

Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S.

 [nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html)

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Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Cristian works a construction job instead of going to school. He is 14.

Carolina packages Cheerios at night in a factory. She is 15.

Wander starts looking for day-labor jobs before sunrise. He is 13.

It was almost midnight in Grand Rapids, Mich., but inside the factory everything was bright. A conveyor belt carried bags of Cheerios past a cluster of young workers. One was 15-year-old Carolina Yoc, who came to the United States on her own last year to live with a relative she had never met.

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 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 were tending giant ovens to make Chewy and Nature Valley granola bars and packing bags of Lucky Charms and Cheetos — all of them working for the processing giant Hearthside Food Solutions, which would ship these products around the country.

“Sometimes I get tired and feel sick,” Carolina said after a shift in November. Her stomach often hurt, and she was unsure if that was because of the lack of sleep, the stress from the incessant roar of the machines, or the worries she had for herself and her family in Guatemala. “But I’m getting used to it.”

Image



Hearthside Food Solutions, one of the United States' largest food contractors, makes and packages products for well-known snack and cereal brands. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

These workers are part of a new economy of exploitation: Migrant children, who have been coming into the United States without their parents in record numbers, are ending up in some of the most punishing jobs in the country, a New York Times investigation found. This shadow work force extends across industries in every state, flouting child labor laws that have been in place for nearly a century. Twelve-year-old roofers in Florida and Tennessee. Underage slaughterhouse workers in Delaware, Mississippi and North Carolina. Children sawing planks of wood on overnight shifts in South Dakota.

Largely from Central America, the children are driven by economic desperation that was worsened by the pandemic. This labor force has been slowly growing for almost a decade, but it has exploded since 2021, while the systems meant to protect children have broken down.

The Times spoke with more than 100 migrant child workers in 20 states who described jobs that were grinding them into exhaustion, and fears that they had become trapped in circumstances they never could have imagined. The Times examination also drew on court and inspection records and interviews with hundreds of lawyers, social workers, educators and law enforcement officials.

In town after town, children scrub dishes late at night. They run milking machines in Vermont and deliver meals in New York City. They harvest coffee and build lava rock walls around vacation homes in Hawaii. Girls as young as 13 wash hotel sheets in Virginia.

Image

Oscar Lopez, a ninth grader, works overnight at a sawmill in South Dakota. On this day, he skipped school to sleep after a 14-hour shift. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

In many parts of the country, middle and high school teachers in English-language learner programs say it is now common for nearly all their students to rush off to long shifts after their classes end.

“They should not be working 12-hour days, but it’s happening here,” said Valeria Lindsay, a language arts teacher at Homestead Middle School near Miami. For the past three years, she said, almost every eighth grader in her English learner program of about 100 students was also carrying an adult workload.

Migrant child labor benefits both under-the-table operations and global corporations, The Times found. In Los Angeles, children stitch “Made in America” tags into J. Crew shirts. They bake dinner rolls sold at Walmart and Target, process milk used in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and help debone chicken sold at Whole Foods. As recently as the fall, middle-schoolers made Fruit of the Loom socks in Alabama. In Michigan, children make auto parts used by Ford and General Motors.

The number of unaccompanied minors entering the United States climbed to a high of 130,000 last year — three times what it was five years earlier — and this summer is expected to bring another wave.

These are not children who have stolen into the country undetected. The federal government knows they are in the United States, and the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for ensuring sponsors will support them and protect them from trafficking or exploitation.

But as more and more children have arrived, the Biden White House has ramped up demands on staffers to move the children quickly out of shelters and release them to adults. Caseworkers say they rush through vetting sponsors.

While H.H.S. checks on all minors by calling them a month after they begin living with their sponsors, data obtained by The Times showed that over the last two years, the agency could not reach more than 85,000 children. Overall, the agency lost immediate contact with a third of migrant children.

An H.H.S. spokeswoman said the agency wanted to release children swiftly, for the sake of their well-being, but had not compromised safety. “There are numerous places along the process to continually ensure that a placement is in the best interest of the child,” said the

spokeswoman, Kamara Jones.

Far from home, many of these children are under intense pressure to earn money. They send cash back to their families while often being in debt to their sponsors for smuggling fees, rent and living expenses.

“It’s getting to be a business for some of these sponsors,” said Annette Passalacqua, who left her job as a caseworker in Central Florida last year. Ms. Passalacqua said she saw so many children put to work, and found law enforcement officials so unwilling to investigate these cases, that she largely stopped reporting them. Instead, she settled for explaining to the children that they were entitled to lunch breaks and overtime.

