

## Iowa employers rarely penalized for endangering youth at work

Open records from 2024 show frequent administrative leniency for employers violating child-labor laws

**S**tate officials in 2024 conducted 77 child-labor investigations, including one that involved the death of a 17-year-old. According to data obtained by Common Good Iowa via open-records request, investigators issued warning letters for child-labor violations to eight businesses and issued civil monetary penalties, totaling \$36,350, against four, including the one where the youth died.<sup>1</sup>

**Teens were scheduled to work too early in the morning or late at night, improperly supervised and allowed to operate dangerous equipment with little or no training — sometimes with terrible results.**

Although there are times where leeway can, and perhaps should, be given to small employers who make innocent mistakes causing no material harm, the data show circumstances where leniency appears undeserved. In several cases, investigators reduced penalties against businesses, citing “good faith” where there was a pattern of violations, or declined to issue a citation or warning despite evidence of questionable practices resulting in injuries.

The state records likely capture just the tip of the iceberg of child-labor violations: the incidents where youth were injured on the job or where concerned adults — often parents — alerted officials. The records document circumstances where youth

were scheduled to work too early in the morning and kept on the clock too late into the night, and who were improperly supervised or allowed to operate dangerous equipment with little or no training, sometimes with terrible results.

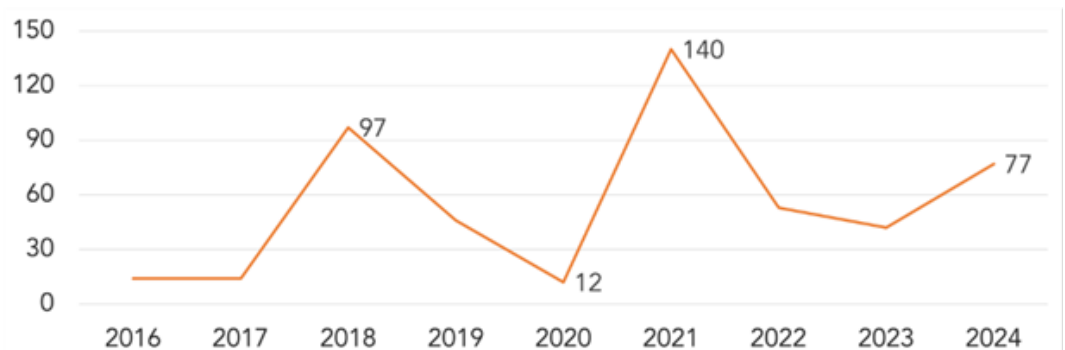
### Iowa’s capacity to investigate and enforce child-labor laws is insufficient

Iowa’s primary line of defense against illegal child labor is the Wage and Child Labor Unit (WCLU) at the Iowa Department of Inspections, Appeals and Licensing (DIAL). Unit staff investigate and enforce wage and child labor law, educate the public about labor laws and conduct annual field observations at the Iowa State Fair.

To enforce wage and child-labor laws for a state workforce of 1.6 million, the WCLU was slated in 2024 for just six full-time positions: four investigators, one secretary and one clerk specialist. In June, only the clerk specialist position was unfilled; by January 2025, the unit was down to three investigators. The other positions were unfilled.

### Child-labor investigation unit has erratic enforcement history

Child-labor investigations concluded by DIAL’s Wage and Child Labor Unit  
Calendar years 2016-2024



Source: Iowa Department of Inspections, Appeals & Licensing, Open Records Request

It is clear that significantly more employers assigned minors to dangerous work activities than sought state approval to do so. In 2024, Iowa Workforce Development received just four applications for Youth Employment Waivers, a new policy that allows employers to request a temporary exemption from prohibited hazardous work activities.<sup>2</sup> Two waiver requests were fully processed, and one was approved. The latter gave conditional, 100-day permission for a small electric company to train 16- and 17-year-olds to operate scissor lifts, work on roofs and ladders and operate circular or band saws and guillotine shears.

