News

A brown-skinned child with short hair has their back to the camera and a payphone to their ea

A migrant child from Venezuela plays with a pay phone in front of a shelter in El Paso, Texas, Sept. 1, 2022. (CNS photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)

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The Biden administration recently announced it would take new actions aimed at preventing the labor exploitation of migrant children released from U.S. custody, saying there has been an increase in such exploitation.

The departments of Labor and Health and Human Services said they would audit the vetting process of adults who sponsor migrant children out of government custody, and increase their efforts to investigate and prosecute cases of child exploitation.

The Labor Department said it has seen a 69% increase in children being employed illegally by companies in the U.S. since 2018. In the last fiscal year, the department said it investigated and found 835 companies had illegally employed more than 3,800 children.

"Every child in this country, regardless of their circumstance, deserves protection and care as we would expect for our own child," HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a statement.

"At Health and Human Services, we will continue to do our part to protect the safety and well-being of unaccompanied children by providing them appropriate care while they are in our custody; placing them in the custody of parents, relatives, and other appropriate sponsors after vetting; and conducting post-release services including safety and wellbeing calls," Becerra said. "Everyone from employers to local law enforcement and civic leaders must do their part to protect children."

Becerra has been under fire after The New York Times reported that he urged staff to move migrant children through the shelter system more quickly, likening the process to "an assembly line."

"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," Becerra said at a 2022 staff meeting, according to a recording obtained by the Times.

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh said in a statement that "We see every day the scourge of child labor in this country, and we have a legal and a moral obligation to take every step in our power to prevent it."

"Too often, companies look the other way and claim that their staffing agency, or their subcontractor or supplier is responsible. Everyone has a responsibility here," Walsh said. "This is not a 19th-century problem -- this is a today problem," Walsh said. "We need Congress to come to the table, we need states to come to the table. This is a problem that will take all of us to stop."

Walsh leaves his post in March. Biden announced the nomination of Julie Su, deputy labor secretary, to replace Walsh, but she must first be confirmed by the U.S. Senate before officially taking the role.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, told OSV News that the labor exploitation of child migrants is "part of what it means to live in the shadows in the United States."

"When you have a population that's pushed to the margins and pushed into the shadows, you know, there's naturally going to be exploitation," Corbett said. "And I think this is one symptom -- it's a particularly grave symptom."

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"It's good to see that we're taking some positive steps, but this is part of a broader issue," he said.

The steps the Biden administration intends to take to prevent the labor exploitation of child migrants are good, Corbett said, while noting "the Biden administration's record on immigration is very mixed."

He referenced the Biden administration's most restrictive border control measure to date, a plan to issue a temporary rule blocking asylum-seekers who cross the border without authorization or who do not first apply for protections in other nations before coming to the U.S. That plan was condemned by Catholic immigration advocates.

"Among the reasons that employers are looking the other way and hiring migrant children are ongoing labor shortages in the service sector, food preparation industry, and construction industry," Julia Young, a historian of migration, Mexico and Latin America, and Catholicism at The Catholic University of America in Washington, told OSV News.

"Another reason is that migrant children who come to the United States are often particularly vulnerable and desperate, and sometimes feel pressure to work and support their families here or back home," Young said.

Young said the vulnerabilities facing migrant children at the border are "almost too many to count."

"Many are deeply traumatized when they get here," Young said. Physical and sexual assault, language barriers, and the lack of an understanding of their rights once they arrive are just some of the obstacles they face, Young said, "leaving them prime targets for exploitation by all kinds of predatory people."

"So, it is sadly not surprising to find out that many of them are being denied the opportunity for education, protection, and safety," she said, "Instead, they are pushed into dangerous and dead-end jobs here in the U.S."

She added that "migrant child labor -- and child labor in general -- is not new."

"It has a long history in the U.S., from enslaved children before Emancipation to the 19th-century immigrant children who worked in factories to Mexican farmworker children working in the fields throughout the 20th century," she said. "While child labor was much more widely accepted in the past, it has never gone away."

Young added that it is "great that the Biden administration is taking new steps to crack down on employers who illegally employ migrant children, and I hope that will help kids who are being exploited now."

A similar phenomenon happened in the early 20th century, Young said, "when media attention to the topic of child labor helped bring about modern child labor laws."