Combating Trafficking in Persons Program Management Office
Foreign National Labor Trafficking and Child Labor Exploitation Cases

1. *U.S. v. Maria Leticia Patricio et al., Waycross, Georgia, 2015 – 2021*

Traffickers used the H-2A work visa program to smuggle foreign nationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras into a dozen states in the U.S. with the promise of good jobs in agriculture. The victims paid the traffickers 20,000 pesos (about $950), to obtain the jobs. After crossing the border, they were taken to corn, onion, and blueberry farms and forced to harvest vegetables and fruits. In one case, workers were told they would be paid $12.00 an hour; instead, they ended up digging onions with their bare hands, paid 20 cents for each bucket harvested. The traffickers required the workers to pay additional fees for transportation, food, and housing so they were accumulating debt instead of paying it down. Their identification documents were withheld, and they were forced "to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and threatening them with deportation and violence" including rape, kidnapping and threats to victims' family members if they did not obey. In many cases victims were sold or traded to other traffickers. At least two victims died during the process. When the case came to court, the traffickers intimidated victims to try to force them to lie to a federal grand jury. The trafficking ring reaped more than $200 million from the illegal scheme, laundering the funds through cash purchases of land, homes, vehicles, and businesses including, a restaurant and nightclub; through cash purchases of cashier's checks; and in casinos.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border.

2. *Rosas et al v. Saraband Farms et al., State of Washington, 2018*

The traffickers were owners of a large blueberry farm. They used HJ2-A visa programs to bring almost 600 workers to the U.S. from Mexico to harvest and pack blueberries. The complaint described hazardous living and working conditions in which workers were guarded and prohibited from leaving the farm, housed miliary style 30 to a room, with only one meal a day. The traffickers required the workers to pay additional fees for transportation, food, and housing so they were accumulating debt instead of paying it down. Their identification documents were withheld, and they were forced "to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded living conditions. They were brought to the U.S. already heavily in debt in order to obtain the job. Their work visas bound them to the farm so they could not leave to find other work. The employer used threats of blacklisting them, deporting them back to Mexico. They worked 12-hour shifts with no time off seven days a week and were told they had to work even if on their deathbed, resulting in at least one death of a workers.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border.

3. *U.S. v. Butikofer, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2011 - 2018*

In 2018, Butikofer used forced labor to financially benefit his cattle farm, recruiting H-2A workers to the U.S. under false pretense. He promised good wages plus expenses such as housing and food, but workers found they had no hot water or furniture, and their water was contaminated by dead animals dumped near their living quarters. He used threats of violence to compel workers including threatened workers with hanging and an electric shock dog collar. Agents later rescued other workers bound for Fawn Hollow in April 2024.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border

4. ***U.S. v. Jesus Ruiz Hernandez, Vashon Island, Washington, 2017 - 2024***

The trafficker ran a landscaping business in which he lured victims from his hometown of Vista Hermosa, Michoacan, Mexico. with the promise of a better life for their families. In exchange, Ruiz-Hernandez required victims to put up collateral, including the temporary relinquishment of parental rights and interest in family properties. Ruiz-Hernandez, using smugglers he hired, brought the undocumented victims to the U.S. and then forced them to work for his company on Vashon Island. He then charged the victims exorbitant fees for rent, food, and other expenses, housed them both in his home and worker properties and held ever increasing debts over their heads. At trial prosecutors said, "For years he ensured a steady pipeline of workers for his landscaping business using their undocumented status and inability to speak English to prey on them." Millions of dollars were laundered from the scheme and used to buy properties on the expensive island, and to pay coyotes to traffic more workers.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border

