

# **Narratives Justifying Unregulated Child Labour In Agriculture**

**Bob Barnettson**

Centre for Work and Community Studies

Athabasca University

Athabasca, Alberta, Canada

[barnetso@athabascau.ca](mailto:barnetso@athabascau.ca)

## **Abstract**

Canadian governments statutorily limit the employment of children under the age of 15. Nevertheless, child agricultural employment in the Province of Alberta is largely unregulated. This paper identifies and evaluates the narratives used to justify this exclusion. Analysis suggests these rationales are at once both deficient and robust and they draw attention away from the interplay between economic pressures facing agricultural operators and the limited social rights of children.

Key words: farming, agriculture, employment, labour, children, regulation

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Child agricultural employment in the Canadian Province of Alberta is largely unregulated by statutory employment standards or occupational health and safety requirements. This exposes children to an occupation known for high rates of injury and death. This paper identifies five narratives use to justify this exclusion: (a) agricultural chores are not work, (b) farms require children's work, (c) farming is different, (d) education is more effective than regulation, and (d) families are better able to protect children. Notably absent is discussion of farmer resistance to regulation.

Analysis suggests these rationales often contain deficiencies and obscure important aspects of the policy debate. Yet these narratives continue to have wide currency, in part because they are very resistant to critique. Evidence that the narratives are invalid or inconsistent runs contrary to conventional wisdom and thus is easily discounted in policy discussions. And the abbreviated nature of policy debate in the media and the legislature allows policy actors to evade conclusive defeat of their arguments by switching from narrative to narrative.

## **2.0 Regulation of Child Employment in Agriculture**

For the purposes of this study, children are defined as those under the age of 15. Historically, Canadian children have worked and, in doing so, helped to support their families and developed vocational skills (Bullen, 1986; Cunningham, 2000; Danysk, 1995; Parr, 1980; Sutherland, 1990). Canadian governments began regulating child employment during the late 19th century (Finkel, 2006; Lorentsen & Woolner, 1950; Tucker, 1990). Internationally, Convention 138 of the International Labour Organization seeks to abolish the employment of those under 15 years of age (Swepston, 1982). Canada is not a signatory to Convention 138,

but all provinces have legislation regulating child and adolescent employment (England, 2008; Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2006). The employment of children is significantly regulated in Alberta, although the effectiveness of enforcement is questionable (see Barnetson, 2009a).

The rationale for regulation centers on protecting the physical safety as well as intellectual and moral development of minors. This typically entails prohibiting employment and/or restricting the range of occupations children may engage in, when work may be performed, and the duties that may be performed. Support for these rationales is mixed (Bushnik, 2003; Carriere, 2005; Franke, 2003; Lawton, 1994). The most compelling rationale for regulation is the physical safety of children in the workplace. A U.S. study found the rate of injury for working children and adolescents to be nearly twice as high as for adults (Institute of Medicine, 1998). Canadian research generally focuses on 15- to 24-year-old workers and also finds a higher likelihood of injury (WorkSafeBC, 2007).

Alberta's agricultural workers are excluded from Employment Standards Code provisions that address minimum wage, hours of work, overtime and overtime pay, general holidays and general holiday pay, vacations and vacation pay, and restrictions on the employment of children. The Occupational Health and Safety Act excludes farming and ranching from the definition of "occupation" (and thus the definition of "worker"), thereby excluding agricultural workers from the substantive standards set out in the Occupational Health and Safety Code as well as the more general provisions of the act (e.g., the right to refuse unsafe work). These exemptions have a long history in Alberta (Barnetson, 2009b) and elsewhere (Tucker, 2006). Children are among the agricultural workers excluded from these "floor of rights" protections in Alberta. There has been significant opposition to the statutory exclusion of agricultural workers from basic employment rights (e.g., Alberta Federation of Labour [AFL], 2008, 2009; Williamson, 2007), but Alberta's government has proved unwilling to alter this arrangement, even with regard to children in agricultural employment.

