than two weeks after Marcos’s injury, the compliance officer closed the case with no citations and without coming near Dreamland or the plant.

### [America’s hidden child work force.](#)

Read more from our series, [Alone and Exploited](#), about the record number of migrant children working dangerous jobs that violate U.S. child labor laws.

**At Perdue**, night-shift workers worried that the bosses would start firing children and others who used false names after Marcos got hurt. But the plant kept running more or less as it had been, though supervisors stopped letting students leave early to catch the school bus, because it seemed like a tacit admission that the shift was filled with minors.

The cleaning company was always hiring, and new workers went through several nights of instruction. As part of the plant’s safety protocol, each new hire was given a padlock for the machine he or she was cleaning to ensure it couldn’t be turned on. After Marcos’s accident, trainers started bringing in a worker to explain the importance of this step. The man warned new hires that he had noticed a child who sometimes neglected to use the lock, and one night that child nearly lost his arm. He told the group that he regretted staying silent — not about Marcos’s young age, but about the fact that he had apparently misunderstood the padlock system.

Emilio Ortiz, 14, went through this orientation and wondered what happened to the boy who got hurt. Emilio had recently come to Virginia from Chiapas, Mexico, to join his two older brothers, who already had a year of experience on the night shift. The brothers were released to an aunt by the Health and Human Services shelter system in 2021, when they were 15 and 16. Within a few months, they had earned enough money to buy their own trailer. Now, with Emilio working, too, they were sending money back to their parents.

Emilio didn’t go to school. He worked until 5 p.m. each day in agriculture, then grabbed an employee badge stamped with the Perdue logo and car-pooled with his brothers to the slaughterhouse. He stopped going to school in Mexico several years earlier, and the idea of enrolling in eighth grade seemed like a waste of time given how much money he could make.

One night this spring, Emilio crossed the parking lot just before the shift started, clutching his bulky green uniform under his arm and half running to keep up with his older brother. Some underage workers were assigned to tackle the kill room, while others would spend the shift on ladders cleaning tall pieces of machinery. Emilio was assigned to one of the assembly lines, as Marcos had been.

The routine was the same every night. He and his brothers used pressure hoses that kicked back against their shoulders and chests to wash away the blood and meat scraps. Most workers wore earplugs to drown out the hoses and roaring machines. The scalding water created billows of steam, and within an hour, the brothers would be drenched in runoff and chicken grime. Working with a partner, Emilio would turn on the conveyor belt and coat it in a thick chemical foam that made his lungs ache. Then he stopped the line and scrubbed it inch by inch, using a flashlight to check corners and undersides.

Image



A teenager (top left) who came to the United States as an unaccompanied minor and worked at Tyson instead of going to school, at a truck-racing event in Accomack County, Va.

Chemical burns could be hard to avoid. One teenager with a welt on his nose explained that he was burned the night before seemingly out of nowhere; maybe the chemical had dripped down from the ceiling. The worst part of the job was the finishing acid used on Fridays. Another boy who cut the three brothers' hair in a shed behind his Dreamland trailer warned them about this part. He, too, had started working at the plant when he was 14, when his sponsor moved out of state and he had to find a way to pay rent by himself. "It makes you cough all weekend, but then by Monday you're OK again," he said.

After the machines are clean, a U.S. Department of Agriculture inspector looks them over. About a dozen of these inspectors work at each plant. During the day, they watch carcasses whiz by on production lines, and as the overnight shift finishes, they ensure that everything is properly sanitized. The three brothers tended to leave the area or look at the ground when the inspectors came around; they seemed connected with law enforcement.

A U.S.D.A. inspector named Maria Escalante worked the Perdue cleaning shift as an adult in the 1990s when she settled in Virginia. She came from Guatemala and obtained

legal status under an amnesty program. Back then, cleaners were hired directly by the company and earned more than \$25 an hour in today's dollars. She saw the inspectors walking around in their clean white coats emblazoned with the U.S.D.A. logo and admired their air of authority. The job did not require a college degree, so she studied English and passed a written test after several attempts. She is now in her 18th year as an inspector, earning \$28 an hour. She notices children like Emilio but has decided not to report them because her job is to ensure that the country's food-safety laws are followed, not its labor laws.

