

# BENCHMARKING REPORT

Hiring and safety practices for adolescent workers in agriculture



National  
**Farm**Medicine  
Center.



NATIONAL  
COUNCIL OF  
AGRICULTURAL  
EMPLOYERS

**WASHINGTON**  
**GROWERS**  
**LEAGUE**



National **Children's** Center  
for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety

December 2004

Dear Agricultural Employer:

We all know that work activities are inherently good for young people. Research has shown that safe and appropriate work can help adolescents develop — intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally. We collaborated on this project because we care about adolescent workers. We value their employment opportunities in agriculture and want them to have positive work experiences.

In spring of 2004 we conducted a survey among members of the National Council of Agricultural Employers and the Washington Growers League. This report gives you the results, which describe the reasons why (or why not) adolescents are hired in agriculture; and safety training practices for those adolescents.

We hope you find the results useful as you compare your perspectives and business decisions with other agricultural employers. If you have questions regarding this report, or suggestions on how we can support your efforts to employ adolescent workers, please contact any one of us.

Sincerely,



Barbara Lee, PhD  
Director,  
National Farm Medicine Center



Sharon Hughes, CAE  
Executive Vice President  
National Council of Agricultural  
Employers



Michael Gempler  
Executive Director  
Washington Growers  
League



## Introduction

According to the National Research Council, work provides young people with many valuable lessons about responsibility, punctuality, human interaction, and money management. Work experiences can provide a foundation for independence by having a positive effect on self-esteem and skill development. Surveys suggest that up to 80% of all adolescents work at some point during their high school years.

Data from the National Agriculture Statistics Service report that in 1998 there were 431,730 youth between ages 12 and 17 hired in agricultural work. The majority (86%) were boys. The largest cluster of youth (28%) were boys ages 16-17 years employed in crop work, including cash grains, nursery, vegetables, fruits and nuts. The next largest group was boys ages 16-17 employed in livestock operations of beef, dairy, cattle, or swine. During 1998 there were 1,900 reported work-related injuries among hired adolescents, which comprised about 8% of all injuries to youth on farms.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) provided funding for a collaborative project – Safety Training for Employers and Supervisors of Adolescent Farmworkers (STESAF). The goal of this project is to improve the occupational health and safety knowledge and practices of

agricultural employers/supervisors responsible for adolescent farmworkers (ages 14–17 years old). The project builds on the success of other industries, such as quick service restaurants that depend on a labor pool of young people.

The first step of this project was to increase our understanding of agricultural employers' perspectives on the characteristics of adolescents as farm workers. Additionally, we sought information on employers' current practices and future intentions to employ adolescents. In January 2004, focus group discussions were convened with participants at the annual meeting of the National Council of Agricultural Employers. In April 2004 mail surveys were sent to members of the National Council of Agricultural Employers and the Washington Growers League. To protect the anonymity of survey respondents, no personal identifiers were collected and only limited information regarding agricultural operations was requested.

An overview of survey findings is provided here. This information can be useful for comparing your practices with other employers and managers. Results will also be used to guide future programs that support efforts of agricultural employers to safely and appropriately give adolescents positive work experiences.



## Survey Participants

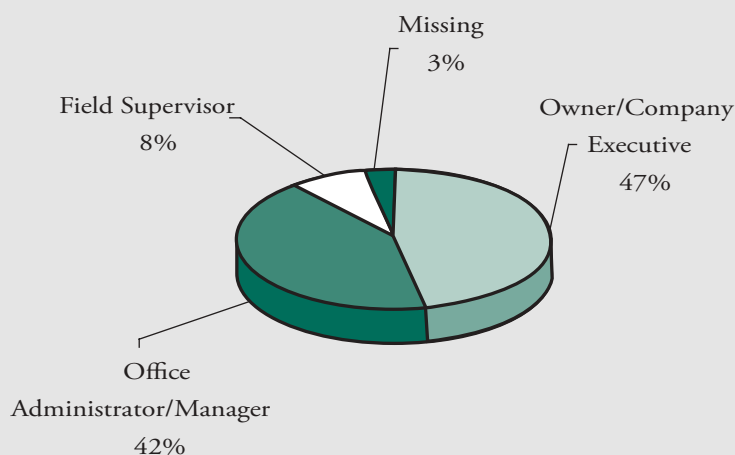
Of the 878 survey forms mailed out, 333 (38%) were returned. Some surveys were blank or not fully completed. There were 283 usable surveys, representing 151 employers who hire adolescents (“teen employers”) and 132 who do not (“non-teen employers”). The cover letter with survey indicated responses were requested from the individual responsible for hiring and supervising teen workers. On the survey form, respondents filled in a blank, indicating job title. The specific titles provided varied from “Owner” to “Human Resource Director.” Titles were then categorized into three levels: Owner/Executive, Office Administrator or Manager or Field Supervisor as shown in Figure 1.

