NCL’s Worst Teen Jobs Report

At the National Consumers League (NCL), we urge teens to choose their summer jobs carefully: the wrong choice could harm you or even kill you. Nearly 15 workers die each day, according to statistics from 2007, the last year for which the Bureau of Labor Statistics has complete data. Four million workers suffered from a nonfatal injury or illness.

Sadly, many teen workers are among those injured or killed. According to the National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (2007), a worker under 18 dies every ten days. In 2006, there were an estimated 52,600 work-related injuries and illnesses among youth 15 to 17 years of age requiring treatment in hospital emergency departments—that’s a hospital visit every 10 minutes for a teen worker. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates that 158,000 youth sustain work-related injuries and illnesses each year.

NCL urges young workers and their parents to select jobs carefully; many jobs teens perform in the United States are dangerous. Some jobs, like construction, are inherently dangerous, but others, like retail work, can pose hidden dangers when teens are asked to work alone at night, vulnerable to robberies and assaults. At times, young workers performing seemingly safe jobs are asked to do unsafe things like use trash compactors—something the law specifically prohibits them from doing because it is too dangerous.

Many teens lack the experience and sense of caution needed to protect themselves from workplace hazards. In government speak, “young workers have unique and substantial risks for work-related injuries…because of their biologic, social, and economic characteristics.” They are often reluctant to refuse tasks because they are dangerous or to ask for safety information. Often employers fail to train young workers in proper safety techniques.

Federal worker fatality statistics paint a partial picture of what led to the deaths of 38 youth workers in 2007. Eighteen—nearly half—died in transportation accidents (four from vehicles that overturned and nine from “noncollision accidents.”) Eight died from “contact with objects and equipment”—and half of those were under 16 years old. Five youth workers died from falls. Three youths, aged 16 to 17, died from “exposure to harmful substances or environments.”

Parents and teens must carefully consider jobs that require driving or being driven for significant periods during the work day. Nationally, among workers of all ages, 2,234 workers died in vehicle accidents—that translates into four in every 10 deaths, and is the single greatest cause of worker deaths. We also urge parents and teens to avoid jobs that involve a risk of falling from a significant height.

The other startling statistic concerning young worker deaths is that nearly half—18 of the 38 deaths involved youth workers who were under 16. If parents assume that employers would only permit older teens to do dangerous tasks and that younger teens are safe, they should think again.

The National Consumers League issues the Five Worst Teen Jobs report each year to remind teens and their parents to choose summer jobs wisely. These jobs can contribute to a child’s development and maturity, and teach new skills and responsibilities, but the safety of each job must be a consideration.

Many jobs pose potential dangers to young workers. The five jobs on the list have proven to be especially dangerous based on anecdotal evidence and federal statistics.

1. [Agriculture: Harvesting Crops](http://www.nclnet.org/worker-rights/54-teen-jobs/48-ncls-2009-five-worst-teen-jobs-report#agriculture)
2. [Construction and Height Work](http://www.nclnet.org/worker-rights/54-teen-jobs/48-ncls-2009-five-worst-teen-jobs-report#construction)
3. [Driver/Operator: Forklifts, Tractors, and ATV’s](http://www.nclnet.org/worker-rights/54-teen-jobs/48-ncls-2009-five-worst-teen-jobs-report#driver)
4. [Traveling Youth Sales Crews](http://www.nclnet.org/worker-rights/54-teen-jobs/48-ncls-2009-five-worst-teen-jobs-report#traveling)
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**Agriculture: Harvesting Crops**

Farms look safe but they are actually very dangerous workplaces. Agriculture is consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous industries in America. In its 2008 edition of Injury Facts, The National Safety Council ranked it as the most dangerous industry, with 28.7 deaths per 100,000 adult workers. According to Kansas State University (KSU) in 2007, there were 715 deaths on farms involving workers of all ages. More than 80,000 workers suffered disabling injuries. Working with livestock and farm machinery caused most of the injuries and tractors caused most of the deaths, according to John Slocombe, an extension farm safety specialist at KSU.

Agriculture poses dangers for teens as well. According NIOSH, between 1995 and 2002, an estimated 907 youth died on American farms. Between 1992 and 2000, more than four in 10 work-related fatalities of young workers occurred on farms. Half of the fatalities in agriculture involved youth under age 15. For workers 15 to 17, the risk of fatal injury is four times the risk for young workers in other workplaces, according to U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In 2006, an estimated 5,800 children and adolescents were injured while performing farm work. Every summer young farmworkers are run over or lose limbs to tractors and machinery. Heat stress and pesticides pose grave dangers. Riding in open pickups is another danger on farms.