"It's not my place to say anything, and anyway, they have no one here," she says. "They have to work to at least pay rent." She adds, "I see these kids, and they're only 13, 14 years old. I do feel bad for them."



Maria Escalante, a U.S.D.A. inspector, feels bad for the children working the nightshift. But she says, "It's not my place to say anything."

Image



Cleaning jobs at the poultry plants are delegated to outside companies, an arrangement that helps minimize the plants' accountability.

Escalante noticed that the child workers often seem to fumble the safety protocols. When she heard about Marcos's injury, she assumed this was what happened. "These kids are always making mistakes and hurting themselves," she says.

After work, she looks for the injured children and tries to help them. She spent a few weeks this year trying to track down a teenager who she heard had fallen from a ladder at Tyson and broken his leg. "But it's hard because they're working under other names," she says.

As the number of migrant children working in American slaughterhouses has grown, adults have occasionally intervened. Last year, a Guatemalan girl working for Packers Sanitation showed up to middle school in Nebraska with acid burns on her hands and knees, and administrators called the police. The Department of Labor began a monthslong investigation into the company and found more than 100 children, some as young as 13, working in eight states, including at plants run by Tyson. The [government fined the cleaning company](#) \$1.5 million, but the brands that benefited from the children's labor faced no consequences.



At Perdue, some women noticed Emilio and his siblings sitting quietly next to one another on breaks and started calling them “the sad brothers.” Angelica Gonzalez, who was on the night shift and had children of her own, often chatted with them. She sometimes bought the working children clothes from Walmart or offered them her husband’s castoffs. “I don’t know how they can stand to be so far from their parents and working so hard,” she says. “I ask how they do it, and they just say, ‘We have to.’”

Other workers judged the children’s parents for sending them out alone to earn money. Arelis Perez, who lives in Dreamland with her two young daughters, recently noticed that a ninth grader who lived near the park entrance had joined the cleaning crew. She was disturbed by how distressed the child looked during her first weeks on the shift. “I would never want my girls to do that,” she says.

Image



Arelis Perez, who lives in Dreamland with her two daughters, says she would never want her children to work the night shift.

**One morning in May**, Marcos was the first in his seat in the newcomers section of Arcadia High School. His class was in a back hallway decorated with international flags as part of a program the district set up several years ago for migrant children. Now nearing the end of ninth grade, he was trying to make peace with his role as a full-time student. He had drawn a smiling picture of himself on the white board in the front of the room and had written, in English, “The best student is Marcos.” His English language teacher, Sandra Ellenberger, decided to leave it there for the week.

The school had divided the migrant ninth graders into two cohorts. Ellenberger’s class was full of students who teachers thought might make it to graduation. Few of these children worked, and most were living with their parents. The other class was larger,

and 90 percent of the students eventually stopped coming to school. Marcos had been placed in the smaller class.

“Happy Cinco de Mayo,” Ellenberger said as students filed in. She was playing mariachi music for the occasion. Like most teachers in the program, she didn’t speak much Spanish, but she looked for ways to show the children that she respected their cultures. She had decorated her classroom with local newspaper clippings about the school’s varsity soccer team, which is composed of so many newcomers that announcements at the games are in Spanish. She put a beanbag chair in a converted closet so students who worked overnight shifts could rest before the bell rang.

Ellenberger passed out a quiz, and Marcos began to fly through the questions, nodding his head to the music. When a boy sitting next to him got stuck on the conjugation of a verb, he explained the rule, murmuring, “Don’t worry, it’s really tricky.”

Ellenberger spent the past year wondering if she should be doing more to protect her working students. She is from a college town where the hardest job a child might find is busing tables. When she told her parents about Marcos’s injury, they couldn’t understand how children were allowed in slaughterhouses. “They were horrified, but I explained that’s normal here,” she says. Teachers are mandated by law to report injuries resulting from abuse or neglect but not accidents connected to child-labor violations. In Accomack, teachers hesitated to make reports that might further jeopardize children they knew needed to work.

Occasionally, students showed teachers acid burns or confided that they were allergic to the cleaning solutions. Some of the ninth graders had what sounded like smokers’ coughs; one had been coughing so much that teachers spoke with her guardian, who said her lungs had been burned by bleach.