Of the 283 survey respondents, 72% were males and 28% were females. The majority of respondents (80%) had formal education beyond high school. More than 60% had college degrees and 16% had post-graduate

degrees. Their ages ranged from 23 to 76 years. More than half of them were age 50 years or older. Their agricultural enterprises involved a wide range of commodities. Some were relatively specialized and others checked several types of products. The primary groupings of agricultural enterprises are shown in Figure 2 and the numbers of employees of survey respondents are depicted in Figure 3.

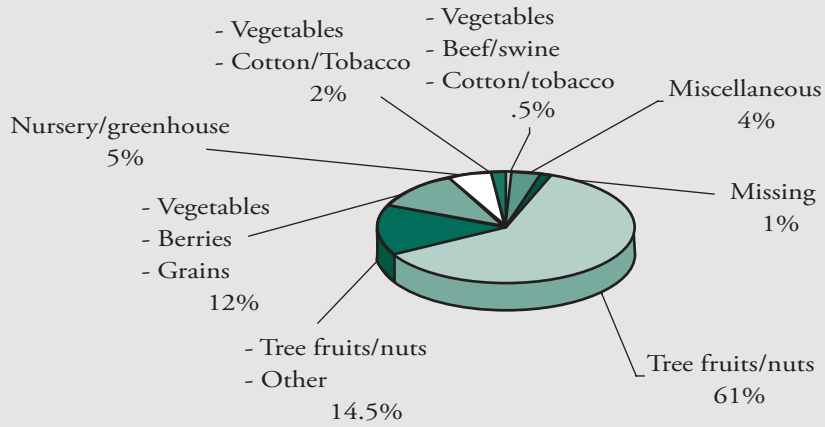
In order to guide future projects, it was important to understand any differences between the types or sizes of agricultural enterprises that routinely hire teens versus those that do not hire teen workers. Figure 3 breaks down the survey participants into the two groups (teen employers and non-teen employers) by the total number of all employees in their business. Results show that among the survey respondents, those that had a greater number of employees overall were more likely to hire teens than the smaller operations.

**Figure 1 - Job title (n=238)**



## Figure 2 - Commodities (n=283)

Note: Survey requested respondents to "check all that apply"



## Figure 3 - Distribution of respondents by total number of employees



## Reasons for and against hiring adolescents

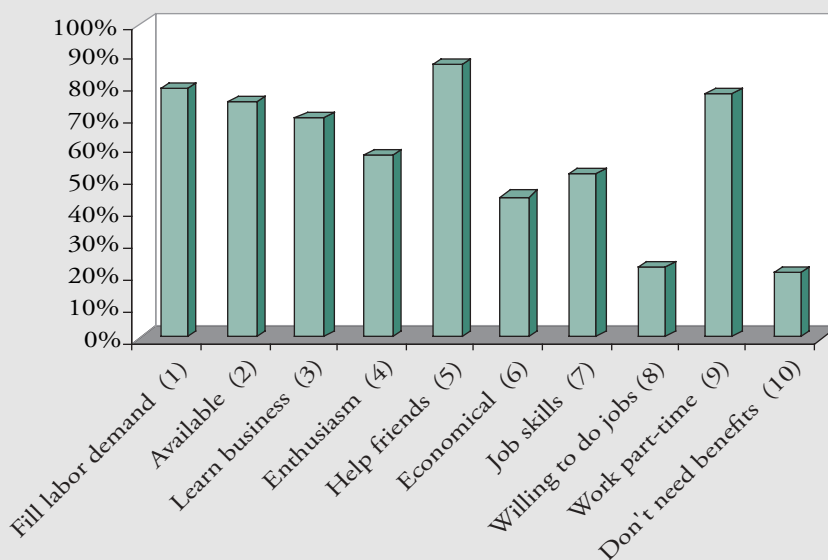
Survey results showed that many respondents perceive adolescents as hardworking, likeable, and dependable. The majority of respondents have positive perceptions about adolescents, in terms of dependability, helpfulness, and general attitudes toward safety. Moreover, approximately 47% of the respondents were intending to employ adolescents in the future, while approximately 32% did not intend to employ adolescents in the future. Roughly 21% were uncertain about their future intentions concerning the employment of youth in their organizations.