Sponsors are required to send migrant children to school, and some students juggle classes and heavy workloads. Other children arrive to find that they have been misled by their sponsors and will not be enrolled in school.

The federal government hires child welfare agencies to track some minors who are deemed to be at high risk. But caseworkers at those agencies said that H.H.S. regularly ignored obvious signs of labor exploitation, a characterization the agency disputed.

In interviews with more than 60 caseworkers, most independently estimated that about two-thirds of all unaccompanied migrant children ended up working full time.

A representative for Hearthside said the company relied on a staffing agency to supply some workers for its plants in Grand Rapids, but conceded that it had not required the agency to verify ages through a national system that checks Social Security numbers. Unaccompanied migrant children often obtain false identification to secure work.

“We are immediately implementing additional controls to reinforce all agencies’ strict compliance with our longstanding requirement that all workers must be 18 or over,” the company said in a statement.

At Union High School in Grand Rapids, Carolina’s ninth-grade social studies teacher, Rick Angstman, has seen the toll that long shifts take on his students. One, who was working nights at a commercial laundry, began passing out in class from fatigue and was hospitalized twice, he said. Unable to stop working, she dropped out of school.

“She disappeared into oblivion,” Mr. Angstman said. “It’s the new child labor. You’re taking children from another country and putting them in almost indentured servitude.”

On the Night Shift

Image

Children being processed by the U.S. Border Patrol in Roma, Texas. In the past two years alone, 250,000 unaccompanied minors have come into the country. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

When Carolina left Guatemala, she had no real understanding of what she was heading toward, just a sense that she could not stay in her village any longer. There was not much electricity or water, and after the pandemic began, not much food.

The only people who seemed to be getting by were the families living off remittances from relatives in the United States. Carolina lived alone with her grandmother, whose health began failing. When neighbors started talking about heading north, she decided to join. She was 14.

“I just kept walking,” she said.

Carolina reached the U.S. border exhausted, weighing 84 pounds. Agents sent her to an H.H.S. shelter in Arizona, where a caseworker contacted her aunt, Marcelina Ramirez. Ms. Ramirez was at first reluctant: She had already sponsored two other relatives and had three children of her own. They were living on \$600 a week, and she didn’t know Carolina.

When Carolina arrived in Grand Rapids last year, Ms. Ramirez told her she would go to school every morning and suggested that she pick up evening shifts at Hearthside. She knew Carolina needed to send money back to her grandmother. She also believed it was good for young people to work. Child labor is the norm in rural Guatemala, and she herself had started working around the second grade.

One of the nation’s largest contract manufacturers, Hearthside makes and packages food for companies like Frito-Lay, General Mills and Quaker Oats. “It would be hard to find a cookie or cracker aisle in any leading grocer that does not contain multiple products from Hearthside production facilities,” a Grand Rapids-area plant manager told a trade magazine in 2019.

General Mills, whose brands include Cheerios, Lucky Charms and Nature Valley, said it recognized “the seriousness of this situation” and was reviewing The Times’s findings. PepsiCo, which owns Frito-Lay and Quaker Oats, declined to comment.

Three people who until last year worked at one of the biggest employment agencies in Grand Rapids, Forge Industrial Staffing, said Hearthside supervisors were sometimes made aware that they were getting young-looking workers whose identities had been flagged as false.

“Hearthside didn’t care,” said Nubia Malacara, a former Forge employee who said she had also worked at Hearthside as a minor.

In a statement, Hearthside said, “We do care deeply about this issue and are concerned about the mischaracterization of Hearthside.” A spokesman for Forge said it complied with state and federal laws and “would never knowingly employ individuals under 18.”

Kevin Tomas said he sought work through Forge after he arrived in Grand Rapids at age 13 with his 7-year-old brother. At first, he was sent to a local manufacturer that made auto parts for Ford and General Motors. But his shift ended at 6:30 in the morning, so he could not stay awake in school, and he struggled to lift the heavy boxes.

“It’s not that we want to be working these jobs. It’s that we have to help our families,” Kevin said.

By the time he was 15, Kevin had found a job at Hearthside, stacking 50-pound cases of cereal on the same shift as Carolina.