Recently, Ellenberger told a school counselor that one of her ninth graders seemed to be struggling with the pressure of the overnight shift. Two migrant students had just died by suicide. She hoped someone might persuade the boy’s guardian to let him stop working. Instead, the counselor helped him find a car-pool from Perdue to the high school, so he would be on time. Ellenberger now felt she had been naïve to expect more.

In the larger English-learners class next door, students trickled in slowly all morning. Their teacher, Claire Applegate, often walked into a mostly empty classroom. She estimated that 16 of her 19 students were working, some of them taking home nearly as much money as she did. Each fall, she made lists of their work schedules to keep at her desk — a yellow sticky note labeled “Perdue” and a blue one labeled “Tyson.”

Two girls who lived at Dreamland walked in 45 minutes late, eyes red from cleaning chemicals. Applegate welcomed them and kept teaching as they fell asleep at their desks.

Image



A ninth grader in the newcomers program at Arcadia High School. She came from Guatemala as an unaccompanied minor and was working the overnight cleaning shift while attending school.

Teachers were used to seeing middle schoolers sleeping outside the building first thing in the morning in cars they drove without licenses after coming directly from the overnight shift. But no one could remember a student getting as badly hurt as Marcos, and they worried about who might be next. Applegate sometimes listened to a police scanner at night and wondered if the emergencies involved her students. Once, firefighters responded to a call in which a Perdue sanitation worker was hoisted 20 feet in the air by a conveyor belt. They had to take him out of the factory with a piece of machinery still attached to his body.

Many of Applegate's students had only a few years of education. Some didn't know that a globe represented the shape of the world. Others had never learned how to hold a pencil, or interpret a clock, or read. Lately, though, she wasn't sure if going to school made sense for the working children who were unlikely to graduate. If they weren't coming to class, they could at least switch to the day shift and get a good night's sleep.

"It's a moral dilemma because it's not the best thing for them," she said. "They're not going to cut their hours, and sleep deprivation is one of the worst things you can do to your body. I question whether they should be here because they don't really need to know geography or trigonometry."

The native-born teenagers tended to avoid socializing with recent arrivals, but Marcos was proud that he could now often keep up in mainstream classes. Even as he succeeded in school, though, his family was sliding further toward disaster. His mother had been sick and needed surgery, but she couldn't find a hospital that would perform the operation without being paid beforehand. The \$6,000 debt was weighing on his parents, with interest mounting. Marcos's mother told him they were eating their chickens and turkeys and sometimes selling the larger animals to turn the lights back on. "They're doing everything they can think of, but it's impossible because they can't work," he said.

After school, he returned to the trailer, which was now home to nine people. An aunt had come from Guatemala a month earlier with her 15-year-old daughter, Antonieta. His aunt had planned to work while Antonieta went to school, but they suffered a series of setbacks on their journey. Kidnappers held them hostage in Mexico and forced them to borrow from relatives to buy their freedom. They were turned back at the border and decided to cross through the desert, but his aunt fell from the border wall, shattering her leg and running up \$107,000 in debt to an El Paso hospital. Now she was sleeping in the kitchen and using a walker, and instead of enrolling in ninth grade, Antonieta was looking for a job.

As Marcos walked into the kitchen, his aunt was lost in worry. "I don't know how we're going to get through this," she said. Marcos nodded to her, then hurried to his bedroom and closed the door. He opened a flashcard app on his phone and started matching vocabulary words to images. The sooner he learned English, the sooner he might be useful again. He might be able to get a job at a fast-food restaurant off the highway. Until then, there was not much he could do to help anyone.

**On Saturdays**, much of the town went to a small shop packed with specialty groceries, medicine with Spanish labels and piñatas to withdraw their salaries and send home remittances.

The store is more than just a place to wire money. Mary Enamorado, the woman at the cash register, acts as an informal social worker and immigration advocate. This part of the Eastern Shore has no pro bono immigration lawyers, few nonprofits and no Spanish-speaking community organizations beyond churches. Enamorado helps adults navigate the paperwork to sponsor minors, welcomes children once they arrive and dispenses advice.

"So, are you working already?" she asked one of her first customers of the day, a student from Applegate's class.