### Iowa needs a different approach

Evidence from decades of child-labor research and policymaking shows that working limited hours in safe environments can benefit teens as they earn money and build job skills. But children who work excessive hours are more likely to struggle with school work and less likely to graduate from high school and go on to college or training and well-paying jobs. Compared with older workers, teens have higher rates of workplace injuries and accidents while driving to and from work.<sup>3</sup>








Iowa child-labor policy should reflect these realities. Lawmakers should realign our state child-labor laws with minimum federal standards (sidebar) and adequately staff DIAL's Wage and Child Labor Unit to conduct child-labor education and enforcement. These efforts should be part of a broader campaign to build a high-road economy in which a teen job is for spending money and experience — not a needed income so their family can pay the bills. Iowa workers need a higher minimum wage, more power to bargain for a fair wage and safe workplace, and adequate enforcement of the full scope of labor laws to hold employers accountable for illegal practices.

### About this report

This summary highlights the most serious and notable Iowa child-labor investigations that concluded in 2024. They include the cases where investigators found violations and issued penalties, cases where they found violations and issued warning letters, and cases where no penalty or warning was issued, even though the incident involved questionable child-labor practices.

## Iowa's new, looser child-labor laws put young workers in riskier situations, conflict with federal law

Even as child-labor violations have risen across the nation,<sup>4</sup> industry interests have pushed to loosen child-labor laws. They succeeded in 2023 in Iowa, where lawmakers reduced penalties and liability for employers and made it easier to employ teenagers in risky activities, in some cases setting standards lower than those in federal law. Senate File 542:

-  **Lowered the age for serving alcohol** at restaurants from 18 to 16.
-  **Let 14- and 15-year-olds work later at night:** till 9 during the school year and 11 p.m. in summer (up from 7 and 9 p.m.).
-  **Let 14- and 15-year-olds perform formerly prohibited tasks** like work in meat freezers and light assembly.
-  **Reduced or removed employer penalties** for some child labor law violations.
-  **Removed employer liability** for minors' injuries or deaths if they are involved in a work-based learning program.
-  **Eliminated Child Labor Permits** requiring informed parental consent before minors begin work. Used in many states, they are effective at reducing child-labor violations.<sup>5</sup>
-  **Launched Youth Employment Waivers** for employers to apply to place minors in otherwise prohibited hazardous activities.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Iowa Department of Inspections, Appeals and Licensing provided copies of all Investigative Case Reports and Notices of Civil Monetary Penalty for child labor investigations concluded in 2024 to Common Good Iowa in May 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> Iowa Workforce Development provided copies of all Youth Employment Waiver applications submitted in 2024 and application outcomes to Common Good Iowa in July 2025.
- <sup>3</sup> Staff, Schulenberg and Bachman, "Adolescent Work Intensity, School Performance, and Academic Engagement," *Sociology of Education*, July 1, 2010. Accessed at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038040710374585>. Guerin et al, "Nonfatal Occupational Injuries to Younger Workers - United States, 2012-2018," September 4, 2020. Accessed at [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a3.htm?s\\_cid=mm6935a3\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a3.htm?s_cid=mm6935a3_w)
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Child labor cases, 2013-24. Accessed at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/data/charts/child-labor>
- <sup>5</sup> Bao and Kabra, State Mandated Employment Certificate for Minors Reduces Child Labor Violations in the US, SSRN, June 7, 2024. Accessed at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4857432](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4857432)

# Child-labor violations resulting in penalties



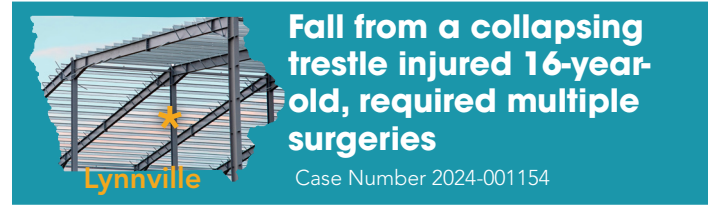
## Employer ultimately settled civil penalties of \$57,500 for just \$18,750

According to five employees aged 15 to 17, Van Hauen Auto & Truck Repair owner Lance Van Hauen regularly tasked them with dangerous duties, including cleaning the shop's walls and ceilings using a powered scissor lift and driving utility vehicles around the farm. When an adult employee was fired, Van Hauen appointed a 16-year-old "supervisor" for the rest of the boys. They regularly worked without adult supervision, including driving themselves around the property in a UTV. All these practices are violations of state and federal child labor law.