5. ***U.S. v. Moreno et al, Florida,***

The trafficker owned, operated and managed LVH — a farm labor contracting company that brought large numbers of temporary, seasonal Mexican workers into the United States on H-2A agricultural visas to pick melons — as a criminal enterprise. Once in the U.S. victims' passports and identification papers were seized and they were compelled to work in Florida, Kentucky, Indiana, Georgia and North Carolina and then charged them inflated sums to bring them to the United States on H-2A visas. Once the victims arrived in the United States, Moreno and his co-conspirators coerced over a dozen of them into providing long hours of physically demanding agricultural labor, seven days a week, for little or no pay. Moreno and his co-conspirators used various forms of coercion, including imposing debts on the workers; confiscating their passports; threatening them with arrest. He subjected them to crowded, unsanitary and degrading living conditions – groups of workers were living 40 – 70 in a room, and sharing beds. harboring them in the United States after their visas had expired; and threatening them with arrest and deportation if they failed to comply with demands. Later, in an attempt to conceal the criminal enterprise from federal investigators, Moreno created falsified records about the workers' pay and hours and repeatedly made false statements to federal investigators.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border

6. *U.S. v. Saul Garcia et al., Racine, Wisconsin, 2019*

The traffickers were a subcontracting firm that brought hundreds of victims to the United States from Mexico legally under an H-2A visa, which allows seasonal farm laborers to work for specific employer. Victims were forced to pay a fee and turn over the deeds to properties they owned in Mexico as security for getting a job in the United States, which is not legal. They were brought to Georgia ostensibly to work on farms there but instead, were taken to a cramped warehouse outside town. Their passports and personal documents were then taken by the contractors. After that, they were driven to Wisconsin in a labor-trafficking scheme that transported legal temporary farm workers from Georgia to work illegally at a Racine-area farm. In Racine they were held "like prisoners" in a motel. They were given fake names and IDs and told not to talk to anyone and forced to work 16-to-18-hour days, seven days a week on the farm, often in extreme weather conditions. They were charged $150 out of their pay if they had to see a doctor, so few went, even when they were seriously ill. Owners of the Wisconsin farm where the men worked said they knew nothing of the conditions under which the men worked or that they were allegedly trafficked.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border

7. *U.S. v. Job Hernandez, Hayward, California, 2015 - 2020*

The trafficker owned construction companies in Northern California. He recruited workers from Mexico, Promising them good jobs and bringing them across the border, but when they arrived, they were forced to work 24-hour shifts in construction and were not paid. They were housed in "squalid conditions" in a warehouse and a garage, with no access to kitchens or bathrooms. The trafficker obtained the labor of his employees by "physical restraint and threats of force, threats of serious harm to the victims and especially to their families back in Mexico. The court held that the trafficker made millions of dollars from the victims unpaid work and ordered him to pay $900,000 in restitution.

Border breach: Smuggling victims into the U.S. and then trafficking them.

8. *Department of Labor Investigation; Chesapeake, Virginia, May 2, 2020*

A 14-year-old foreign national immigrant boy lost his arm while working at a Perdue slaughterhouse on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. He was hired by one of Perdue's contractors tasked with cleaning operations. He and dozens of other middle and high school-aged children made up about a third of the overnight shifts at the plant, handling acid and pressure hoses to wash away blood and meat scraps from industrial machines. Mostly from Central America, the children were hired through an outside sanitation company. They worked with potent chemicals, washed hazardous machinery, and sometimes showed up to school with burns. There were reasons that supervisors, teachers, federal inspectors and even police officers had said nothing for years about children working at the slaughterhouses. Everyone understood that the children were under extraordinary pressure to earn money to pay off their "travel debts."

9. Department of Labor Investigation; Hattiesburg, Mississippi, July 20, 2023

A 16-year-old died while on the job at a poultry plant in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He suffered a fatal injury when he "became entangled" in one of the machines he was cleaning. His was the third accidental death at the facility in less than three years. The minor was a Guatemalan who immigrated approximately six years ago and began work at the chicken factory to help his family. "Workers are put in these conditions that are truly deplorable," an investigator said. "We've been hearing from folks on the ground that there is a lot of child labor that is happening at that poultry plant, so there's a lot that needs to be investigated. "