The dangers of farm work for youth are highlighted in the following injuries and fatalities:

* While driving a tractor as he loaded stone in Skaneateles, N.Y. in October 2008, John Rice, 16, lost control. The tractor began rolling backwards down a hill. The tractor overturned, ejecting Rice, running him over and causing critical injuries that nearly killed him.
* In September 2008, Jacob Kruwell, age 14, was driving a tractor in Lake Mills, Wisconsin when the wheels went off the pavement, causing the load he was carrying to shift and flip the tractor onto the young teen, killing him.
* Matthew Helmick, 16, died when the tractor he was driving overturned on the farm that his family owned in Doylestown, Ohio in August 2008. According to reports, Helmick was turning the tractor into a driveway and made the turn too fast, hitting an embankment and causing the tractor to flip. He was pinned underneath the vehicle.
* A 15-year-old boy, Michael Paul Young, died in June 2008 on a Western Kentucky farm as he worked beside his father and brothers. Young fell into a truck load of grain that acted like quicksand. He sank into the grain and died of asphyxiation before his family and fellow workers could rescue him.
* In May 2008, Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez, a 17-year-old farmworker, died of heat stroke after working nine and a half hours in a California vineyard as temperatures hovered in the mid-90s. Jimenez was pregnant at the time. According to the United Farm Workers and the girl’s family, the labor contractor in the vineyard ignored California laws that require workers to be given breaks and provided with shade. Workers also said they were not given adequate amounts of water.
* Edilberto Cardenas, 17, died in a Groveland, Florida citrus grove in January 2008—his first day on the job. Cardenas was emptying bags of oranges into a truck when then truck backed up and ran him over.In December 2006, a 10-year-old Florida youth accidentally ran over his 2-year-old brother while driving a pickup truck in a Florida orange grove. The boy had been driving trucks in the fields since he was only 8 years old.
* A 13-year-old Illinois youth died after he became entangled in the beaters of a forage wagon. The youth was helping his cousin feed cattle in a farm pasture. The death occurred when the boy climbed on the front of the wagon to dislodge clumps of hay. The legs of his pants became entangled in the rotating beaters. The youth was spending the summer at a relative's farm in Minnesota where the accident occurred. (September 2005)

Loopholes in current child labor law allow children to work in agriculture at younger ages than children can work in other industries. It is legal in many states for a 12-year-old to work all day under the hot summer sun with tractors and pickup trucks dangerously criss-crossing the fields, but that same 12-year-old could not be hired to make copies in an air-conditioned office building. Because of the labor law exemptions, large numbers of 12- and 13-year-olds—usually the children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers—can be found working in the fields in the United States.

An estimated 400,000 youth under the age of 16 help harvest our nation’s crops each year, and the exemptions allow even younger kids to work legally on very small farms. Field investigations by the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs, a member of the Child Labor Coalition, have found children working in the fields at the age of 9 and 10. NCL and the Child Labor Coalition believe the long hours of farm work for children under 14 is deleterious to their health, education, and well-being and should be illegal. NCL has long supported legislation that would apply child labor age restrictions to all industries, including agriculture.

Exemptions in the law also allow teens working on farms to perform tasks deemed hazardous in other industries when they are only 16—as opposed to 18 for the other industries. For example, a worker must be 18 to drive a forklift at retail warehouse but a 16-year-old is legally allowed to drive a forklift at an agricultural processing facility. NCL does not believe such exemptions are justified. Driving a forklift is dangerous and should not be undertaken by minors.

In agriculture, 16- and 17-year-olds can work inside fruit, forage or grain storage units, which kill workers every year in suffocation accidents; they can also operate dangerous equipment like corn pickers, hay mowers, feed grinders, power post hole diggers, auger conveyors and power saws. NCL and the Child Labor Coalition, which it coordinates, are working to eliminate unjustified exemptions to U.S. Department of Labor safety restrictions based on age.

According to SafeKids USA, only about 5 percent of farms in the United States are covered by safety regulations under the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Children working on family farms with their parents are not protected by safety laws.  
  
**Construction and Height Work**

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics fatality records, construction and roofing are two of the ten most dangerous jobs in America. In 2007, an estimated 372,000 workers of all ages were injured in construction accidents and construction led other industries in the number of deaths among all workers: 1,178. A construction worker is nearly three times as likely to die from a work accident as the average American worker.

Young workers are especially at risk given their relative inexperience on work sites and commonplace dangers construction sites often pose. According to NIOSH in 2002, youth 15-17 working in construction had greater than seven times the risk for fatal injury as youth in other industries, and greater than twice the risk of workers aged 25-44 working in construction. In a 2003 press release, NIOSH noted that despite only employing 3 percent of youth workers, construction was the third leading cause of death for young workers.