‘So Many Red Flags’

Image

Cristian, 14, has been working in construction in North Miami for two years instead of going to school. Federal law bars minors from a long list of such jobs. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

The growth of migrant child labor in the United States over the past several years is a result of a chain of willful ignorance. Companies ignore the young faces in their back rooms and on their factory floors. Schools often decline to report apparent labor violations, believing it will hurt children more than help. And H.H.S. behaves as if the migrant children who melt unseen into the country are doing just fine.

“As the government, we’ve turned a blind eye to their trafficking,” said Doug Gilmer, the head of the Birmingham, Ala., office of Homeland Security Investigations, a federal agency that often becomes involved with immigration cases.

Mr. Gilmer teared up as he recalled finding 13-year-olds working in meat plants; 12-year-olds working at suppliers for Hyundai and Kia, as documented last year by a [Reuters investigation](#); and children who should have been in middle school working at commercial bakeries.

“We’re encountering it here because we’re looking for it here,” Mr. Gilmer said. “It’s happening everywhere.”

Children have crossed the Southern border on their own for decades, and since 2008, the United States has allowed non-Mexican minors to live with sponsors while they go through immigration proceedings, which can take several years. The policy, codified in anti-trafficking

legislation, is intended to prevent harm to children who would otherwise be turned away and left alone in a Mexican border town.

When Kelsey Keswani first worked as an H.H.S. contractor in Arizona to connect unaccompanied migrant children with sponsors in 2010, the adults were almost always the children's parents, who had paid smugglers to bring them up from Central America, she said.

But around 2014, the number of arriving children began to climb, and their circumstances were different. In recent years, "the kids almost all have a debt to pay off, and they're super stressed about it," Ms. Keswani said.

She began to see more failures in the vetting process. "There were so many cases where sponsors had sponsored multiple kids, and it wasn't getting caught. So many red flags with debt. So many reports of trafficking."

Now, just a third of migrant children are going to their parents. A majority are sent to other relatives, acquaintances or even strangers, a Times analysis of federal data showed. Nearly half are coming from Guatemala, where poverty is fueling a wave of migration. Parents know that they would be turned away at the border or quickly deported, so they send their children in hopes that remittances will come back.

In the last two years alone, more than 250,000 children have entered the United States by themselves.

The shifting dynamics in Central America helped create a political crisis early in Mr. Biden's presidency, when children started crossing the border faster than H.H.S. could process them. With no room left in shelters, the children stayed in jail-like facilities run by Customs and Border Protection and, later, in tent cities. The images of children sleeping on gym mats under foil blankets attracted intense media attention.

The Biden administration pledged to move children through the shelter system more quickly. "We don't want to continue to see a child languish in our care if there is a responsible sponsor," Xavier Becerra, secretary of health and human services, told Congress in 2021.

Image

A detention site in the Rio Grande Valley in March 2021. The Biden administration has faced pressure to move unaccompanied children through the system quickly. Credit...Pool photo by Dario Lopez-Mills

His agency began paring back protections that had been in place for years, including some background checks and reviews of children's files, according to memos reviewed by The Times and interviews with more than a dozen current and former employees.

"Twenty percent of kids have to be released every week or you get dinged," said Ms. Keswani, who stopped working with H.H.S. last month.

Concerns piled up in summer 2021 at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the H.H.S. division responsible for unaccompanied migrant children. In a memo that July, 11 managers said they were worried that labor trafficking was increasing and complained to their bosses that the office had become “one that rewards individuals for making quick releases, and not one that rewards individuals for preventing unsafe releases.”

Staff members said in interviews that Mr. Becerra continued to push for faster results, often asking why they could not discharge children with machine-like efficiency.

“If Henry Ford had seen this in his plants, he would have never become famous and rich. This is not the way you do an assembly line,” Mr. Becerra said at a staff meeting last summer, according to a recording obtained by The Times.

Video



The H.H.S. spokeswoman, Ms. Jones, said that Mr. Becerra had urged his staff to “step it up.” “Like any good leader, he wouldn’t hesitate to do it again — especially when it comes to the well-being and safety of children,” she said.

During a call last March, Mr. Becerra told Cindy Huang, the O.R.R. director, that if she could not increase the number of discharges, he would find someone who could, according to five people familiar with the call. She resigned a month later.

He recently made a similar threat to her successor during a meeting with senior leadership, according to several people who were present.

‘It Was All Lies’

Image

Migrant children were among the day laborers who gathered on a school day in Homestead, Fla., to find roofing, landscaping or other work. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

While many migrant children are sent to the United States by their parents, others are persuaded to come by adults who plan to profit from their labor.