10. Department of Labor Investigation Nashville, TN, Florida, June 23, 2020

A 16 year old high school junior, was working a summer job at a Nashville construction site in June when he fell to his death from scaffolding raised 120 feet (11 stories) in the air. He was too young to work any job at roof height, according to Occupational Safety and Health Administration child labor regulations. A gap of about 3 feet separated the scaffold from the side of the building, He and dozens of other young workers, none of whom were wearing harnesses, "regularly crossed back and forth between the scaffold and the building when working on each floor, without lowering the scaffold. They crossed in mid-air, as high as 120 feet in elevation, between the building and the scaffolding." He had been hired to work by a subcontractor who supplied roofers to the contractor. Contractors said his death was a "tragic accident," each stating that another company was ultimately responsible for ensuring his safety on the site. Other states were cited for underage roofers including a twelve-year-old roofers were also found in Florida

11. Department of Labor Investigation; Kieler, Wisconsin and eight other states, August 2022

At least 102 foreign national children – ages 13 to 17 years of age - were illegally employed in hazardous jobs in food sanitation services. The children were working overnight shifts at 13 meat processing facilities in 8 states. The cases were uncovered after children suffered severe injuries working with toxic chemicals cleaning mat processing equipment. The investigation started after a middle school in Grand Island, Nebraska, notified police that a 14-year-old student came to school with acid burns on her hands and knees. The girl told staff that she was working night shifts at a local slaughterhouse plant. Teachers also noticed that other students were falling asleep in class after reportedly working at the plant at night. "It seemed to be known within the community that minors either are or were working overnight shifts. They told us about children that were falling asleep in class, that they had burns, chemical burns. They were concerned about the safety of the kids. Packers Sanitation Services Inc. (PSSI) employed minors to use caustic chemicals to clean razor-sharp saws and other high-risk equipment at 13 meat processing facilities in 8 states (see list below). The company, headquartered in Kieler, Wisconsin, is one of the largest sanitation service providers in the country, has paid $1.5 million in civil penalties. The Department of Labor investigation found that children were working with hazardous chemicals and cleaning meat processing equipment including back saws, brisket saws and head splitters.

City	State
Batesville	AR
Green Forest	AR
Greeley	CO
Milford	IN
Dodge City	KS
Marshall	MN
St. Cloud	MN
Worthington	MN
Gibbon	NE
Grand Island	NE
Omaha	NE
Goodlettsville	TN
Fiona	TX

Images released by the US labor department show children working illegally for PSSI. Photograph: US Department of Labor ‘They were little’: photos show children illegally working in US slaughterhouse

Images released by US labor department show conditions over 100 children faced at Packers Sanitation Services Incorporated. Harrowing photos released by the US labor department taken at a slaughterhouse plant in Nebraska

12. Department of Labor Investigation; Grand Rapids, MI

Hundreds of foreign national minors worked in cereal factories in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The unaccompanied minors came across the southern border by themselves and then were settled in towns supposedly with relatives. One was 15-year-old girl who came to the United States on her own in 2022 to live with a relative she had never met. In the factory, a conveyor belt carried bags of Cheerios past a cluster of young workers. About every 10 seconds, she stuffed a sealed plastic bag of cereal into a passing yellow carton. It could be dangerous work, with fast-moving pulleys and gears that had torn off fingers and ripped open a woman's scalp. The factory was full of underage foreign national workers like Carolina, who had crossed the Southern border by themselves and were now spending late hours bent over hazardous machinery, in violation of child labor laws. At nearby plants, other children worked tending giant ovens to make granola bars and packing bags of snack foods— all of them working for giant processing companies that ship their products to grocery stores around the country.

13. Department of Labor Investigation; St. James, Minnesota,

Chinese-owned meat processing giant Smithfield paid a $2 million penalty after a Department of Labor Investigation found that between 2021 and 2023, the St. James area plant owned by Smithfield employed at least 11 minor children between the ages of 14 and 17. The children were also working late on school nights and performing hazardous jobs like working near chemicals; operating power-driven machinery, including meat grinders, slicers and power-driven conveyor belts; and operating nonautomatic elevators, lifts or hoisting machines, including motorized

pallet jacks and lift pallet jacks "It is unacceptable for a company to employ minor children to perform hazardous work late at night.