In 2007, five working youths died in falls—a common cause of death in construction accidents. Among workers 18 and 19, the number of deaths from falls was 11.

Examples of recent teen construction deaths include the following:

* In January, Danilo Riccardi Jr. was trying to get water from a trench so that he could mix concrete when he fell into the large room-sized hole. A muddy mixture of sand and water soon trapped him like quicksand. By the time rescuers arrived, the boy was dead, submerged under the liquid mixture. It took almost three hours to dig his body out.
* A 15-year-old Lawrenceville, Georgia boy, Luis Montoya, performing demolition work, fell down an empty escalator shaft 40 feet to his death. According to a spokesman for the Georgia Department of Labor, minors—defined in the state as being 15 years old—are not allowed to work on construction sites. The company that employed the boy, Demon Demo had been fined by OSHA in 2005 and 2008 because workers did not wear required safety harnesses to prevent falls. The fine in the second violation was reduced from a $4,000 penalty to $2,000. Montoya was not wearing a safety harness when he fell.
* Bendelson Ovalle Chavez, a 17-year-old resident of Lynn, Massachusetts, was fixing a church roof in September 2007 when he fell 20 feet to his death. Employed by the company two months earlier, he had received no training or information about how to prevent falls, according to a report by the Massachusetts AFL-CIO and the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health.
* In July 2007, James Whittemore, 17 died while taking down scaffolding at a construction project in Taunton, Massachusetts. The teen was helping his father remove the scaffolding when a pole he was holding fell against a high-voltage electrical wire and he was electrocuted. The boy died in his father’s arms.
* That same month, Travis DeSimone, 17, was working on a Marlborough, New Hampshire farm, converting a barn into a kennel, when a concrete wall collapsed and killed him.

Roofing, siding, sheet metal work, electrical work, concrete work all pose serious dangers. Falls, contact with electric current, transportation incidents, and being stuck by objects are among the most common causes of construction accident deaths.

Federal child labor law prohibits construction work for anyone under 16 years of age (although youths 14 and 15 may work in offices for construction firms if they are away from the construction site).

Labor law regarding work at heights has some inconsistencies. Minors 16 years and older may work in heights, as long as it is not on or about a roof. They can work on a ladder, scaffold, in trees, and on structures like towers, silos, and bridges.

**Driver/Operator of Forklifts, Tractors, and All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs)**

Forklifts, tractors, and all-terrain vehicles pose dangers for many young workers. Several youth tractor accidents have been detailed in our section on agricultural fatalities and injuries. Some recent forklift and vehicle accidents involving youth:

* On May 11th, Miguel Herrera-Soltera drove a forklift up a ramp when it tipped over. The boy fell out of the forklift and it landed on top of him. Fellow workers used another forklift to extricate the boy, but he died at the hospital.
* In March 2008, a 15-year-old suffered a serious leg injury in a Portland, Oregon wrecking lot when a 17-year-old co-worker operating a front loader knocked over a stack of cars and part of a concrete wall collapsed onto the younger boy. No one under 18 is allowed by law to work in an auto wrecking area, or operate a front loader, according to The Oregonian newspaper.
* John Sanford, 18, a forklift operator in Toledo, mistakenly thought he put his forklift in park. The machine was in neutral and when Sanford walked in front of it, he was pinned between a trash receptacle and the lift and killed. (December 2007)
* A 17-year-old in California died when the forklift he was operating at a grain and hay store rolled over on him. The youth had only been employed one hour and misguidedly took the initiative to operate the forklift. (June 2004)
* In Iowa, an 8-year-old was killed helping his father and neighbor chop hay for silage on their dairy farm. The youth was helping, driving to and from the field location on a 4-wheel ATV to assist his father hook up each silage wagon. The boy drove up a slight embankment causing the ATV to roll over on its top and pinning him to the ground. (Summer 2004).
* A 13-year-old Arkansas youth died when the ATV he was driving tipped over on a levee between catfish ponds. The minor was pinned under the water and drowned. (March 2003).

Each year, nearly 100 workers are killed in forklift accidents. Another 20,000 workers are seriously injured in forklift-related accidents. Many of these injuries occur when workers are run over, struck by, or pinned by a forklift. U.S. child labor law mandates an age of 18 to operate a forklift unless the forklift is being operated on an agricultural facility—then the youth operating the forklift can be 16. NCL can think of no rationale for this disparity in safety standards, and child labor advocates in Washington are asking Congress to raise the age to 18 for all operators.

