

## ***Biden Administration Plans Crackdown on Migrant Child Labor***

The move came days after a Times investigation showed children were working in dangerous jobs throughout the United States.

**By Hannah Dreier**

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The Biden administration on Monday announced a wide crackdown on the labor exploitation of migrant children around the United States, including more aggressive investigations of companies benefiting from their work.

The development came days after The New York Times published an investigation into the explosive growth of migrant child labor throughout the United States. Children, who have been crossing the southern border without their parents in record numbers, are ending up in punishing jobs that flout child labor laws, The Times found.

The White House laid out a host of new initiatives to investigate child labor violations among employers and improve the basic support that migrant children receive when they are released to sponsors in the United States. Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, called the revelations in The Times “heartbreaking” and “completely unacceptable.”

As part of the new effort, the Department of Labor, which enforces these laws, said it would target not just the factories and suppliers that illegally employ children, but also the larger companies that have child labor in their supply chains. Migrant children often use false identification and find jobs through staffing agencies that do not verify their Social Security numbers.

Companies have escaped fines in the past by blaming those agencies or other subcontractors when violations are discovered.

“Too frequently, employers who contract for services are not vigilant about who is working in their facilities,” the Labor Department said in a statement.

The department will also explore using a “hot goods” legal provision that allows it to stop the interstate transport of goods when child labor has been found in the supply chain.

The Times found products made with child labor in the American supply chains of major brands and retailers, including Ben & Jerry’s, Fruit of the Loom, Ford, General Motors, J. Crew, Walmart, Whole Foods and Target. In Grand Rapids, Mich., children worked late nights at plants operated by Hearthside Food Solutions, which makes and packages food for other companies, including General Mills, Frito-Lay and Quaker Oats.

The Department of Labor has begun an investigation into Hearthside, administration officials said.

Officials plan to initiate investigations in parts of the country more likely to have child labor violations and ask Congress to increase penalties. Federal investigators have long complained that the maximum fine for violations — about \$15,000 per occurrence — is not enough to deter child labor. The new effort also establishes a joint task force between the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services, which is responsible for child migrants, to better share information.

In the past two years, more than 250,000 children have come into the country alone. Many of them are under tremendous pressure to send money back to their parents, as well as pay thousands of dollars in smuggling fees and, in some cases, rent and living expenses to their sponsors. Most are from Central America, where economic conditions have deteriorated since the pandemic.

Children now are working hazardous jobs in every state and across industries, The Times found. They are taking jobs in slaughterhouses, construction sites and commercial bakeries — positions that have long been off-limits to American children for nearly a century.

At least a dozen underage migrant workers have been killed on the job since 2017, including a 16-year-old who fell from and was crushed by an earthmover he was driving in Georgia. Others have been seriously injured, losing legs and shattering their backs in falls.

In a speech on the House floor Monday, Representative Hillary Scholten, Democrat of Michigan, called on Congress to act.

“Stories of kids dropping out of school, collapsing from exhaustion, and even losing limbs to machinery are what one expects to find in a Charles Dickens or Upton Sinclair novel, but not an account of everyday life in 2023, not in the United States of America,” Ms. Scholten said.

A spokesman for Speaker Kevin McCarthy said Xavier Becerra, the secretary of health and human services, “cut corners on vetting procedures to prioritize the expedited release of minors, and as a result more migrant children are being handed off to traffickers and exploited.”

Republicans on Capitol Hill immediately began launching investigations and discussing legislation, including plans to demand the Department of Health and Human Services to track and provide better care for children after they are released to sponsors. Democrats are also considering new measures.

Both the House Judiciary and Oversight committees pledged investigations, and Representative Jim Jordan, Republican of Ohio and the Judiciary chairman, demanded in a letter sent Monday that Robin Dunn Marcos, the director of the division of H.H.S. in charge of child migrants, submit to a transcribed interview.

One Hearthsides worker, Carolina Yoc, 15, described a grueling schedule of juggling school and eight-hour swing shifts packaging Cheerios each day. She said she was growing sick from the intensity of the factory work and lack of sleep.

A representative for Hearthsides said last week that it had found workers through a staffing company and would implement better controls. After The Times’s story was published, the company said it had hired a law firm and consultant to review its employment and safety practices and begun requiring government identification from any worker entering its 39 plants nationwide.

Carolina Yoc, 15, described working to nearly midnight packaging Cheerios at Hearthsides Food Solutions in Grand Rapids, Mich. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Most of the companies identified by The Times as having child labor in their supply chains said last week they were investigating the findings or had ended contracts with suppliers. PepsiCo, which owns Frito-Lay and Quaker Oats, whose brands are sometimes manufactured at Hearthside, did not respond to repeated requests for comment until after the Biden administration's announcement on Monday, when it said in a statement that it was "deeply concerned" and had prohibited its suppliers from hiring underage workers. Whole Foods, which also did not comment until after the story was published, said it would investigate The Times's findings of child migrant labor at one of the company's chicken suppliers.

Under a 2008 federal anti-trafficking law, children arriving alone from countries other than Canada and Mexico are allowed to stay in the United States and apply for asylum or other legal protections. The Department of Health and Human Services is supposed to ensure sponsors will support them and protect them from trafficking or exploitation.

But as more and more minors have crossed the border, the Biden administration has ramped up demand on H.H.S. staff members to release the children from shelters as quickly as possible. Mr. Becerra has urged staff members to move with the speed of an assembly line, The Times found. The department rolled back protections that had been in place for years, including some background checks and reviews of children's files.

A spokeswoman for the department said last week that it was in the best interest of children to be quickly moved out of detention and that the department had not compromised safety.

Once children are released, they have few options for additional help. Most leave shelters with little but the phone number for a national hotline run by H.H.S. The Times found that children were calling the hotline to report labor exploitation and hearing nothing back. Operators were generally referring calls to local law enforcement and other agencies, who may not have followed up.

On Monday, senior administration officials said Health and Human Services would now direct operators to return calls to children and require them to explain what local law enforcement agency would be in touch.

After caseworkers told The Times that H.H.S. regularly ignored obvious signs of labor exploitation — including adults who were sponsoring up to 20 children at a time — the agency said Monday that it would spend a month investigating whether policies needed to be changed for people who sponsor multiple children.

Case managers will also start providing information to sponsors and recently released children about U.S. labor protections.

Luke Broadwater contributed reporting.