

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-26](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Children aged 17 and under in the United States work for various reasons: some are encouraged to work to develop independence and responsibility; others work because of financial need. At the same time, research suggests working children are at risk for work-related injuries and fatalities. GAO was asked to update its 2002 child labor report to discuss the current status of working children in the United States, including those working in agriculture.

This report examines (1) children working in the United States since 2003, (2) work-related fatalities and injuries to such children for the period, and (3) how DOL oversees compliance with the child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. GAO analyzed federal data from several sources, including DOL and other agencies; reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; and interviewed officials from DOL, including staff in six WHD district offices that were selected based on factors such as investigations with at least one child labor violation, and all five regional offices. GAO also spoke with stakeholders knowledgeable about child labor, such as employer and employee labor groups.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DOL, including that DOL should evaluate the feasibility of measuring injuries and illnesses to certain worker populations, and establish metrics for child labor-related outreach in agriculture. DOL generally agreed with all four recommendations.

View [GAO-19-26](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or [brownbarnesc@gao.gov](mailto:brownbarnesc@gao.gov), or Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or [morriss@gao.gov](mailto:morriss@gao.gov).

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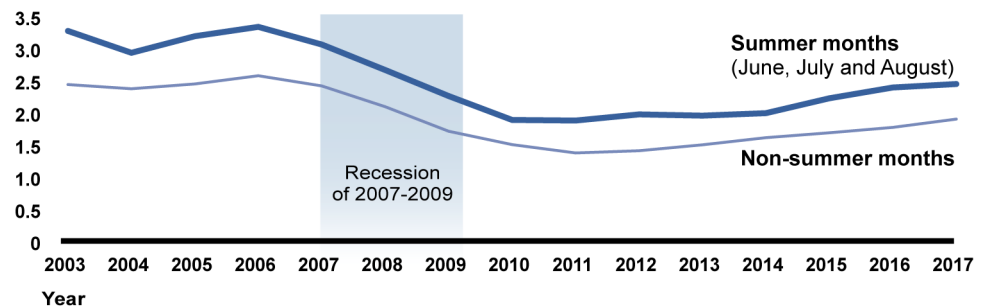
## WORKING CHILDREN

### Federal Injury Data and Compliance Strategies Could Be Strengthened

## What GAO Found

The number of working children has fluctuated with the economy since 2003. An estimated 3.3 million children aged 15 to 17 worked in the summer months of 2003, and the number of working children reached a low of 1.9 million by 2011. It then increased to 2.5 million by 2017, but has not returned to its pre-recession level, as shown below. GAO's analysis of the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Department of Labor's (DOL) Current Population Survey data found that non-agricultural industries employed an estimated 2.5 million working children aged 15 to 17 in the summer months of 2017. Further, GAO found that the leisure and hospitality industry employed the largest number of children.

**Estimated Number of Working Children Aged 15 to 17 in the United States, 2003 to 2017**  
Number of children (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-19-26

Since 2003, the majority of work-related child fatalities were in agriculture, and while available data are incomplete, they indicate that work-related injuries have declined. Although agriculture employs a small percentage of working children, DOL data indicate that from 2003 to 2016, the year for which the most recent data are available, over half of the 452 work-related fatalities among children were in agriculture. Also, according to DOL estimates, the number of work-related injuries and illnesses to children has declined, but these estimates do not include certain populations. While DOL is conducting a pilot study to enhance its work-related injury and illness data, this pilot does not include children, including those 14 or under. DOL has not evaluated the feasibility of measuring this population. As a result, DOL is missing opportunities to more accurately quantify injuries to children, which could better inform its compliance and enforcement efforts.

DOL's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) uses a strategic enforcement approach to oversee compliance with the child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act and collaborates within DOL to exchange information on potential violations. WHD officials told GAO that their enforcement and compliance efforts include outreach to industries with vulnerable workers, including children. However, WHD has not developed metrics for child labor-related outreach in agriculture. Federal internal control standards state that management should define objectives clearly to enable the identification of risks, such as by defining objectives in measurable terms. Without such metrics, WHD may not be effectively addressing the risks faced by children working in agriculture.