### ***2.1 Employment and Injury of Children in Agriculture***

There are no data about the employment rates of children in agriculture or, indeed, in any industry, although Barnetson (2009a) found that 8.7% of 9- to 11-year-olds and 29.8% of 12- to 14-year-olds in Alberta were employed. Children are present on Alberta farms in appreciable numbers (Thurston & Blundell-Gosselin, 2004), and injury data suggest that at least some perform work, although reliable data about agricultural injuries and fatalities to children is difficult to obtain (Reed & Claunch, 2000). In Canada, national fatality (1990–2000) and hospitalization (1990–2003) data on those under age 20 is available from the Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program (CAISP). CAISP (2007) data indicate that preschool children (ages 1–4) experienced 96 fatalities (35% of under-20 fatalities) and 471 hospitalizations (16.7% of under-20 hospitalizations). Machine injuries were the cause of 63.5% of fatalities and 45.2% of hospitalizations for this group. Young school children (ages 5–9) experienced 54 fatalities (19.7%) and 675 hospitalizations (23.9%). Again, machine injuries accounted for 57.4% of fatalities and 43.7% of hospitalizations for this group. And finally, older school children (aged 10–14) experienced 45 fatalities (16.4%) and 742 hospitalizations (26.2%). Again, machine injuries accounted for 75.6% of fatalities and 73.3% of hospitalizations for this group. More recent data on fatalities (CAISP, 2009)

suggest that the number of annual fatalities among children under 15 is declining, although other fatality trends (e.g., age, sex) remained relatively stable. The cause of the decline appears to be some combination of a smaller farm population, safer work practices, and chance.

Where work-relatedness could be determined, 75.9% of deaths occurred in circumstances where agricultural work was being performed in the vicinity of or by the victim. When using agricultural fatality and injury data to discuss regulation of employment relationships, it is important to note that only 30% of child injuries and 27% of child fatalities occurred when a minor was performing work (Marlenga, Berg, Linneman, Brison, & Pickett, 2007; Pickett et al., 2005). The remainder occurred when children were in proximity to agricultural work or during recreational use of agricultural land and buildings (e.g., playing on the worksite or horseback riding). This distinction is addressed more thoroughly below. It is also useful to be clear about who these children are and what their relationship to the farmer is. The most recent fatality data (CAISP, 2009) suggest that 71.4% of fatalities are to children of the farmer. Only 1% of fatalities were to hired (nonrelated) child workers and 3.5% to the children of hired workers. The remainder includes child visitors to the farm or other relatives of the farmer.

It is also important to consider that focusing on fatalities and hospitalizations also typically excludes consideration of nonacute injuries (often with long latency periods) common to agriculture, such as respiratory problems (Kronqvist, Johansson, Pershagen, & Johansson, 1999), reproductive health problems (Jennissen, 1992), depression (Scarth, Stallones, Zwerling, & Burmeister, 2000), suicide (Pickett, King, Faelker, & Lees, 1999), and skin cancer (Reding, Krauska, Lapp, & Fischer, 1994).

Alberta data are available from the Alberta Farm Accident Monitoring Program, although not all hospitals participate and the data record only emergency room visits (Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development [AARD], 2008a). The small number of fatalities among children means significant annual variation. For example, 1 of 12 fatalities in 2007 was a child, while 6 of 20 fatalities in 2006 were to children (AARD, 2007a; AARD, 2008b). The number of emergency-room visits is more stable. In 2007, there were 28 agriculture-related emergency-room visits by children under age 6, 28 by children aged 6–10, and 80 by children aged 11–17. These are respectively 2.95%, 2.95%, and 8.42% of all injuries reported (AARD, 2008a). Machinery is involved with the majority of fatalities and injuries on the farm, while drowning and livestock-related injuries were also common (Voaklander, Belton, Menon, Lim, & Schopflocher, 1999).

### **3.0 Methods**

This study seeks to identify and test the validity of the narratives used by policy actors to justify the regulatory exclusion of child agricultural workers from basic employment rights. The study follows the naturalistic paradigm in that it seeks to develop a holistic interpretation of these narratives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994; Wiersma, 1995). The data are primarily qualitative because the study seeks to determine how policy actors construct their justification of child agricultural labour. The data used to develop these narratives were collected between 1996 and 2006 and comprise my recollections of conversations with workers, advocates, policy analysts, farmers, and the general public.

During the time of data collection, I worked for a trade union, the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board, and what used to be Alberta's Department of Labour. The conversations drawn upon were typically small talk before meetings or during coffee breaks and took place all over the province. This rather eclectic approach to data collection and analysis has strengths and weaknesses. Its key strength is that it provides a window into the way that policy actors think about and justify the use of child labour in agriculture. I believe the result is a fuller understanding of the arguments (and the interrelationships between them) used to oppose the regulation of child agricultural labour because the data contain a degree of candor that would not be revealed by a more structured data collection approach.