Enamorado had helped the ninth grader's brother apply to be her sponsor. Now she noticed that the girl had the white payroll debit card used by the sanitation companies. The companies deposited a week's pay each Friday, and workers usually withdrew it all in cash the following day. The girl told Enamorado with pride that she had gotten a job.

Enamorado sympathized with children who worked nights but thought their sponsors were akin to traffickers. She had joined the cleaning shift herself when she first arrived in Virginia from Honduras in her early 20s and knew how dangerous it could be. She

had been especially disgusted by what she heard of Marcos's case. "Making a 13-year-old go to work like that?" she said. "Awful."

Enamorado's son played on the varsity soccer team with many of the working children. The captain who led the team to state quarterfinals this year came to the United States on his own as a 12-year-old and started working immediately to pay his sponsor rent. He juggled the soccer team with shifts at Perdue, getting home at 10 p.m. after away games, sleeping a couple of hours and then heading to the plant. Now he was weeks away from graduating, one of a few students from his English-language-learners cohort who had made it through high school. "We can all be proud of him," Enamorado said. She encouraged the migrant children who had dropped out of school to take G.E.D. classes at the local community college. Most dreamed instead of joining the military.

Image



Many students on the Arcadia High School soccer team worked late shifts at the poultry plants.

Another girl came in with a white payroll card. She finished the Tyson cleaning shift a few hours earlier and still had a headache from the night's chemicals. Enamorado counted out \$500 for her and gave her a discount on a bag of ice pops. "Take care of yourself," she said.

When the girl walked out, Enamorado shook her head. She had tried to encourage the girl's sponsor to enroll her in school. "But they have \$14,000 in debt to pay off," she said.

Technically, minors are not supposed to send wire transfers, and Enamorado was supposed to check their IDs. But when she tried to enforce the rule, customers complained. “They just have fake papers anyway,” she said.

The store got more crowded in the afternoon. A boy with the beginnings of a mustache withdrew his \$500 and bought a bottle of nonalcoholic wine. A teenager who had recently dropped out of 10th grade so he could switch to the day shift sent \$150 to his mother. Another child came in, a slight 15-year-old who had played on the soccer team with Enamorado’s son but dropped out after spring break to work at Perdue during the day. He was too short to rest his elbows on the counter. “Is your uncle not letting you go to school?” she asked as he ran his payroll card.

“They don’t let me,” he said.

“Who exactly?” Enamorado asked.

The boy didn’t answer. Sometimes, she wanted to interrogate the children who came in with payroll cards, but she also knew that would be bad for business. There was another store with a card reader a few miles up the highway. She handed the boy \$500 and then helped him send money to his mother. “They miss you on the soccer team,” she said.

A week later, Enamorado was in place behind the counter again for the Saturday rush. Applegate’s student came back with her brother. As the girl used the payroll-card reader, she and her brother explained that it would be her last payday for a while. The cleaning-shift supervisor had called her into his office, she said, and told her that she had done a good job, but minors were no longer allowed at the plant.

Enamorado counted out \$500 and told the girl that with any luck she would find a new job before too long. But she knew there were few jobs to be had in Accomack beyond the poultry industry.

Image



Mary Enamorado helping a teenage poultry worker from Guatemala withdraw his salary after a night shift. Enamorado works at a convenience store popular with migrants who send part of their paychecks to their families abroad.

**I began visiting** Parksley in the summer of 2022 as part of reporting I've been doing on migrant child labor over the past year and a half. When the first of these articles ran, the [Biden administration responded](#) by [stepping up child-labor enforcement](#). Each time I went back to Parksley after that, I wondered whether I would find that children had been fired from the Perdue and Tyson plants. I thought labor inspectors might audit the plants. But the peninsula continued to keep its secret.

That changed in May, after Perdue got word that I was reporting on the plant during one of my Parksley trips. The company sent out a warning that I was looking into its operations. Soon slaughterhouses around the country began passing out fliers with my photograph.

In Accomack, the assistant night manager, Cobo, gathered 150 sanitation workers for a midnight meeting at Perdue. They sat sweating in their rubberized uniforms as he told them that minors were no longer welcome. Some children got mad and said they needed the jobs to survive. Others took the news quietly but then made private appeals to the supervisors. "They were looking at me with tears in their eyes," Cobo remembers. Afterward, Fayette, the sanitation company, sent an inspector to look over the remaining workers and ensure none were minors.