The reasons for (and against) hiring adolescents were analyzed by group. Figure 4 depicts reasons for hiring

adolescents as reported by 151 respondents who currently have adolescent employees. Among the survey respondents who do not hire teens, the reasons for their decision are illustrated in Figure 5.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with personal beliefs and social expectations regarding employment of teen workers in agriculture. Responses on a five-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) of all employers are depicted in Figure 6. More than 80% of respondents agree that it is important to have strategies for complying with teen labor regulations. Only a few respondents were concerned that hiring teens resulted in bad outcomes.

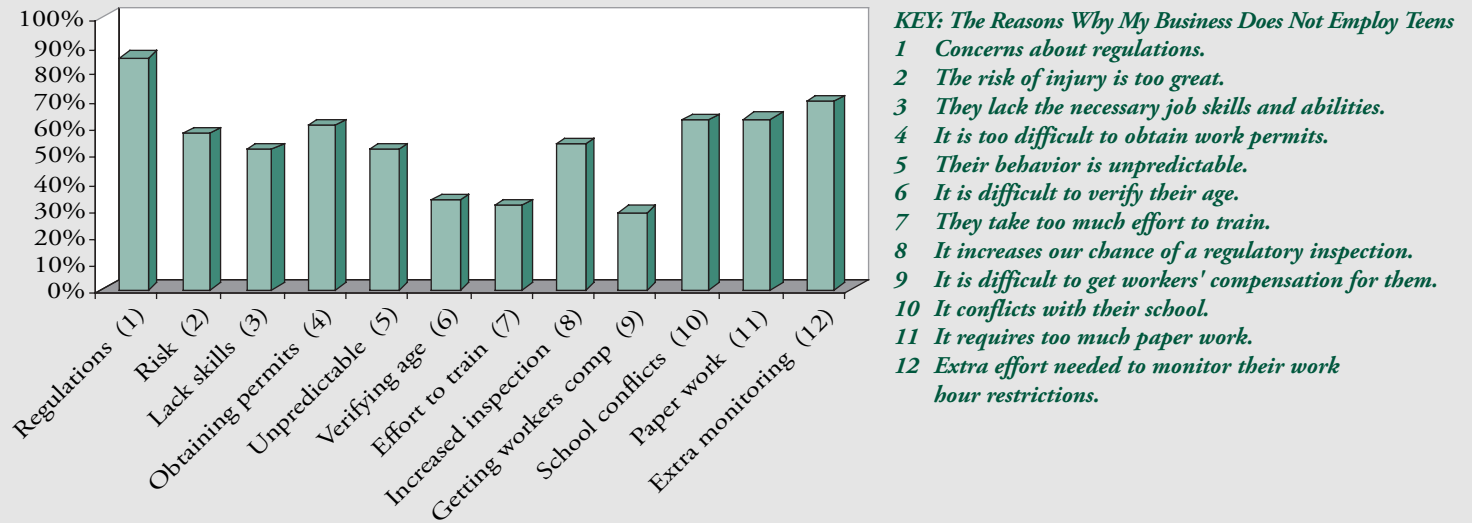
**Figure 4 - Reasons for hiring adolescents (n=151)**