14. Department of Labor Investigation; Omaha, Nebraska, 2021 - 2024

Fifty-four (54) children, some as young as 12 and 13 years old, were found working in meatpacking plants in several slaughterhouses in Nebraska. The problem of kids working in dangerous slaughterhouses continues to be a concern as the Labor Department announced its third agreement with a company in the industry agreeing to pay a penalty and reform its practices to help ensure it won't hire underage workers again. The Department said investigators found that another slaughterhouse cleaning company had employed children in 13 plants on overnight shifts sanitizing the industrial carving and slicing machines companies use to produce beef and chicken between 2021 and 2024. This is at least the fourth example of one of these cleaning contractors being caught employing kids in the last two-and-a-half years. The company will pay a $400,000 penalty.

15. Department of Labor Investigation; Sioux City, Iowa, November 29, 2024

Federal investigators found nearly a dozen children to be working dangerous, overnight shifts at a pork processing plant in Sioux City, Iowa, the Department of Labor announced. Employed by an Oklahoma-based sanitation contractor, 11 kids allegedly used corrosive cleaners to sanitize head splitters, jaw pullers, bandsaws, neck clippers and other equipment at the Seaboard Triumph Foods facility from at least September 2019 through September 2023, the DOL stated in a news release. The company is among the nation's biggest pork producers. In addition to Iowa, it has operations in Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah, and in Mexico, according to the company's website." These findings illustrate [the company's] history of children working illegally in their Sioux City facility since at least September 2019. Despite changing sanitation contractors, children continued to work in dangerous occupations at this facility," the Midwest regional administrator with the DOL's Wage and Hour division, stated in the release.

16. Department of Labor Investigation; Addison County and other counties, State of Vermont

An investigation by the New York Times, published in February, implicated the Vermont dairy industry in a nationwide scandal in which unaccompanied migrant children have been released from federal custody only to perform grueling work for U.S. companies in violation of child labor laws. The story asserted that child laborers were processing milk used in famous ice cream companies. It quoted a 19-year-old Middlebury farmworker named Paco Calvo, who described working 12-hour shifts milking cows since he arrived at age 14. Over the past 25 years, workers from Mexico and Central America have become the backbone of Vermont's dairy industry — as much a part of the rural landscape as the cows they milk. While most are in the United States illegally, they've provided a reliable workforce for farmers who need more hired hands but can't find them locally. As many as 1,000 migrants work in the state's milking parlors and dairy barns, doing sometimes dangerous jobs for long hours and low pay, without labor protections that workers in other industries take for granted. Many don't earn overtime pay or even minimum wage. If they're hurt on the job, safety inspectors often don't investigate. Their lives are shaped

every day by the risk of deportation. They live where few people look like them or speak their language. A survey in 2018 showed that 94 % of dairy farms hire Latino workers, most here illegally. Working 14-hour days, kicked by cows, no breaks for food, they do not file complaints.

17. ***Department of Labor Investigation ; Greenville, Alabama, September 2022***