Supervisors who oversaw the cleaning shift at the Tyson plant warned their corporate office that a reporter was spending a lot of time in town. By June, all the children I had been speaking to were out of jobs. Emilio was fired along with his two brothers, and his agricultural job became the family's only source of income. His older brothers spent their days stewing over what happened at the plant. "They made plenty of money from our labor and then tossed us out like trash," one says.

After the firings, Arcadia High teachers noticed that some ninth graders were suddenly coming to class on time. Their eyes were less red, and they seemed more animated, laughing with friends and shouting out answers.

At the end of the school year, Marcos was the only ninth grader in the newcomers program to earn a passing score on a statewide standardized test on his first try. But Ellenberger, his teacher, saw that he was troubled. He continued to fill his English workbooks with references to home. One exercise asked about his dream job. "To help my family," he wrote. Another asked what made him happy. "My parents."

He was starting to accept that he would probably never wear short sleeves again. At his most recent checkup, the doctor explained that his arm had healed badly and he would need at least three more surgeries. Marcos found himself crying in the examination room for the first time. "I thought they were going to tell me I was finally done," he said. "It made me realize I might never get better." Fayette is still covering his medical care, but he needed to go to Baltimore for the surgeries and hadn't found anyone to drive him there.

Workers said the cleaning crew at Perdue struggled through the summer. Supervisors told the remaining staff that everyone would have to clean more areas until they could find more workers. Eventually, adults started to see young faces again. A few of Marcos's classmates were hired back. One teenager who could no longer work at Tyson was able to switch to the Perdue cleaning shift with a set of fake papers.

Image





Children playing at dusk in Dreamland, which has effectively become company housing for slaughterhouse workers.

Toward the end of the summer, Marcos, now 15, was able to find something, too. It was a job that even the most desperate migrants shunned: sifting through industrial chicken warehouses and pulling out dead birds. Each day, he passed through entrances marked “Perdue family farmer,” put on two masks to guard against the overpowering smell of ammonia and waded in among thousands of chickens packed together in windowless coops. His task was to search the ground carefully for carcasses amid layers of excrement as the birds pecked frantically at his hands and feet. He started at 5 a.m. and removed between 100 and 150 dead birds during each 12-hour shift. “There are some dead chickens that are good and rotten — they explode,” he said.

The chicken houses paid less than the sanitation crew, but he was still able to send \$100 home to his parents after a few weeks.

When school started again, his 15-year-old cousin Antonieta didn’t consider enrolling, but Marcos cut his shift back to just four hours in the evening and returned for 10th grade. If he learned English, he might get a higher-paying job outside the poultry industry. His teachers were happy to see him and fussed over how tall he had grown. But as school got underway, Marcos felt torn. The reduced hours meant that most days he was earning just \$20, and he no longer had time to study when he got home. “Maybe the classes won’t assign so much homework this year,” he said. “Or maybe I’ll be able to

do it all on the bus.” If he dropped out and worked full time, he might be able to pay off his family’s debt within a year.

One afternoon in September, he hurried off the school bus and back to his trailer to get ready for his shift. He threw his backpack in a corner; he wouldn’t start on his outstanding assignments until the next morning.

Antonia was at Perdue, so Marcos car-pooled with another chicken-house worker. The man honked when he arrived, and they drove out of Dreamland, going slowly to avoid the potholes. They passed the green jackets on clotheslines. They passed a girl with a puppy who had dropped out after eighth grade to work at Tyson. They passed the assistant manager’s home, with its new wood porch, and then the shed where migrant children were lining up to get their hair cut.

Marcos wouldn’t be back until after dark. He usually got home around 8 p.m., but he would stay at the chicken houses longer if there were more dead birds to find. It had been a sweltering day, which would mean additional carcasses and, he hoped, more work.

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Research was contributed by Seamus Hughes, Eli Murray and Julie Tate.

Meridith Kohut is a photojournalist who earned a Courage in Journalism award for her decade of work documenting international humanitarian crises for The Times. She was a finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for feature photography.