Nery Cutzal was 13 when he met his sponsor over Facebook Messenger. Once Nery arrived in Florida, he discovered that he owed more than \$4,000 and had to find his own place to live. His sponsor sent him threatening text messages and kept a running list of new debts: \$140 for filling out H.H.S. paperwork; \$240 for clothes from Walmart; \$45 for a taco dinner.

“Don’t mess with me,” the sponsor wrote. “You don’t mean anything to me.”

Nery began working until 3 a.m. most nights at a trendy Mexican restaurant near Palm Beach to make the payments. “He said I would be able to go to school and he would take care of me, but it was all lies,” Nery said.

His father, Leonel Cutzal, said the family had become destitute after a series of bad harvests and had no choice but to send their oldest son north from Guatemala.

“Even when he shares \$50, it’s a huge help,” Mr. Cutzal said. “Otherwise, there are times we don’t eat.” Mr. Cutzal had not understood how much Nery would be made to work, he said. “I think he passed through some hard moments being up there so young.”

Nery eventually contacted law enforcement, and his sponsor was found guilty last year of smuggling a child into the United States for financial gain. That outcome is rare: In the past decade, federal prosecutors have brought only about 30 cases involving forced labor of unaccompanied minors, according to a Times review of court databases.

Image

A handwritten ledger, in Spanish, of Nery Cutzal's debts to his sponsor, including money for tacos and clothes. The child owed more than \$4,000, plus interest. Court information has been redacted for privacy.

Unlike the foster care system, in which all children get case management, H.H.S. provides this service to about a third of children who pass through its care, and usually for just four months. Tens of thousands of other children are sent to their sponsors with little but the phone number for a national hotline. From there, they are often on their own: There is no formal follow-up from any federal or local agencies to ensure that sponsors are not putting children to work illegally.

In Pennsylvania, one case worker told *The Times* he went to check on a child released to a man who had applied to sponsor 20 other minors. The boy had vanished. In Texas, another case worker said she had encountered a man who had been targeting poor families in Guatemala, promising to help them get rich if they sent their children across the border. He had sponsored 13 children.

"If you've been in this field for any amount of time, you know that there's what the sponsors agree to, and what they're actually doing," said Bernal Cruz Munoz, a caseworker supervisor in Oregon.

Calling the hotline is not a sure way to get support, either. Juanito Ferrer called for help after he was brought to Manassas, Va., at age 15 by an acquaintance who forced him to paint houses during the day and guard an apartment complex at night. His sponsor took his paychecks and watched him on security cameras as he slept on the basement floor.

Juanito said that when he called the hotline in 2019, the person on the other end just took a report. "I thought they'd send the police or someone to check, but they never did that," he said. "I thought they would come and inspect the house, at least." He eventually escaped.

Asked about the hotline, H.H.S. said operators passed reports onto law enforcement and other local agencies because the agency did not have the authority to remove children from homes.

The Times analyzed government data to identify places with high concentrations of children who had been released to people outside their immediate families — a sign that they might have been expected to work. In northwest Grand Rapids, for instance, 93 percent of children have been released to adults who are not their parents.

H.H.S. does not track these clusters, but the trends are so pronounced that officials sometimes notice hot spots anyway.

Scott Lloyd, who led the resettlement office in the Trump administration, said he realized in 2018 that the number of unaccompanied Guatemalan boys being released to sponsors in South Florida seemed to be growing.

Image

Jose Vasquez, 13, photographed at the church he attends in Grand Rapids, Mich. He works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, at an egg farm outside the city. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

“I always wondered what was happening there,” he said.

But his attention was diverted by the chaos around the Trump administration’s child separation policy, and he never looked into it. The trend he saw has only accelerated: For example, in the past three years, more than 200 children have been released to distant relatives or unrelated adults around Immokalee, Fla., an agricultural hub with a long history of labor exploitation.

In a statement, H.H.S. said it had updated its case management system to better flag instances when multiple children were being released to the same person or address.

Many sponsors see themselves as benevolent, doing a friend or neighbor a favor by agreeing to help a child get out of a government shelter, even if they do not intend to offer any support. Children often understand that they will have to work, but do not grasp the unrelenting grind that awaits them.

“I didn’t get how expensive everything was,” said 13-year-old Jose Vasquez, who works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, at a commercial egg farm in Michigan and lives with his teenage sister. “I’d like to go to school, but then how would I pay rent?”