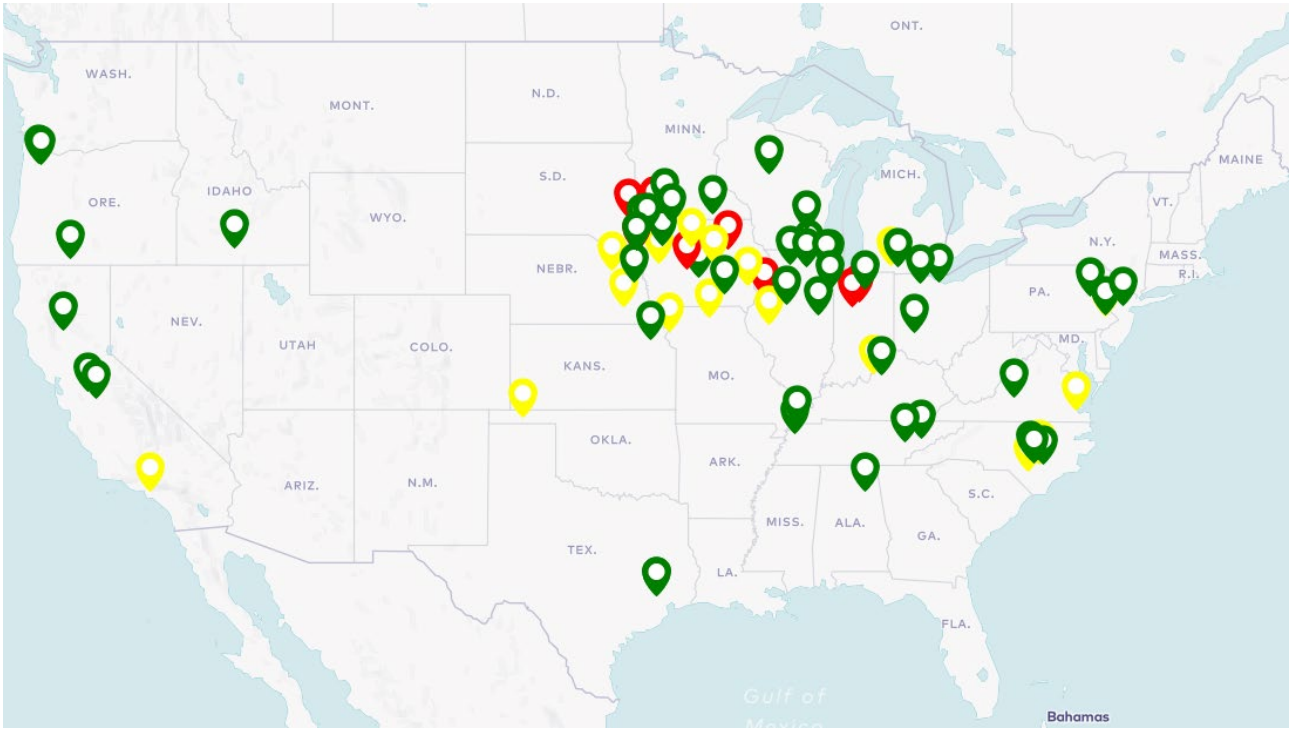
Foreign national children as young as 12 years old have been discovered working at car factories in Alabama. At least four major suppliers of these car factories have employed child labor at Alabama factories in recent years, and federal agencies are probing whether kids have worked at as many as a half dozen additional manufacturers throughout the automakers' supply chain in the southern U.S. state. At a plant owned by a supplier to the two car brands in the south Alabama town of Greenville, a 14-year-old Guatemalan girl worked this May assembling auto body components. At plants owned by Korean auto parts maker Ajin Industrial Co, in the east Alabama town of Cusseta, a former production engineer said he worked with at least 10 minors. And six other ex-employees of Ajin said they, too, worked alongside multiple underage laborers. The news follows a Reuters report in July that revealed the use of child workers, one as young as 12, by SMART Alabama LLC, a Hyundai subsidiary in the south Alabama town of Luverne. In August, the U.S. Department of Labor said that SL Alabama LLC, another Hyundai supplier and a unit of South Korea's SL Corp, employed underage workers, including a 13-year-old, at its factory in Alexander City. Since then, as many as 10 Alabama plants that supply parts to Hyundai or Kia have been investigated for child labor.

