

Safety first on the job, especially for inexperienced teens

Wanted: Secure job for teenage worker. Prefer no big equipment, no tractors or trucks, no heavy lifting. Safety is a top priority.

So where do you find a “safe” job for teenage workers? A clothing store at the mall? A fast-food restaurant? About 77 percent of teens who work have jobs in retail and service industries, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Those jobs might *seem* safer than jobs in construction or agriculture.



Dr. Carol Runyan

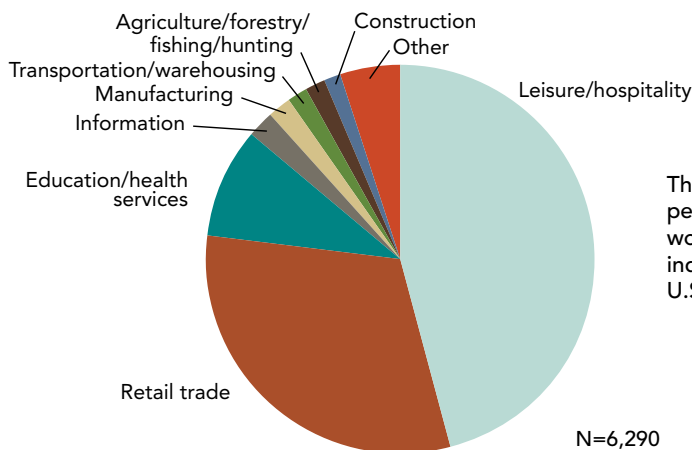
But Carol Runyan, PhD, director of the UNC Injury Prevention Research Center and professor of health behavior and health education at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, wants young workers and their families to know that injuries occur on all kinds of job sites. More than 200,000

teenagers are injured on the job each year.

“Food slicers, hot grease, slippery floors and box crushers account for some of these injuries,” Runyan says. “Restaurants, food stores and the fast-food industry can be hazardous places for young workers.”

Fifteen years ago, Runyan and her team collected statistics on young worker fatalities in North Carolina. She wanted to help prevent these deaths, so she began analyzing the circumstances in which teens work.

The national study she led, interviewing about 900 youth workers in retail and service occupations, showed that one-third of the respondents did not receive safety training and many worked without supervision. Her survey of teenagers working in construction in N.C. found that 84 percent of those surveyed performed tasks prohibited by child labor laws.



The majority of young people injured on the job work in the service and retail industries. (Shown here are U.S. data for 2007.)

Data provided by Janice Windau of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, from the Bureau's Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses. Reprinted with permission from the Web site of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (<http://snipurl.com/cdc-young-worker-injury>).



LINDA KASTLEMAN

“Restaurants, food stores and the fast-food industry can be hazardous places for young workers,” says Dr. Carol Runyan.

“My research leads to where interventions need to be,” Runyan says.

She identified interventions including enforcement of and education about child labor laws and development of strategies to ensure worker safety, such as employers’ learning how best to supervise teenagers.

“Young workers lack experience,” says Runyan. “In an attempt to demonstrate competence, they may take risks, not understanding the hazards involved. The responsibility for safety lies with the employer—and with the government, to set regulations, monitor compliance and then hold employers’ feet to the fire.”

Runyan’s work has been groundbreaking in its impact on young workers’ safety. In 2009, after significant media coverage of her studies, she was urged by N.C. Rep. Jennifer Weiss and the N.C. Child Fatality Task Force to share her results with several legislative committees, leading to two new laws designed to protect working children. One, a law with tougher penalties for employer violations, went into effect in North Carolina in December 2009. The other requires the N.C. labor commissioner to provide detailed reports on child labor complaints and obstacles to child labor law enforcement.

“This is an important step in raising awareness of young worker safety and the need to ensure that employers are accountable,” Runyan says. ■

—Chris Perry