[Hannah Dreier](#) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter on the investigations team. Email her at [hannah.dreier@nytimes.com](mailto:hannah.dreier@nytimes.com). [More about Hannah Dreier](#)

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[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/09/business/hello-fresh-child-labor.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20241210&instance\\_id=141835&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=45572836&segment\\_id=185335&user\\_id=bc7815b95cf0a9e157a12ca2c681c8e](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/09/business/hello-fresh-child-labor.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20241210&instance_id=141835&nl=the-morning&regi_id=45572836&segment_id=185335&user_id=bc7815b95cf0a9e157a12ca2c681c8e)

## ***U.S. Investigating Child Labor Claim at HelloFresh Subsidiary***

The Labor Department investigation focuses on a plant in Aurora, Ill., operated by Factor75, a meal kit delivery company that HelloFresh acquired in 2020.

A Factor75 plant in Aurora, Ill., is the subject of a federal Labor Department investigation.



By [Johnny Diaz](#)

Dec. 9, 2024

The U.S. Labor Department is investigating allegations that migrant children have worked at a meal preparation delivery facility in Illinois that is a subsidiary of the popular meal kit company HelloFresh, the company and federal regulators said.

At least six teenagers, including some from Guatemala, worked night shifts at the facility, Cristobal Cavazos, the executive director for Immigrant Solidarity, [an immigrant rights advocacy group](#) that helped report the claims to federal regulators, told [ABC News](#), which reported on the investigation.

“They’re minors working dangerous jobs,” Mr. Cavazos told ABC News, which reported that the children were working there as recently as last summer.

In a statement on Monday, a spokesman for the Labor Department confirmed an investigation into HelloFresh and a temporary staffing agency, Midway Staffing. The spokesman declined to comment further, citing the open investigation.

It was not clear what kind of jobs the minors had at the facility.

The claims relate to a Factor75 facility in Aurora, Ill., according to a HelloFresh spokeswoman who said the company learned of the claims from the Labor Department. In 2020, [HelloFresh acquired](#) Factor75, which provides ready-to-eat meals to customers.

In a statement on Sunday, the HelloFresh spokeswoman said: “We were deeply troubled to learn of the allegations made against a former temporary staffing agency, Midway Staffing. As soon as we learned of these allegations, we immediately terminated the relationship.”

“We have zero tolerance for any form of child labor,” she added, “and we have taken action to ensure no minors perform work in or have access to our facilities.”

Midway Staffing said in a statement on Monday that it was cooperating with the Labor Department’s investigation.

“Midway Staffing denies that its actions or practices contributed to or caused any alleged child labor violations,” R.J. Parrilli, the company’s chief executive, said in the statement.

He added, “Midway Staffing refuses to knowingly hire anyone who is not at least 18 years of age.”

Founded in Berlin in 2011, HelloFresh delivers meal kits with ingredients measured out for specific recipes. The company, which operates in more than a dozen countries, [was one of the earliest entrants in an industry](#) that includes other big players such as Blue Apron and Plated.

The [Labor Department said](#) that employers nationwide were fined more than \$15.1 million for child labor violations in the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30, an 89 percent increase from the previous year. Those penalties were related to 736 investigations that uncovered violations involving more than 4,000 children.

Under federal law, minors are prohibited from working in dangerous jobs that are common in the meat processing industry, where there is a high risk of injury.

The investigation is the latest by the department to target companies that employ children. Last month, the department [said it had fined a cleaning company in Oklahoma](#) nearly \$172,000 after an investigation found that it had hired nearly a dozen children to work dangerous overnight shifts at a slaughterhouse in Sioux City, Iowa, operated by Seaboard Triumph Foods.

In May, a cleaning company in Tennessee [was ordered to pay more than \\$649,000](#) in civil penalties after federal regulators found that it had employed [at least two dozen children as young as 13](#) to work overnight shifts at the Sioux City structure and at a Perdue Farms plant on the eastern shore of Virginia.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/21/business/child-labor-slaughterhouses-tennessee.html>

## ***Company Hired 24 Minors to Clean Slaughterhouses, Labor Department Says***

Fayette Janitorial employed at least 24 children between the ages of 13 and 17 to work overnight shifts cleaning dangerous equipment at plants in Virginia and Iowa, federal regulators said.