Occupational Hazards

Image

Carolina Yoc, back right, worked on math problems after a night shift at a Grand Rapids food plant. The 13-year-old girl sitting next to her said she also worked nights at a factory. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

One fall morning at Union High School in Grand Rapids, Carolina listened to Mr. Angstman lecture on the journalist Jacob Riis and the Progressive Era movement that helped create federal child labor laws. He explained that the changes were meant to keep young people out of jobs that could harm their health or safety, and showed the class a photo of a small boy making cigars.

“Riis reported that members of this family worked 17 hours a day, seven days a week,” he told the students. “The cramped space reeked of toxic fumes.” Students seemed unmoved. Some struggled to stay awake.

Teachers at the school estimated that 200 of their immigrant students were working full time while trying to keep up with their classes. The greatest share of Mr. Angstman's students worked at one of the four Hearthside plants in the city.

The company, which has 39 factories in the United States, has been cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for 34 violations since 2019, including for unsafe conveyor belts at the plant where Carolina found her job. At least 11 workers suffered amputations in that time. In 2015, a machine caught the hairnet of an Ohio worker and ripped off part of her scalp.

The history of accidents "shows a corporate culture that lacks urgency to keep workers safe," an OSHA official wrote after the most recent violation for an amputation.

Underage workers in Grand Rapids said that spicy dust from immense batches of Flamin' Hot Cheetos made their lungs sting, and that moving heavy pallets of cereal all night made their backs ache. They worried about their hands getting caught in conveyor belts, which federal law classifies as so hazardous that no child Carolina's age is permitted to work with them.

Hearthside said in a statement that it was committed to complying with laws governing worker protections. "We strongly dispute the safety allegations made and are proud of our safety-first culture," the statement read.

Image

A selfie taken by a 17-year-old at a Hearthside facility in Grand Rapids. She said older men at the factory sometimes harassed her.

Federal law bars minors from a long list of dangerous jobs, including roofing, meat processing and commercial baking. Except on farms, children younger than 16 are not supposed to work for more than three hours or after 7 p.m. on school days.

But these jobs — which are grueling and poorly paid, and thus chronically short-staffed — are exactly where many migrant children are ending up. Adolescents are twice as likely as adults to be seriously injured at work, yet recently arrived preteens and teenagers are running industrial dough mixers, driving massive earthmovers and burning their hands on hot tar as they lay down roofing shingles, The Times found.

Unaccompanied minors have had their legs torn off in factories and their spines shattered on construction sites, but most of these injuries go uncounted. The Labor Department tracks the deaths of foreign-born child workers but no longer makes them public. Reviewing state and federal safety records and public reports, The Times found a dozen cases of young migrant workers killed since 2017, the last year the Labor Department reported any.

The deaths include a 14-year-old food delivery worker who was hit by a car while on his bike at a Brooklyn intersection; a 16-year-old who was crushed under a 35-ton tractor-scraper outside Atlanta; and a 15-year-old who fell 50 feet from a roof in Alabama where he was laying down shingles.

Image

From left: Oscar Nambo Dominguez, 16, was crushed last year under an earthmover near Atlanta. Edwin Ajacalon, 14, was hit by a car while delivering food on a bike in Brooklyn. Juan Mauricio Ortiz, 15, died on his first day of work for an Alabama roofing company when he fell about 50 feet.

In 2021, Karla Campbell, a Nashville labor lawyer, helped a woman figure out how to transport the body of her 14-year-old grandson, who had been killed on a landscaping job, back to his village in Guatemala. It was the second child labor death she had handled that year.

“I’ve been working on these cases for 15 years, and the addition of children is new,” Ms. Campbell said.

In dairy production, the injury rate is twice the national average across all industries. Paco Calvo arrived in Middlebury, Vt., when he was 14 and has been working 12-hour days on dairy farms in the four years since. He said he crushed his hand in an industrial milking machine in the first months of doing this work.

“Pretty much everyone gets hurt when they first start,” he said.

Targeting the Middlemen

Image

Young workers exited an overnight cleaning shift last October at a JBS pork plant in Worthington, Minn. Their employer, a sanitation company, was later fined for violating child labor laws. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Charlene Irizarry, the human resources manager at Farm Fresh Foods, an Alabama meat plant that struggles to retain staff, recently realized she was interviewing a 12-year-old for a job slicing chicken breasts into nuggets in a section of the factory kept at 40 degrees.

Ms. Irizarry regularly sees job applicants who use heavy makeup or medical masks to try to hide their youth, she said. “Sometimes their legs don’t touch the floor.”