18. Department of Labor Investigation; Canton, Ohio

A teenage worker had his left leg amputated below the knee when his employer illegally allowed him to clean a giblet chiller machine at a Canton chicken processing facility. Following an investigation, the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division assessed civil money penalties of $63,250 to the company. The agency found that the company violated child labor laws by employing a 17-year-old to clean equipment their processing facility. Investigators determined the company employed at least four minors on its sanitation crew in violation of the child labor regulations. "This 17-year-old's life was forever altered because his employer illegally allowed him to operate hazardous poultry processing equipment," said George Victory, district director for the Wage and Hour Division in Columbus. This case should serve as a wake-up call to other employers and cause them to review their labor practices to comply with critical protections that the law requires

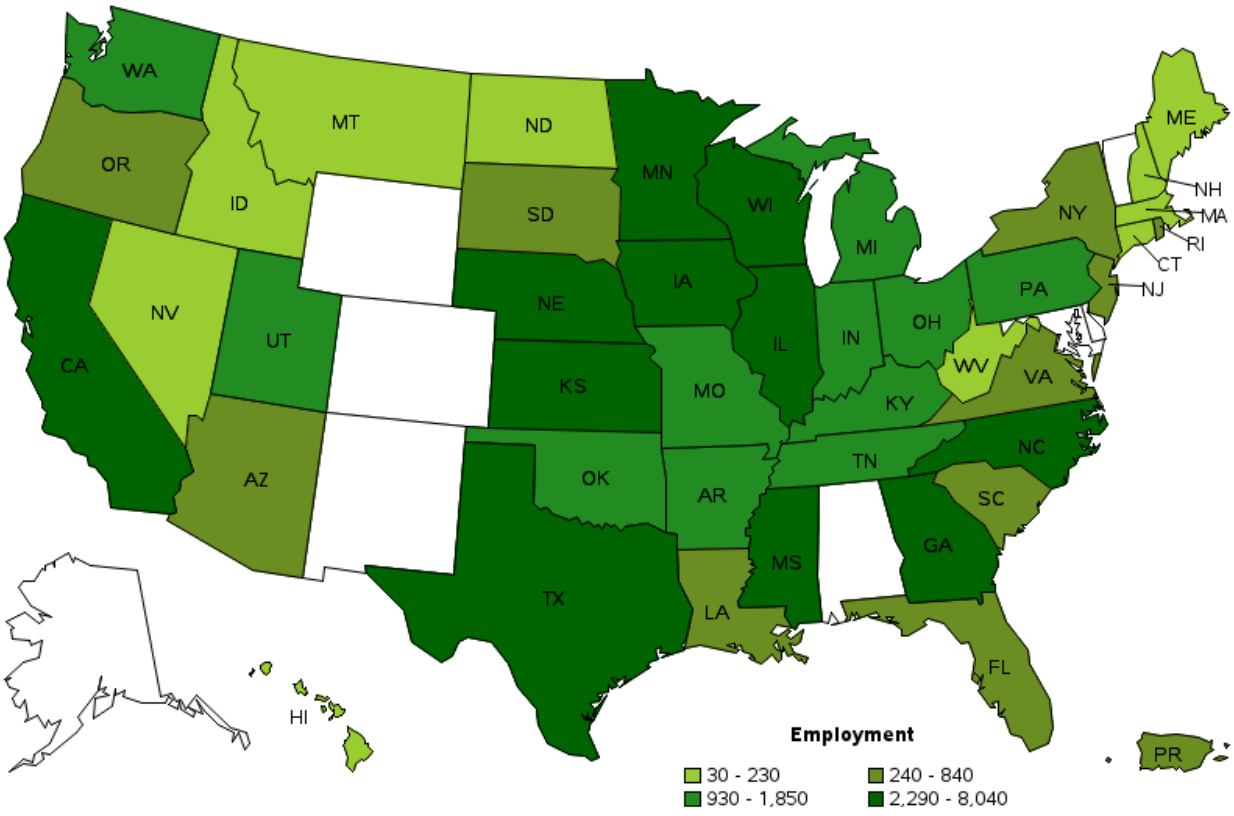
In Michigan, foreign national children make auto parts used by Ford and General Motors.
According to data from the Labor Department, child labor violations have nearly quadrupled since a low point in 2015 — leading to more injuries and deaths on the job.

Map of "broiler belt" chicken factories in U.S.



Map of pig slaughterhouses in U.S.

Employment of slaughterers and meat packers, by state, May 2023



Blank areas indicate data not available.