The Labor Department said that Fayette Janitorial Service in Tennessee had hired at least 24 children between the ages of 13 and 17 to clean slaughterhouses in Virginia and Iowa. Credit...Google maps

By [Rebecca Carballo](#)

Published Feb. 21, 2024 Updated Feb. 23, 2024

A Tennessee-based company employed at least two dozen children as young as 13 to work overnight shifts cleaning dangerous equipment in slaughterhouses, including a 14-year-old whose arm was mangled in a piece of machinery, the Labor Department said on Wednesday.

The department filed a request on Wednesday for a temporary restraining order and injunction in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa against the company,

Fayette Janitorial Service LLC. It provides cleaning services at slaughterhouses in several states, including Iowa and Virginia, where the department said an investigation had found that the company had hired children to clean plants.

The Labor Department opened its investigation [after an article in The New York Times Magazine](#) reported that Fayette had hired migrant children to work the overnight cleaning shift at a Perdue Farms plant on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

A spokeswoman for Fayette said in a statement that the company had cooperated with the investigation, and added that there was a “zero-tolerance policy for minor labor.”

The statement continued, “Fayette has made significant procedural improvements and enhancements over the past two years to bolster our hiring protocols, including: a biometric technology to assist in employee processes, the hiring of a new CEO, and adding an additional third-party legal representation to aid in the vetting of employees.”

Meat processing is among the nation’s most dangerous industries, and minors are barred under federal law from working in slaughterhouses because of the high risk of injury. But that has not stopped thousands of destitute migrant children from coming to the United States from Mexico and Central America to work dangerous jobs, including in meatpacking plants.

The Labor Department found that Fayette had hired at least 24 children between the ages of 13 and 17 to work the overnight shift cleaning dangerous power-driven equipment at a Perdue plant in Accomack County, Va., and at a plant operated by Seaboard Triumph Foods in Sioux City, Iowa.

Seaboard said in a statement that, after learning of the allegations, it had terminated its contracts with Fayette.

Fifteen children were working at the Virginia plant, and at least nine children were found to be working at the Iowa plant, the department said in its complaint requesting the injunction and restraining order.

Their duties included cleaning “kill floor equipment,” such as head splitters, jaw pullers, meat band saws and neck clippers, the Labor Department said.

The Times Magazine article focused on one child, Marcos Cux, who was hired by Fayette at age 13 after he arrived in Virginia from a village in Guatemala. Marcos was sanitizing a deboning area in the Perdue plant in Accomack County in February 2022 when he thought he saw a torn piece of a rubber glove within a conveyor belt and reached to grab it. The machine suddenly started moving and tore his forearm open to the bone. He was 14 at the time and in the eighth grade.

According to the Labor Department complaint, “someone at the Perdue facility’s sanitation office” called 9-1-1 to report the injury. When a dispatcher asked the worker’s age, the caller was silent, then responded with “Um” before the line went dead.

When the call reconnected 30 seconds later, the dispatcher again asked the age of the injured employee and was told he was 19, according to the complaint.

Marcos missed a month of school and needed three surgeries, including skin grafts from his thighs to his arm, and six months of physical therapy. Fayette covered his medical bills.

A Perdue spokeswoman said that the company terminated its contract with Fayette before the Labor Department filed its complaint.

“Underage labor has no place in our business or our industry,” the spokeswoman, Andrea Staub, said in a statement. “Perdue has strong safeguards in place to ensure that all associates are legally eligible to work in our facilities — and we expect the same of our vendors.”

Labor Department investigators received reports that some Fayette workers carried “pink and purple sparkly backpacks,” and that the younger ones “noticeably hid their faces” while older employees entering the plant did not.

“Some of these children were too young to be lawfully employed at all,” the Labor Department said in the complaint.

The Labor Department confirmed the investigation of Fayette in September, along with [investigations of Perdue, Tyson Foods and QSI](#), a company that ran cleaning shifts for Tyson and is part of a conglomerate, the Vincit Group.

The injunction that the department is seeking against Fayette would ban it from refusing to cooperate with the investigation and from telling workers not to talk to investigators, according to a Labor Department spokesman, Jake Andrejat.