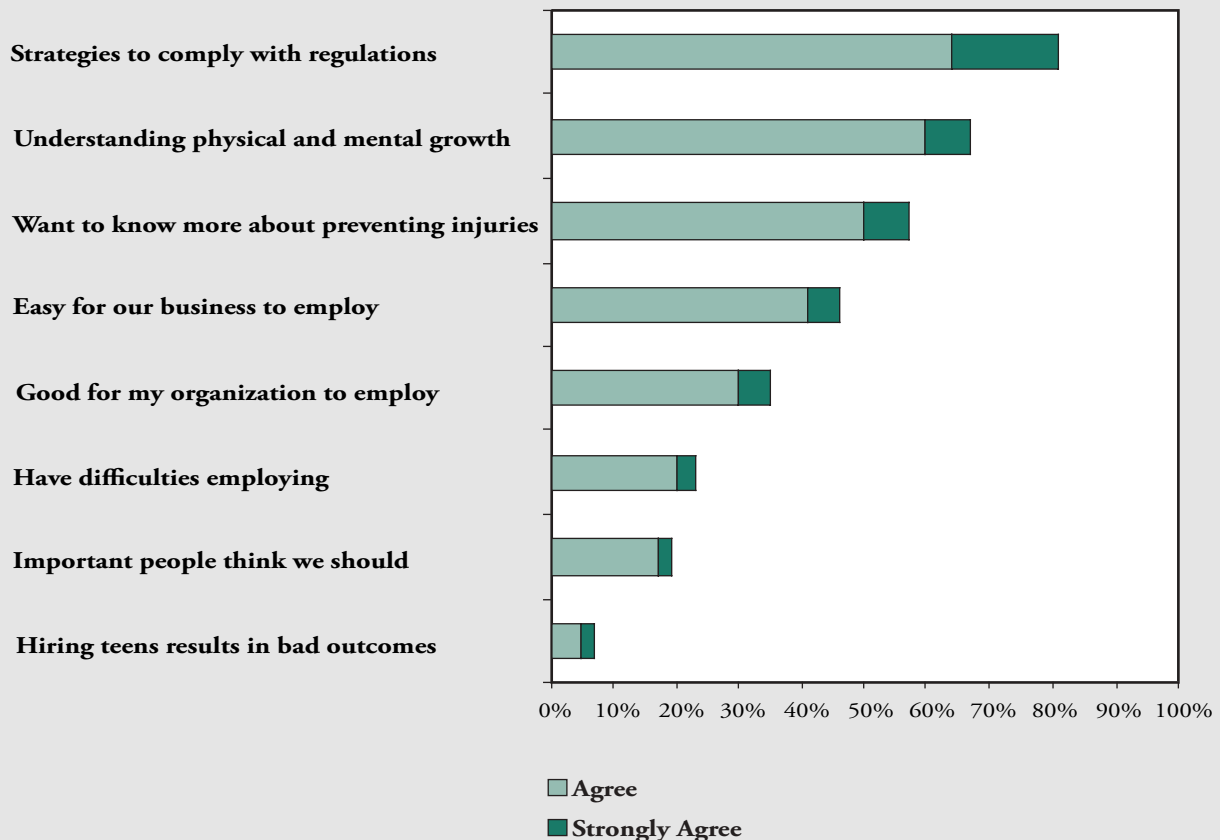
**KEY: The Reasons Why My Business Employs Teens**

- 1 To fill our labor demand.
- 2 Teens are available for work.
- 3 To help them learn about the business.
- 4 Their enthusiasm at work.
- 5 To help employ teens of family or friends.
- 6 It is economically good for our company.
- 7 They have the necessary job skills and abilities.
- 8 They are willing to do jobs adults will not do.
- 9 They can work part-time or during the summer.
- 10 They do not need special benefits or health coverage.