At the same time, the absence of a sampling plan and interview protocol suggests that chance, my own biases, and errors in my recollection may be significant sources of error. As a constructivist, I accept that bias is an endemic feature of policy analysis, reflecting that data selection and interpretation occur in the context of researcher experiences, beliefs, and expectations (Hawkesworth, 1988). Consequently, the results are not statistically generalizable but have analytical generalizability in that this study's results may be used in conjunction with the results from other studies to develop, confirm, or refute a broader theory about the policy rationale for this statutory exclusion.

Validity and reliability are difficult to address because of the fundamentally different assumptions of naturalistic research. The rigor of research can be addressed by examining its credibility and trustworthiness. Credibility parallels positivism's validity but accepts that research results are constructed by researchers based upon their interaction with the subject (Kincheloe, 1991). The credibility of the research conclusions is judged based upon the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research process (i.e., were all available data sources utilized? was their use in context? were all alternative interpretations addressed?). Trustworthiness is the degree of plausibility of the study's conclusions and replaces the positivist conception of reliability. Merriam (1988) suggests that by creating a thick description for the reader, the issue of reliability (i.e., trustworthiness) of the interpretation is passed along to the reader.

One recurring difficulty in this data collection is the fuzziness that surrounds what qualifies as "work" on a farm in the minds of policy actors. The injury data outlined above suggest there are few child "workers," yet many children perform tasks on the farm that would otherwise be completed by a hired person. Further, children are frequently found (and injured) in proximity to work being performed by someone else. In keeping with the naturalistic approach of the study, I have attempted to focus analysis on tasks where a child is either explicitly employed or is undertaking tasks that would otherwise require the employment of another, although this is mediated by a desire to accurately represent the thoughts of the policy actors themselves.

Missing in these discussions are the differing farm work experiences that children of waged adult farm workers may experience, when compared with the experiences of children of farmers. The relatively small number of waged farm workers (about 12,000) and migrant farm workers (fewer than 1,000) in Alberta makes this less of an issue than it might be in other provinces, such as Ontario (Barnetson, 2009b). It should also be noted that the conversations with policy actors did not address (more than in passing) farming practices that appear to

significantly rely upon child labour (e.g., communal farming typically associated with particular religious groups); this omission should be kept in mind when considering the conclusions. Intermingling a freedom-of-religion argument (to the degree that child agricultural labour is an expression of religious beliefs) into the narratives outlined below would create additional complexity.

A brief note about the ethics of this study is appropriate. During the time when these data were collected, I was not employed by a university and thus was not subject to (and indeed could not access) an ethics review process. Consequently, no ethics approval was sought. The Tri-Council Statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans sets out seven principles that this study conformed to, excepting the requirement for free and informed consent. No consent was sought from research participants, reflecting that the research project entailed no practicable risk to the subjects and all data collection took the form of voluntary conversations under the joint control of the researcher and subject.

#### **4.0 Narratives Justifying Unregulated Child Agricultural Employment**

Policy actors justify the continued exclusion of child agricultural employment from labour standards and occupational health and safety requirements by using one or more of five narratives:

- Agricultural chores are not work.
- Farms require children's work.
- Farming is different.
- Education is more effective than regulation.
- Families are better able to protect children.

These narratives are extremely resistant to critique for three reasons: (a) evidence that the narratives are deficient runs contrary to conventional wisdom and is often simply disbelieved or ignored; (b) some of the narratives obscure important aspects of the debate (e.g., via issue substitution or framing), an effect that can be difficult to reveal because (c) policy actors often switch arguments as narratives are invalidated. This latter, evasive tactic is highly effective given the abbreviated nature of policy debate in the media and the legislature (which sat an average of 53 days per year between 1998 and 2008), whereby the deficiencies of all of the narratives are unlikely to be considered at the same time (Hansard, 2008). This creates the impression that there is a viable rationale for unregulated child agricultural labour. The sections below set out the narratives and critique them. Included in this critique is an indication of how policy actors typically move from narrative to narrative when justifying child agricultural employment.

##### **4.1 Agricultural Chores Are Not Work**

Most children engage in household tasks, which may or may not be remunerated. These "chores" may be necessary for the operation of the household and, when so, would otherwise be performed by another unwaged worker or hired out. These tasks may also contribute to developing useful self-management skills and/or developing a sense of personal and communal responsibility. In this way, the work of children in the home is conceptualized as both necessary and developmentally useful.