Fayette isn’t the only cleaning company to draw the scrutiny of federal regulators over accusations that it used child labor. Packers Sanitation Services Inc. [paid a \\$1.5 million penalty](#) last year after a Labor Department investigation found that children between the ages of 13 and 17 worked overnight shifts at 13 meat processing plants in eight states, mostly in the South and the Midwest.

Hannah Dreier contributed reporting.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/business/iowa-pork-plant-child-labor.html>

## *Children Worked Dangerous Shifts at Iowa Slaughterhouse, Inquiry Finds*

Qvest Sanitation was ordered to pay nearly \$172,000 after the Labor Department found it had employed 11 children to clean equipment on overnight shifts at a pork processing plant in Sioux City, Iowa.



By [Aimee Ortiz](#)

Dec. 3, 2024

An Oklahoma-based cleaning company has been fined nearly \$172,000 after federal investigators found that it had hired nearly a dozen children to work dangerous overnight shifts at an Iowa slaughterhouse.

The 11 children were hired by Qvest Sanitation of Guymon, Okla., to work at a pork processing plant in Sioux City, Iowa, operated by Seaboard Triumph Foods, the Labor Department said. The children used corrosive cleaners to wash equipment, including head splitters, jaw pullers, band saws and neck clippers, [the department said](#) last week.

The department did not say how old the children were when they were working in the plant.

Adam Greer, Qvest's vice president of operations, said in a statement that the company had not been able to confirm the allegations because the Labor Department "has declined to provide us with any names or specific information related to the alleged violations."

"In spite of this, Qvest has not only fully cooperated with the Department of Labor but is and has been committed to strengthening our onboarding process," he said.

It was the second time this year that a company that had been hired to clean the Seaboard Triumph Foods plant in Sioux City had been the target of enforcement action by the Labor Department.

In May, a Tennessee-based company, Fayette Janitorial Service, [was ordered to pay \\$649,000](#) in civil penalties after an investigation found that it [had hired at least two](#)

[dozen children as young as 13](#) to work overnight shifts cleaning equipment at Seaboard's Sioux City plant and a Perdue Farms plant on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Nine of those children worked at the Seaboard plant, the Labor Department said.

When Fayette Janitorial Service took over the plant's sanitation contract in September 2023, it "rehired some of the children previously employed by Qvest," which had held the contract since September 2019, the Labor Department said in its statement.

"These findings illustrate Seaboard Triumph Foods' history of children working illegally in their Sioux City facility since at least September 2019," Michael Lazzeri, the Midwest regional administrator for the Labor Department's wage and hour division, said in the department's statement. "Despite changing sanitation contractors, children continued to work in dangerous occupations at this facility."

In a statement, Seaboard said that it "did not employ any of the alleged individuals" and that it had no evidence that children ever "accessed the plant." It added that Qvest had not been at the facility for over a year.

In July, after Fayette Janitorial Service was ordered to pay the civil penalty, [Seaboard announced in a blog post](#) that it had "made the strategic decision to establish our own in-house sanitation team."

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In addition to the civil penalty, Qvest was ordered to hire a third-party to adopt policies to prevent the hiring of children, and to establish a process for reporting concerns about the illegal employment of children.

Paul DeCamp, a former head of the Labor Department's wage and hour division who is now a lawyer for Seaboard, said in a statement that the situation with Qvest "underscores the problems facing employers throughout the country: individuals, including minors, obtaining jobs through their use of fraudulent identification documents."

Those documents, he said, are "sophisticated enough to fool even the federal government's E-Verify system," adding that "businesses are victimized by this fraud."

Under federal law, minors are barred from working in dangerous jobs that are common in the meat processing industry, where there is a high risk of injury. But that has not stopped thousands of destitute migrant children from [coming to the United States from Mexico and Central America](#) to work hazardous jobs, including in meatpacking plants.

The [Labor Department said](#) that employers across the country were fined more than \$15.1 million for child labor violations in the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30, an 89

percent increase from the previous year. Those penalties stemmed from 736 investigations that uncovered the violations affecting more than 4,000 children.

“Ultimately and fundamentally, our role and responsibility is to help make sure we’re keeping kids safe,” Jessica Looman, the administrator for the Labor Department’s wage and hour division, said in an interview.

Kirsten Noyes contributed research.