Other times, an adult will apply for a job in the morning, and then a child using the same name will show up for orientation that afternoon. She and her staff have begun separating other young applicants from the adults who bring them in, so they will admit their real ages.

Ms. Irizarry said the plant had already been fined for one child labor violation, and she was trying to avoid another. But she wondered what the children might face if she turned them away.

“I worry about why they’re so desperate for these jobs,” she said.

In interviews with underage migrant workers, The Times found child labor in the American supply chains of many major brands and retailers. Several, including Ford, General Motors, J. Crew and Walmart, as well as their suppliers, said they took the allegations seriously and would investigate. Target and Whole Foods did not respond to requests for comment. Fruit of the Loom said it had ended its contract with the supplier.

One company, Ben & Jerry’s, said it worked with labor groups to ensure a minimum set of working conditions at its dairy suppliers. Cheryl Pinto, the company’s head of values-led sourcing, said that if migrant children needed to work full time, it was preferable for them to have jobs at a well-monitored workplace.

The Labor Department is supposed to find and punish child labor violations, but inspectors in a dozen states said their understaffed offices could barely respond to complaints, much less open original investigations. When the department has responded to tips on migrant children, it has focused on the outside contractors and staffing agencies that usually employ them, not the corporations where they perform the work.

In Worthington, Minn., it had long been an open secret that migrant children released by H.H.S. were cleaning a slaughterhouse run by JBS, the world’s largest meat processor. The town has received more unaccompanied migrant children per capita than almost anywhere in the country.

Outside the JBS pork plant last fall, The Times spoke with baby-faced workers who chased and teased one another as they came off their shifts in the morning. Many had scratched their assumed names off company badges to hide evidence that they were working under false identities. Some said they had suffered chemical burns from the corrosive cleaners they used.

Not long afterward, labor inspectors responding to a tip found 22 Spanish-speaking children working for the company hired to clean [the JBS plant in Worthington](#), and dozens more in the same job at meat-processing plants around the United States.

But the Labor Department can generally only issue fines. The cleaning company paid a \$1.5 million penalty, while JBS said it had been unaware that children were scouring the Worthington factory each night. JBS fired the cleaning contractor.

Many of the children who were working there have found new jobs at other plants, The Times found.

“I still have to pay back my debt, so I still have to work,” said Mauricio Ramirez, 17, who has found a meat processing job in the next town over.

‘Not What I Imagined’

Image

Cristian Lopez, 16, pictured with his 12-year-old sister, Jennifer, works at a Hearthside facility in Grand Rapids. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

It has been a little more than a year since Carolina left Guatemala, and she has started to make some friends. She and another girl who works at Hearthside have necklaces that fit together, each strung with half a heart. When she has time, she posts selfies online decorated with smiley faces and flowers.

Mostly, though, she keeps to herself. Her teachers do not know many details about her journey to the border. When the topic came up at school recently, Carolina began sobbing and would not say why.

After a week of 17-hour days, she sat at home one night with her aunt and considered her life in the United States. The long nights. The stress about money. “I didn’t have expectations about what life would be like here,” she said, “but it’s not what I imagined.”

She was holding a debit card given to her by a staffing agency, which paid her Hearthside salary this way so she did not have to cash checks. Carolina turned it over and over in her palm as her aunt looked on.

“I know you get sad,” Ms. Ramirez said.

Carolina looked down. She wanted to continue going to school to learn English, but she woke up most mornings with a clenched stomach and kept staying home sick. Some of her ninth grade classmates had already dropped out. The 16-year-old boy she sat next to in math class, Cristian Lopez, had left school to work overtime at Hearthside.

Cristian lived a few minutes away, in a bare two-room apartment he shared with his uncle and 12-year-old sister, Jennifer.

His sister did not go to school either, and they had spent the day bickering in their room. Now night had fallen and they were eating Froot Loops for dinner. The heat was off, so they wore winter jackets. In an interview from Guatemala, their mother, Isabel Lopez, cried as she explained that she had tried to join her children in the United States last year but was turned back at the border.

Cristian had given his uncle some of the money he earned making Chewy bars, but his uncle believed it was not enough. He had said he would like Jennifer to start working at the factory as well, and offered to take her to apply himself.

Cristian said he had recently called the H.H.S. hotline. He hoped the government would send someone to check on him and his sister, but he had not heard back. He did not think he would call again.

Research was contributed by Andrew Fischer, Seamus Hughes, Michael H. Keller and Julie Tate.