Children who live on farms and ranches may perform agriculture-related tasks assigned to them by their parents. These agricultural tasks are often called *chores* and are thus framed as analogous to the tasks all children perform (i.e., are not work). But are farm chores the same thing? Some certainly are: Where a 5-year-old makes her bed is immaterial. Yet the direct and situational risks of some farm tasks suggest an important qualitative difference. By obscuring the risks associated with child agricultural work, this narrative counters arguments for regulation via a false analogy.

This narrative also ignores the direct economic contribution some children make: Families derive profit (or maintain financial viability) by substituting child labour for paid or unpaid work by adults. In this way, some of these “chores” are akin to employment because they have a potentially immediate and significant economic impact that is not characteristic of, for example, taking out the garbage. This narrative is effective because it is both sometimes true (some chores are just household chores) and the nature and economic value of farm chores is difficult to determine. This critique of the “chores” narrative often leads to the assertion that farm profitability/viability requires the work of children.

#### ***4.2 Farms Require Children’s Work***

Children’s work may be necessary for farms to be financially viable. It is difficult to establish an evidentiary base upon which to assess the validity of these claims because of the significant differences in capitalization, revenue, profitability, and the organization of work among Alberta’s heterogeneous agricultural producers (AARD, 2007b; CAAC, 2007). It is plausible that some (perhaps many) farms struggle financially and require child labour to minimize labour costs. And it is also plausible that regulation would entail some level of higher direct and indirect costs.

Shields (1992; Denis, 1988) suggests that the dynamics of agriculture (where farmers are price takers at both ends of the production chain) compel farmers to minimize their labour costs—one of the few costs farmers can control (Kelly, 1982; Skogstad, 1987). The federal and Alberta governments have facilitated minimizing labour costs since the late 19th century, in part by leaving agricultural workplaces largely unregulated (Barnetson, 2009b). Low labour costs contribute to the production of cheap food, which, in turn, reduces wage demands from industrial workers and frees up their income to spend on other consumer products. This meets the needs of both capital and nonagricultural workers and thus is a form of state subsidization of the capital accumulation process (Basran & Hay, 1988).

That it is difficult to see or know children’s contribution to cheap food makes the narrative robust. The narrative also displaces concerns about child labour with ensuring that the evocatively named but ill-defined “family farm” does not go bankrupt. Farm bankruptcy has significant political poignancy in Alberta. Rural constituencies almost always elect Progressive Conservative candidates to the provincial legislature (Elections Alberta, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2008) and Conservative governments have ensured electoral boundaries are drawn so there are a disproportionately high number of rural ridings (Archer, 1993; Thomson, 2008). The substitution of bankruptcy for child labour means opponents of regulation can evade the question of whether the state ought to subsidize marginal farms through a regulatory exception that facilitates the imperilment of children. Critiquing this narrative may trigger a return to “agricultural chores are not work,”

resulting in the difficult-to-fathom assertion that farms require children's work, but this "work" is somehow not real work, but rather just chores. More commonly, policy actors move on to the "farming is different" narrative.

### ***4.3 Farming Is Different***

Farms or farm work are often asserted to be somehow unique (e.g., farms are both workplaces and residences, farm tasks require odd schedules, and farm work is inherently dangerous), and therefore, farm work warrants different levels or approaches to regulation. Farms are often both a workplace and a residence and, in this way, differ from typical workplaces. This duality of function means children may be exposed to workplace hazards (e.g., machinery, animals, and structures) in the course of their home and recreational activities (Brison et al., 2006). These situational risks to residents are not, however, relevant to the question of whether child employment (i.e., the use of children to perform agricultural work) ought to be regulated. The risk to child workers stems from work-related activities, not their residence on a farm. In this way, this argument is a red herring, although it does suggest that, for the general health of children, farmers ought to limit access to work areas, equipment, and structures, and raises the question of whether adequate childcare is available in rural communities.