Tractor-related incidents are the most common type of agricultural fatality in the U.S. Increasingly, tractors are being used in non-agricultural industries, like construction, manufacturing, and landscaping. Tractor overturns are the most common event among tractor fatalities, and was the primary cause of tractor-related fatality among youth workers.

ATVs resulted in 44,700 serious injuries of youth under 16. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CSPC) reported that in 2004, 130 children under the age of 16 died in ATV accidents. The Associated Press reported that more than 100 kids died in 2006, although clearly the majority of the fatalities were in non-work-related accidents.

**Traveling Youth Crews** **Performing Door-to-Door Sales**

Parents should not allow their children to take a traveling sales job. The dangers are too great. Without parental supervision, teens are at too great a risk of being victimized. Traveling sales crew workers are typically asked to go to the doors of strangers and sometimes enter their homes—a very dangerous thing for a young person to do.

Frequent crime reports involving traveling sales crews suggests that the environment they present is not a safe one for teen workers. And with four in 10 worker fatalities coming from vehicle accidents, NCL urges teens not to accept any job that involves driving long distances or for long periods of time.

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) warned consumers in May 2009 that deceptive sales practices are common in door-to-door sales—the group had received 1,100 complaints in the prior year. “Experience tells us that customers aren’t the only victims of [these scams],” said Michael Coil, President of BBB of Northern Indiana, “the young salespeople are also potentially being taken advantage of by their employers and forced to work long hours, endure substandard living conditions and have their wages withheld from them.”

In May 2008, police in Spokane, Washington investigated a 16-year-old’s claim that she was held as a captive worker by a door-to-door sales company. She escaped after the sales crew leaders beat up her boyfriend because he wasn’t selling enough magazines.

Unscrupulous traveling sales companies charge young workers for expenses like rent and food that requires them to turn over all the money they ostensibly make from selling magazines or goods. When they try to quit or leave the crew, they are told they can’t. Disreputable companies have been known to seize young workers’ money, phone cards, and IDs and restrict their ability to call their parents. Drug use and underage drinking are not uncommon. A New York Times report in 2007 found that crew members often make little money after expenses are deducted.

Among the possible dangers:

**Murder:**

* In November 2007, Tracie Anaya Jones, 19, who was a member of a traveling sales crew, was found dead of stab wounds. Originally from Oregon, Jones was last seen working in Little Rock Arkansas before her body was found 150 miles away in Memphis, Tennessee. Her killing remains unsolved and is featured on America’s Most Wanted Web site.
* In Rapid City, South Dakota in April 2004, a 41-year-old man was charged with murdering a 21-year-old woman who came to his home to sell magazines.

**Robbery:** Working in unknown neighborhoods poses risks, especially if you are carrying money from sales or goods to sell.

* Although not part of a traveling sales crew, a 12-year-old selling candy for a school fundraiser in a Jacksonville, Florida neighborhood in March 2009 was robbed by three individuals who drove up to her in a car.
* In April 2003, a 16-year-old Texas youth selling candy was robbed and shot in the stomach by two teens.

**Assaults:**

* In May 2009 in Bethesda, Maryland, a 19-year-old woman selling magazines was attacked and nearly raped by someone she encountered while selling magazines door-to-door.
* In Lawton, Oklahoma, a 19-year-old Nevada woman was selling magazines door-to-door in February 2009 when her potential customer invited her in. The man gave her something to drink and she awoke several hours later and realized she had been raped.
* A 19-year-old Ohio magazine sales person was assaulted by three men who expressed an interest in buying magazines. The victim was waiting for a pickup by co-workers when she was approached, abducted, and sexually assaulted (April 2003).

**Reckless driving:** traveling sales crews face greater risk of vehicle accidents and in many cases, crew leaders are driving without licenses or driving on suspended licenses. Vehicles are not always maintained properly and the use of 15-passenger vans in some cases presents safety concerns.

* In November 2005, two teenagers were killed and seven were injured when the van they were riding in flipped near Phoenix, Arizona. The vehicle crossed a median strip, and ended up in the opposite lanes of a freeway. All nine occupants, who worked for a magazine subscription company, were thrown from the vehicle.
* A month earlier, 20-year-old, James Crawford, was ejected and killed from a van crash in Georgia. Eighteen young adults were crammed into the 15-passenger van. The driver fell asleep and was allegedly driving under the influence of marijuana. The occupants were heading north from Florida to sell magazine subscriptions.
* Two young salespersons, age 18 and 19, were ejected from a vehicle and pronounced dead at the scene after a vehicle accident in which 15 salespersons were crammed into a 10-year-old SUV that rolled over on a highway in New Mexico (September 2002).
* In 1999, seven individuals travelling as a sales crew were killed in an accident in Janesville, Wisconsin. Five other passengers were injured, including one girl who was paralyzed. The driver of the van, who was trying to elude a police chase, did not have a valid drivers license and attempted to switch places with another driver when the accident occurred. The fatality victims included Malinda Turvey, 18, who has inspired ground-breaking legislation—Malinda’s Act—which passed in Wisconsin in April 2009 to regulate traveling sales crews.