**Figure 5 - Reasons for NOT hiring adolescents (n=132)**



**Figure 6 - Employers' (n=283) agreement with statements (perspectives) on teen workers**



## Safety Training Practices and Employment Experiences

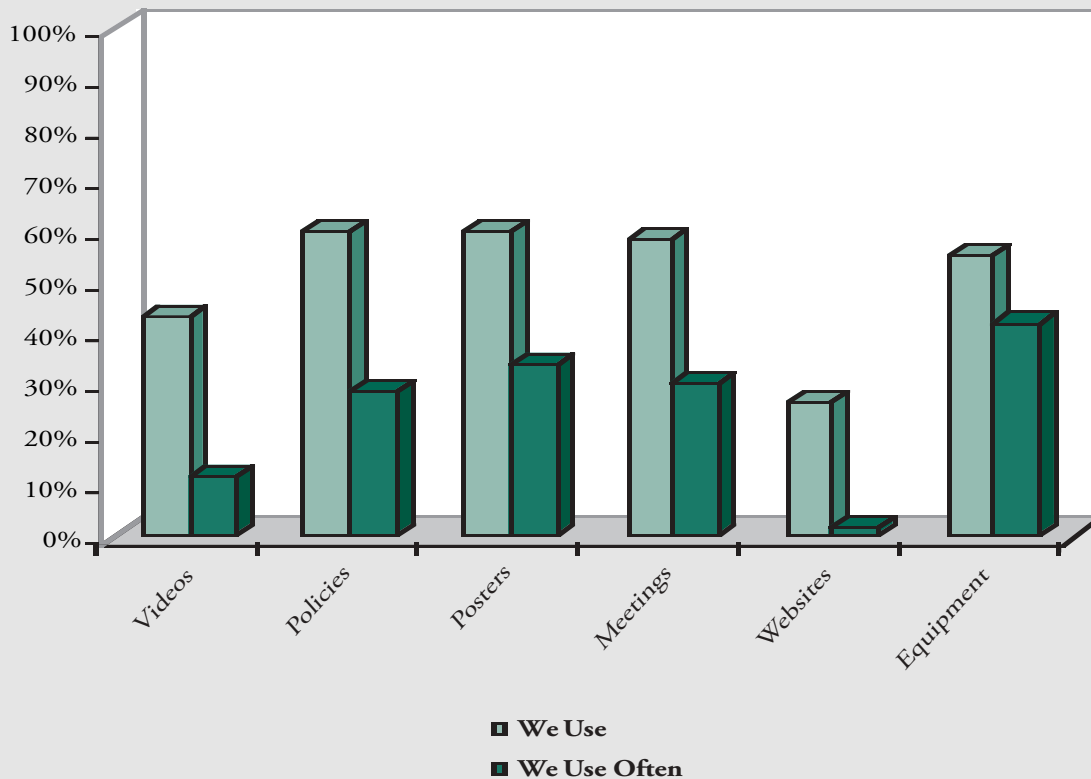
Respondents described their current practices and indicated whether they expect to need certain resources (e.g. safety posters) more or less often in the future. Figure 7 describes the current safety practices of all employers. Surveyed employers report using written policies, posters, meetings, and equipment most often with their employees. Employers that are educating their employees about safety use safety-related websites less than 30% of the time.

Employers of adolescent workers were asked the question, “in the future, will you need more or less of the various safety resources, or are no changes

