



## Athabasca University Study of Child Labour In Alberta

Employment rate surveys were conducted under contract by the University of Alberta Population Research Laboratory in 2008 and 2009. Random sampling of 1,200 homes resulted in statistically generalizable results with an estimated sampling error of 2.8 per cent at the 95-per-cent confidence level.

Interviews were conducted with children, adolescents and parents in the spring and summer of 2009. Initial subjects were recruited through newspaper advertisement and handbills and snowball sampling was subsequently used. The results are not statistically generalizable but are analytically generalizable.

The principal investigator of the Child Labour study was Bob Barnetson, PhD, Assistant Professor of Labour Studies at Athabasca University. The study was funded by Athabasca University and the Alberta Federation of Labour.

Survey results have been published in:

Barnetson, B. (2009). The regulation of child and adolescent labour in Alberta. *Just labour*. 13. 29-47.

Barnetson, B. (2010). Effectiveness of complaint-driven regulation of child labour in Alberta. *Just labour*. 16. 9-24.

## Overview of Alberta's child labour laws

Children (under 12) cannot be employed. The government does not typically consider babysitting and casual yard work as employment for this group.

### Adolescents (12-14) can be employed in the follow occupations:

- ▶ Delivery person for flyers, newspapers and handbills
- ▶ Delivery person for small goods and merchandise for a retail store
- ▶ Clerk or messenger in an office
- ▶ Clerk in a retail store
- ▶ Certain jobs in the restaurant and food services industry
- ▶ Any job for which the Director of Employment Standards will issue a permit

### Adolescents may not work:

- ▶ More than two hours on a school day
- ▶ More than eight hours on a non-school day
- ▶ Between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

Source: <http://www.employment.alberta.ca/SFW/1476.html>

# Alberta's Child Labour Laws:

## The Need for Change

**All provinces have child labour laws to protect children's physical, intellectual and emotional development. We require they attend school and prohibit them from working in dangerous jobs or in the middle of the night.**

Alberta's child labour laws are set out in the Employment Standards Code. This law makes it illegal to employ children under 12. It strictly limits when and what adolescents (age 12-14) can do.

A recent study conducted at Athabasca University shows a high number of Alberta children employed in jobs that are prohibited under the Employment Standards Code.

The study also found children with jobs often had little understanding of occupational health and safety practices or other employment rights and protections. Even more disturbing, parents had little knowledge of these rules for children as well.

The study's results show that Alberta's complaint-driven system for ensuring Employment Standards rules are followed – especially for children – allows for widespread child labour that is actually against the law.

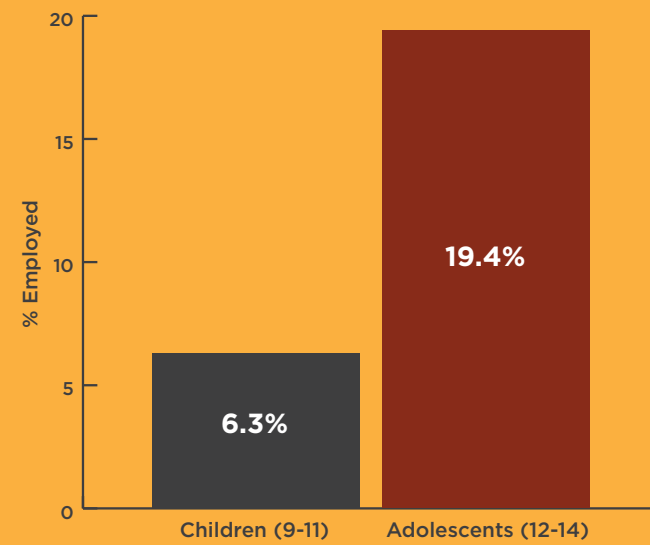


## STUDY FINDING #1: Child employment in Alberta is widespread and often illegal.

In 2009, 6.3 per cent of children had jobs - that's 8,200 children aged nine to 11. A total of 78 per cent of the jobs done by children were clearly illegal (newspaper delivery, janitorial services). The remainder did jobs such as babysitting and yard work.

The same survey found that 26,000 adolescent workers were employed. More than 21 per cent of these 12- to 14-year-olds worked in prohibited occupations (janitorial services, sports teams, working on a golf course). By contrast, 28.6 per cent of jobs appear to be legal types of employment (newspaper delivery, retail sales, restaurants, agriculture). The remaining 50 per cent of jobs again fall into the grey area of babysitting and yard work.

Child and adolescent employment rates in Alberta, 2008/09



## Why do employers violate child labour laws?

Three reasons. First, it saves money. Second, there is virtually no chance of getting caught. Alberta relies on complaints to trigger enforcement, but few children, adolescents or parents know their rights. Few can identify when their rights have been violated, and few consider complaining. Researchers in the U.S. have found that fewer than one in 100 violations of pay or safety violations rules generate a complaint.

The third reason employers violate child labour laws is that there is no risk attached to breaking the law. In the unlikely event an employer is caught, the government will issue a cease-and-desist order and, if there are unpaid wages, require payment.

The only consequence of violating the law is having to pay what was owed in the first place. Why wouldn't employers break the law?

## Alberta's current system DOES NOT work.

Alberta has a long history of setting workplace standards and then not enforcing them. For example, occupational health and safety violations are rarely prosecuted, even when they result in a worker's death.

Alberta relies on worker complaints (versus random inspections) and cajoling employers (versus fines and prosecutions) in order to protect children and teenagers on the job.

## A better way for child labour in Alberta: Random Inspections, tougher prosecutions and more resources for monitoring and enforcement.

Random inspections of industries that commonly employ young workers would encourage compliance with Alberta's child labour laws. Prosecutions of repeat violators would create an incentive for employers to respect the law.



## STUDY FINDING #2: Child workers' rights are often violated.



Interviews with 20 working children or adolescents found most (19 out of 20) had their rights violated. These violations included:

- ▶ Working too many hours, most commonly a four-hour shift on a school day.
- ▶ Receiving less than the minimum wage or minimum call-in pay.
- ▶ Working under age or in prohibited occupations or performing prohibited tasks.

The majority of adolescents working in restaurants also reported illegal deduction for uniforms and that employers did not provide health and safety hazard assessments.

Half of the workers reported multiple violations of employment standards law, although most were unaware that their treatment was illegal - reflecting a limited knowledge of their rights.

## STUDY FINDING #3: Parents don't have the tools to protect their children at work.

In theory, parents play a role in making sure a child is not exploited at work. But the reason we have child labour laws is because parents have difficulty monitoring what goes on in a workplace.

Interviews with 17 parents found they did not fully understand their children's rights. Many also did not know how their children were treated in the workplace. Many simply assumed their kids' jobs were safe.

Interviews with families found about half of parents thought about whether their children's work was safe. But they all formed their opinions on the basis of their own experiences in similar jobs, their perceptions of the workplace as a customer, and/or the general reputation of the company. None acquired any specific information about their children's jobs from the employer.

Many parents were surprised to learn their child routinely handled box cutters, worked on ladders, lifted heavy boxes, and used fryers and other equipment. These activities resulted in injuries such as burns, cuts and back injuries.

It is up to employers to guarantee children and adolescent workers are safe and free of exploitation, and it is up to the government to enforce its own laws.