**Desertion:** young salesmen have been stranded if they try to quit or do not sell enough.

**Exposure:** crews often work in bad weather, walking miles in blazing heat or in cold weather.

**Arrest:** crews often operate without proper licenses and permits and young sales people are subject to arrest.

**Sexual exploitation:** young workers, far from home, are at special risk of exploitation from older crew leaders and crew members.

At any given time, there are as many as 50,000 youth under the age of 18 involved in youth peddling crews.

**Outside Helper: Landscaping, Groundskeeping, and Lawn Service**

Landscaping and yard work is a frequent entry point into the job market for teenagers. However, the sharp implements and machinery used to do the work present dangers for teens. Often young workers are left unsupervised for long periods of time. The job also requires a great deal of time spent driving in vehicles which, as we have noted, is a dangerous work-related activity.

These incidents highlight the dangers of outside work:

* A 15-year-old Florida youth died of electrocution while trimming trees. The youth was standing on an aluminum ladder holding a pole saw when it hit a wire. (May 2005)A 16-year-old Oklahoma youth died when he was struck by lightening while working as a general laborer for a landscaping company. The youth was standing in the bed of a dump truck, where he was manually moving pallets of rocks from the truck to a front-end loader. The youth had worked for the company for three weeks. (July 2004)
* A 15-year-old Maryland youth was killed when he fell into a mulch spreading truck. The machine, called a bark blower, churns mulch with a large spinning device called an auger and then disperses it through a hose. The machine had jammed and the teen had gotten on top of the truck to see why the mechanism wasn’t working. He had been with the company for a couple of weeks. (May 2004)
* Landscaping, groundskeeping, and lawn service workers use hand tools such as shovels, rakes, saws, hedge and brush trimmers, and axes, as well as power lawnmowers, chain saws, snow blowers, and power shears. Some use equipment such as tractors and twin-axle vehicles. These jobs often involve working with pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemicals. Rollovers from tractors, ATVs, and movers are a risk. Tree limb cutting and lifting and carrying inappropriately heavy loads are another potential danger; so is handling chemicals, pesticides, and fuel. Contact with underground or overhead electrical cables presents electrocution dangers.

**Federal Child Labor Law** Minors who are age 16 and older may be employed in landscaping and operate power mowers, chain saws, wood chippers, and trimmers. The operation of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) or tractors for non-agricultural labor is only prohibited if the equipment is used for transporting passengers, an activity prohibited for minors under age 18.

**Conclusion**

To ensure a safe and rewarding work experience, teens and parents should carefully think about prospective jobs that teens are considering. Workplace dangers those jobs might possess should be examined. When safer alternatives exist, they should opt for those jobs. Jobs that involve unsupervised door-to-door sales, long-distance traveling away from parental supervision, and extensive driving should be avoided. Jobs that involve the use of dangerous machinery and the risk of falling significant distances should also be avoided. Parents should discuss potential job dangers with their children and urge them to consider their own safety. They should empower their children to confront their supervisors when they are asked to do unsafe tasks. They should not be afraid to inquire about safety training.

Employers must, by law, comply with child labor laws, provide training to young workers, and be vigilant about providing a safe work place. The U.S. Department of Labor and state agencies must enforce the law and conduct regular reviews to ensure that new workplace hazards are dealt with. Companies that repeatedly violate child labor laws should pay the highest penalty allowed by law.

Existing inequities in child labor policy, such as allowing agricultural workers to perform hazardous jobs at younger ages, should also be remedied. And Congress should act to raise the age at which children can work long hours in agriculture to the standard of other industries: Children under 14 who are not working on their parents’ farm should be prohibited from working in the fields, and the Secretary of Labor should determine what agricultural tasks can safely be done by 14- and 15-year-olds.Workplace fatality rates have been dropping over time thanks to the vigilance of working teens, parents, employers, advocacy groups and state and federal authorities, but 38 youth deaths and 50,000-plus work injuries and illnesses is still far too many. We can do better and we should strive to do so. Work safe, work smart!

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