A more compelling argument is that farm work often entails tasks requiring immediate attention. Dairy cows, for example, require milking, even on statutory holidays. And harvests must be brought in while the produce is ripe and the weather is conducive to maximizing yields (Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses, 2005). For this reason, the case for excluding employment standards that limit the workday is stronger than the case for eliminating the extra pay workers receive for working longer than normal hours or statutory holidays or for the elimination of vacations and vacation pay. Exclusion from these latter standards externalizes costs associated with agricultural production onto workers. The application of these rationales to exclusions from child labour laws is less easy to see, given the risk associated with farm work and the general imperative to protect children from physical harm and exploitation.

Farming is also cast as an inherently dangerous occupation. This is demonstrably true (CAISP, 2007, 2009) but does not support the current exclusion from child labour laws; indeed this argument actually raises questions of why government does not prohibit child agricultural labour or at least stipulate the health and safety standards for such employment. This line of argument, better than most, shows the irrationality that can (somehow) be accommodated within these narratives. Again, as the arguments composing this narrative are shown deficient, proponents typically shift back toward "farms require children's work" or suggest "education is more effective than regulation."

### ***4.4 Education Is More Effective Than Regulation***

Enforcement is often posited to be less effective and/or efficient than state-funded farm-safety education (Stolte, 2008). It does seem probable that education is less expensive than enforcement, in that delivery can be periodic and transmission oriented (versus the ongoing and interactive nature of enforcement) and farm safety for children can be included in school curriculum at little direct cost. Education is also appealing because it is less intrusive than enforcement.

Whether a general farm-safety curriculum aimed at children *residing* on farms, which could include, for example, an exhortation to not play in the dugout or near animals, is also effective for children *performing* agricultural tasks is unclear. Further, education implicitly identifies the root cause of injury as ignorance of hazards, safe practices, and developmentally appropriate tasks for children. Providing information does not necessarily mean that knowledge is retained or translated into changes in practice. Indeed, the literature suggests that educational campaigns do not significantly alter the child injury rate (DeRoo & Rautiainen, 2000; Gadowski, Ackerman, Burdick, & Jenkins, 2006). The reason for this failure is unclear. Thurston and Blundell-Gosselin (2004) note that many educational programs ignore farmers' social, political, and economic contexts, which may affect the application of knowledge.

Educational campaigns may also target the wrong party: Teaching children safe farming practices ignores that their exposure to workplace hazards is determined largely by how their employer/parent has designed the job. Not surprisingly, multifaceted educational interventions, which target operators as well as workers, typically generate greater results. Also, alterations to equipment (passive changes) appear to have a greater impact on reducing injury rates than relying on workers to act safely (DeRoo & Rautiainen, 2000).

Education leaves the application of farm-safety information to farmers. There is little support for the assertion that knowledge leads to behavioural and/or injury rates changes. Further, the impact of financial pressures makes this narrative an unsatisfying rationale for excluding child agricultural work from regulation. What makes education politically attractive and, perhaps, fundamentally undermines the validity of the narrative is its assumption that “families are better able to protect children” than the state. And it is to this narrative that discussion about regulation versus education often migrates.

#### ***4.5 Families Are Better Able to Protect Children***

A particularly emotional narrative is found in the rhetorical question: Who has a greater stake in farm safety than farm families? In effect, this narrative suggests that agricultural operators will protect their children from the hazards of the agricultural life and thus government regulation is unnecessary. At the core of this narrative is the belief that the interests of agricultural operators and children are aligned such that operators would not jeopardize the health and well-being of their children. This requires operators to identify and mitigate the hazards facing children working and/or living on a farm.

Setting aside that identification of hazards (particularly when it comes to biological and chemical agents) is not always possible, the significant rate of child injuries suggests families are, at least sometimes, not successful in protecting their children. In a study of farm injury in Saskatchewan, Meiers and Baerg (2001) found 64% of fatal injuries between 1988 and 1999 occurred while children were being supervised. The long-term use of educational programs suggests that the problem lies less with knowledge than attitude (Health Canada, 1996). This narrative is also premised upon farmers' having available to them a full range of choices regarding safety—choices that may be constrained by economic pressures.

A more controversial line of inquiry is questioning the degree of alignment that exists between the interests of farmers and their children. For example, economic



pressure might cause some farmers to have their children undertake or be present during the completion of agricultural work, both of which can increase the probability of injury or death. The sanctions that parents in other occupations would face for endangering their child in this manner (e.g., coal miners, firefighters) are absent in agriculture.