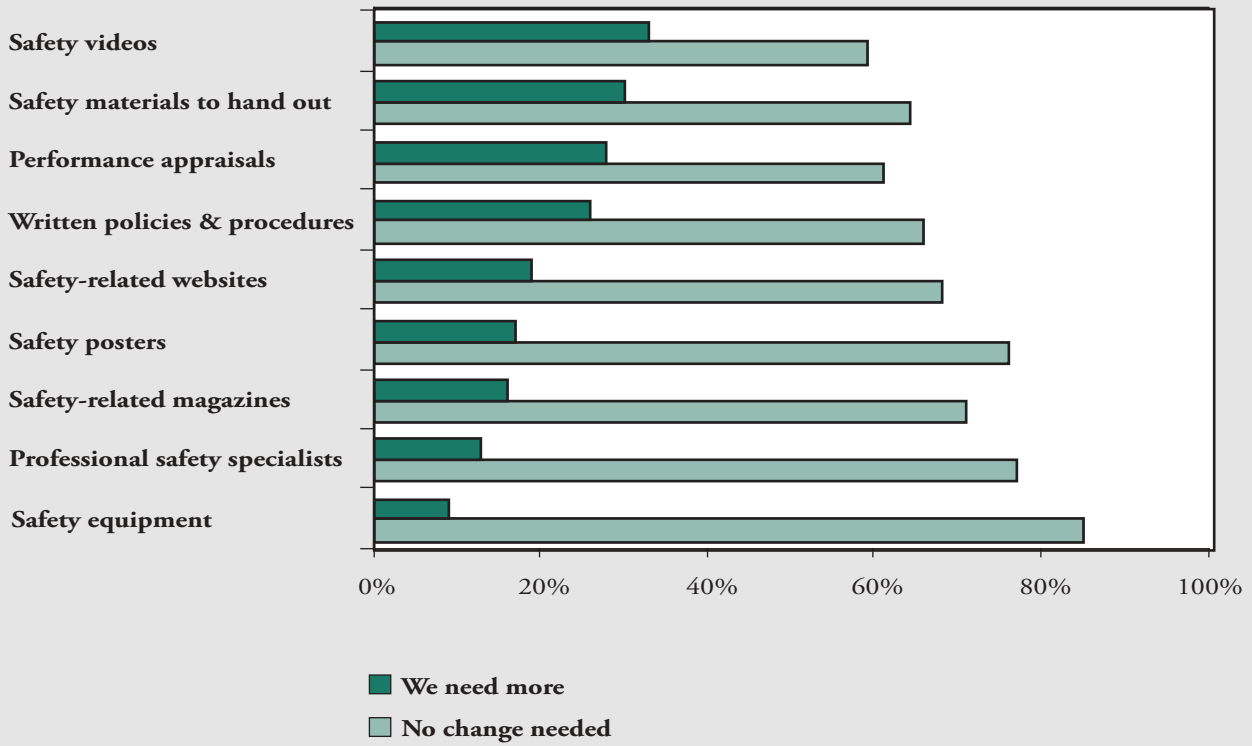
needed?” Figure 8 illustrates that most employers have enough resources now, but about 25% of teen employers would appreciate more safety training videos and printed handout safety resources.

Employers were asked about the extent to which they experience factors that affect the work output (Figure 9). On a four-point scale of never to always, more than 60% indicated that among their adult and teen employees combined they often or always have high productivity and high quality work. Very few reported they often have employee accidents or absenteeism. There was no difference in responses between the teen employers and the non-teen employers.

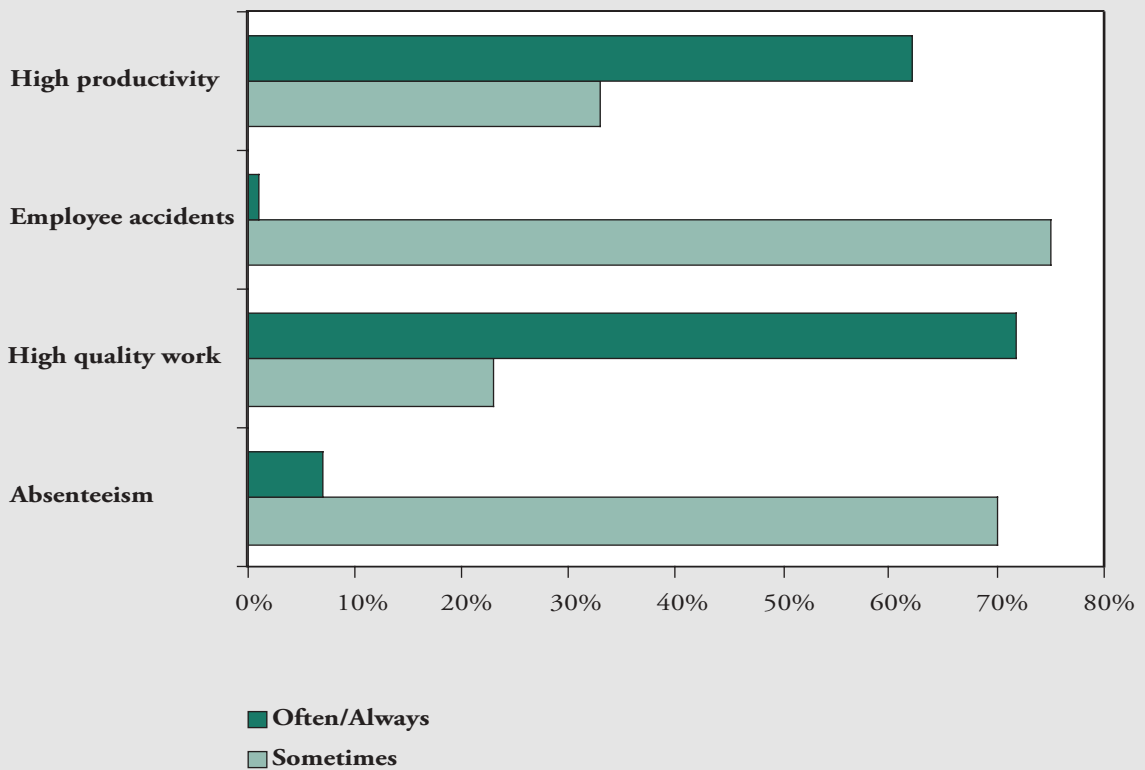
**Figure 7 - All employers safety education practices (n=283)**