Teeple's (2006) analysis of human rights sheds some light on why it is sometimes acceptable for parents to imperil their children and on the general position of children in human rights discourse. Teeple asserts that civil, political, and social rights (collectively "human rights") interact to support the dominant mode of production. Civil and political rights, rooted in western constitutions, codify and legitimize capitalist, propertied relations. Civil rights emphasize the sanctity of private property and cast humans as economic actors. Granting individuals political rights to select their government legitimizes this arrangement—capitalism is framed as choice (at least notionally) made by the populace among differing public policies.

Capitalist systems typically struggle with social reproduction, with government intervention periodically required in, for example, the operation of the labour market (e.g., employment standards), and the workplace (e.g., health and safety legislation). In this way, the state acts to maintain both capital accumulation and its own legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate (Mandel, 1992; Picchio, 1992). These social "rights" run contrary to the civil and political rights entrenched in constitutions and find expression in legislation and international agreements. The codification of social rights manages (and results from) class-based pressure, but enforcement can be weak and exceptions made.

Minors have few civil and political rights because they are not "persons" in the context of capitalist relations: They cannot make binding and rational choices. Yet the power of parents over their wards has been limited by the state because (a) the interests of children and their parents are not necessarily aligned and (b) minors face a significant disadvantage within this framework. For example, parents may compel the participation of minors in waged labour, perhaps out of economic necessity compelled by downward wage pressure facilitated by economic globalization. The state, then, may intervene to protect children from the (in)action of parents as well as employers and preclude exploitation or injury that imperils the state's own legitimacy.

Child agricultural employment is an interesting example of this dynamic. The exclusion of waged agricultural labourers from most of the statutory protections considered part of the floor of rights for workers discussed above facilitates cheap food, which subsidizes the capital accumulation process. To the degree that children share the labour market position of adult waged agricultural workers, this analysis provides insight into the continued exclusion of children from statutory limits that regulate child employment. The effect of this exclusion is compounded by the disadvantaged position of children in the structure of human rights in capitalist societies. That is to say, children form an ideal secondary labour market: They are largely without political and civil rights as well as being poorly educated, intellectually malleable, and physically weak. They both minimize labour costs for farmers and create downward pressure on the wages of other workers.

Government's offloading regulatory responsibility to the children's parents (who are already minors' legal guardians) while simultaneously following a cheap food

policy may create economic pressure on parents to utilize their children to keep agricultural operations financially viable. When this happens, the interests of parents and their children are misaligned, to the detriment of the children. Government inaction when a child dies in an agricultural accident is further justified because the victim's family is in the conflicted position of being victimized by their own "choice" to employ the child. This conflicted position is so socially awkward that it appears to retard development of a legitimation crisis that appears when children are killed in other, nonagricultural, workplaces.

Discussion of this narrative with proponents of child agricultural labour is typically quite heated. While some proponents will seek to return discussion to the notion that "agricultural chores are not work," reasoned argumentation often devolves into a more charged discussion. Despite earlier discussion about farms' requiring children's work, there is typically little willingness to examine how economic pressures may compel parents to endanger their children. Key differences between the narratives "farms require children's work" and "families are better able to protect their children" are that the former narrative contains other avenues of argument, while the latter requires uncomfortable self-reflection. The potentially insolvable conflict between parental and economic obligations may cause significant cognitive dissonance.

## **5.0 Discussion**

The narratives identified in this study that are employed by actors in Alberta's agricultural policy community to justify not regulating child agricultural employment do not appear to withstand scrutiny. More specifically, all appear to contain significant deficiencies that undermine the case for continuing with unregulated child agricultural labour. Yet these narratives have wide currency, there is little public outcry over child agricultural labour, and the government has declined to regulate this employment. In considering this analysis, it is important to be mindful of the caveats outlined in the methods section regarding the potential for bias in constructing (and deconstructing) the narratives as well as their analytical (instead of statistical) generalizability.

The effectiveness of these arguments may lie in their ability to disguise prescription as description. In this way, they appear to function as myths (Browne, Skees, Swanson, Thompson, & Unnevehr, 1992). Myths that retain currency are typically resistant to critical scrutiny, particularly if they contain elements that appear to correlate with reality. This resistance to scrutiny also allows myths to contain contradictory information (Wear, 2000). In North America, the agrarian myth has wide currency and has been used in the United States to exclude farming from occupational health and safety legislation (Kelsey, 1994). This narrative extols the virtues of farm life, farmers, and rural communities, emphasizing the rural work ethic, the independence of farmers, and the centrality of family and community. It can also contain stories of struggle against nature and the interests of outside groups. The hardships associated with farming also create a sense of society's owing farmers a social debt.