**Figure 8 - Teen employers' future safety resource needs (n=151)**



**Figure 9 - Frequency of adult and teen worker performance issues among all employers (n=283)**



## Additional feedback from survey respondents

A final survey question asked survey participants to “share other important insights you have about safety, teen workers, or general business issues.” Written feedback responses were submitted by 100 (35%) of the 283 survey respondents. Comments reflected a range of feelings and experiences from very positive to negative (primarily associated with regulatory restrictions). Written feedback included:

“I am very pleased with teen workers. They are willing to work and do a great job. We will continue to use teens, hopefully, we won’t be regulated out of using them.”

“Teens have a lot to offer, but there’s a lot of paperwork and regulations.”

“All our teenage employees work side by side with their parents. We hire them because it’s good for them and helpful to their families.”

Current regulations discourage employment of teenagers. As a result, a strong work ethic is often missing among young people.”

“It’s all a balancing act – dealing with regulations while hiring teen workers.”



## Summary

There are many reasons for and against hiring adolescents to work in agriculture. Safety practices of employers and supervisors range from minimal oversight to use of multiple resources, such as video training programs and written safety procedures. Ideally, young people will be recruited, hired, and carefully trained and supervised to conduct safe, appropriate work in agriculture.

To this end, we support efforts of agricultural employers to hire teen workers and hope to facilitate access to resources that can simplify their training and supervision of adolescents. Through positive work experiences, young adults will gain important life skills along with an appreciation of the importance of production agriculture for our society and economy.

## References

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- Myers, J.R., & Hendricks, K.J. (2001). *Injuries Among Youth on Farms in the United States, 1998* (DHHS/NIOSH Publication No. 2001-154) Cincinnati, OH: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/childag/pdfs/2001154.pdf>
- USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service (2004). 2001 Childhood Agricultural-Related Injuries. Available at <http://jan.mannlib.cornell.edu/reports/nassr/other/injury/injr0104.pdf>
- Vela Acosta, M.S. & Lee, B. (Eds)(2001). *Migrant and Seasonal Hired Adolescent Farmworkers: A Plan to Improve Working Conditions*. Marshfield, WI: Marshfield Clinic. <http://www.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc/farmworkersreport/>

## Resource Information & Websites

Additional information about employing adolescents in agriculture can be found from these sources:  
Youth Rules ([www.youthrules.dol.gov](http://www.youthrules.dol.gov))

OSHA teen workers website  
(<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/teenworkers.html>)

Child Labor Requirements in Agricultural Occupations Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (Child Labor Bulletin 102)—Available by calling (202) 693-0023

U.S. Department of Labor listing of Hazardous Occupation Orders in Agriculture  
([http://www.dol.gov/dol/allcfr/Title\\_29/Part\\_570/29CFR570.71.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/allcfr/Title_29/Part_570/29CFR570.71.htm))

Young worker labor laws listed by state  
(<http://youthrules.dol.gov/states.htm>)

State specific minimum wage rates  
(<http://www.dol.gov/esa/minwage/america.htm>)

### Web sites

National Council of Agricultural Employers  
<http://www.ncaeonline.org>

National Farm Medicine Center  
<http://research.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc/>

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### Additional Copies

Copies of this and other reports are available by contacting the National Farm Medicine Center/National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety.

**Phone:** 1-800-662-6900 or 715-389-4999

**Internet:** <http://research.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc/>

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