Among the public policy implications of the agrarian myth are that it obscures rural poverty and the pressures associated with it (indeed sometimes transforming poverty into a sign of virtue) and overstates the degree of community support available to producers. Also obscured are the broader economic trends (e.g., rising input and decreasing commodity prices, growth of highly capitalized operations)

that create systemic pressures on farmers to organize their work in a particular fashion. There is also a strong sense that government intervention is neither desired nor effective (Aubrun & Grady, 2003). Images of virtuous poverty embodied in the agrarian myth also pits notions of a fair and safe workplace against the spectre of farm bankruptcy and the ripple effect of such bankruptcies on already threatened rural communities. Again, the potency of the agrarian myth makes it difficult to question policies whereby governments subsidize marginal businesses by allowing them to externalize costs onto employees (particularly unfree and vulnerable employees such as children) via poorly remunerated and dangerous work.

The narratives used to justify child agricultural labour in Alberta appear consistent with the agrarian myth. These narratives are also important because they both signal the position of stakeholders and help legitimize the absence of regulation. Their effectiveness is reinforced by the hostile opportunity structure and limited resistance to statutory exclusion among waged agricultural workers (Barnetson, 2009b) as well as the administrative invisibility of problems with the regulation of child employment (Barnetson, 2009a). In short, there is little widespread pressure on government to regulate the agricultural work of children and significant political incentive for the government not to, given the expected (although unsubstantiated) impact of regulation on government supporters.

Interestingly, none of those interviewed ever articulated that regulation might be ineffective due to farmer resistance. Indeed, Marlenga et al. (2007) suggest that viewing farms solely as a workplace and focusing solely on employment-related restrictions will not eliminate the majority of farm injuries or fatalities affecting children. Perhaps the absence of this narrative suggests an unwillingness of proponents to see themselves (or be seen) as willing to break the law. This may reflect political considerations or simply be consistent with the tendency of proponents to avoid the cognitive dissonance created by recognizing the impact of economic imperatives, as discussed above.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Alberta has a long history of refusing to provide basic statutory employment rights to agricultural workers. Examining the narratives used to oppose the extension of child labour laws to agriculture reveals them to have significant deficiencies. Yet these narratives have significant political utility for proponents of child agricultural labour because they are resistant to critique. Evidence that the narratives are invalid runs contrary to conventional wisdom and thus is easily discounted. One of the narratives facilitates highly effective issue substitution (i.e., farm bankruptcy), and the abbreviated nature of policy debate in the media and the legislature allows policy actors to evade conclusive defeat of their arguments by switching from narrative to narrative.

The result of these narratives is that children on some Alberta farms continue to face a disproportionate chance of injury and death. Assuming that the regulation of child agricultural work led to compliance, regulation could reduce, to some degree, the injury and death rate because children under 15 years of age would be precluded from performing such tasks. Whether regulation would result in children no longer performing such tasks is unclear. Much of the farm-safety literature addresses protecting nonworking children on the farm. For example, Pickett et al. (2005) suggest introducing a variety of measures to reduce injuries, such as prohibiting children on the worksite, installing passive physical barriers to prevent

children from accessing the worksite, safe storage practices, developing adequate childcare options, and developing guidelines for common recreational activities on the farm. Some of these measures, such as safe storage practices and altering machinery to prevent unsafe use, appear to also provide protection to working children.

Regulation establishes a new social norm and, in doing so, creates a counternarrative that “farming is too dangerous for children.” The susceptibility of farmers to this narrative is questionable; its effect on their behaviour, though, likely turns on the consequences attached and the degree of enforcement. At present, the government has 84 occupational health and safety inspectors for approximately 140,000 nonfarm employers, a ratio of 1:1,667 (Province of Alberta, 2008). The addition of 49,000 farms (Statistics Canada, 2006) may simply further dilute occupational health and safety enforcement. Regulation may also mean some farms will no longer be economically viable. Such an outcome of government intervention is politically unpalatable in Alberta because of its disproportionate effect on small producers. The potential expansion of larger agribusiness in the wake of small producers’ leaving the marketplace could in fact reduce the level of injury and death by injecting economies of scale and reducing the burden faced by regulators in a marketplace with thousands of operators.

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