In July 2023, the teens were riding on the UTV when the driver braked suddenly and veered to avoid an electric fence. The UTV flipped, crushing the passenger, who died at the scene. At least two teens were injured attempting to pull the vehicle upright.

In interviews with WCLU investigators, Van Hauen denied that he permitted the teens to complete prohibited tasks, providing statements contradicting the testimony of every interviewed employee and parent. Investigators found that the teenage boys had spent hundreds of hours performing unsupervised, prohibited hazardous tasks at Van Hauen's direction.

DIAL calculated total civil penalties of \$57,500 against Van Hauen: \$10,000 for the fatality, \$23,500 for prohibited work by a 15-year-old, and \$24,000 for prohibited work by all minors. DIAL then reduced the penalty by 50% due to the business's small size, lack of violation history and for "good faith" — a 15% reduction for employers who make "a good faith attempt to comply with the requirements." A penalty letter for \$28,750 was issued in November 2023, at which point Van Hauen challenged the investigation's findings and civil penalties. The case was closed in September 2024 after Van Hauen paid \$18,750.



## Incident garnered an employer fine of \$2,500

A 16-year-old was illegally employed by Lynnville Construction to assist with securing trestles from an elevated boom lift in May 2024 when the series of connected trestles collapsed under the workers, causing them to fall and seriously injure two teens (ages 16 and 18). The teens were rushed to receive medical attention; the 16-year-old suffered a dislocated ankle and multiple leg fractures that have required two surgeries so far.

Iowa Code prohibits employers from allowing a minor to use a powered hoist, like the one used, or to perform work related to roofing installation. Investigators calculated civil penalties totaling \$5,000, but reductions for history, business size and good faith reduced the final penalty to \$2,500.



## Developer issued a \$1,500 civil penalty for construction-site injury

A 15-year-old attempted to saw through a water-main pipe without supervision in July 2024 when he lost control of the saw, which struck him in the face. The teen required stitches. In speaking with WCLU investigators, the owner of Bella Commercial admitted that the child should not have been on the worksite or allowed be in a situation where he was working unsupervised. Penalty reductions for history, business size and good faith halved the employer's final penalty from \$3,000 to \$1,500.



### Trench collapsed on 15-year-old, causing life-altering injuries

Case Number 2024-001468

#### DIAL reduced penalties from \$46,800 to \$15,600

Despite prior warnings to Rogers Septic Maintenance & Repair against employing minors, the company put a 15-year-old to work in hazardous trench conditions at a site near the Des Moines River. Trenching is prohibited for all minors under state and federal law. On August 8, 2024, after regularly working in the trenches for three weeks, the minor went to grab some tools when one side of the trench collapsed, burying him waist-deep in rubble. Coworkers acted quickly to pull him out and rush him to the ER, where they discovered severe trauma, including fractures to the pelvis and sacrum and a laceration to the urethra. The injuries required multiple surgeries and an external cast around his hips. More surgeries were anticipated as his injuries heal.

The accident prompted an investigation by IOSHA and DIAL's Wage and Child Labor Unit. Interviews with company personnel acknowledged that despite explicit advisories, the minor was assigned to work on dangerous sites, including trench work. Investigative findings revealed that the employer violated several provisions of Iowa Code, resulting in a calculated civil penalty of \$46,800.

During an informal closing conference with WCLU investigators in September 2024, the owners accepted responsibility and agreed not to hire minors in the future. DIAL reduced the penalty by 10% for having no prior violation history and by 25% for being a small business. After negotiations, the number of violations listed in the penalty letter was reduced from 108 to 48, and the case was settled for \$15,600.

## Child-labor violations resulting in warnings



### Manufacturer warned after 17-year-old's finger crushed in machine

Case Number 2024-000795

A 17-year-old was illegally employed to operate a metal press/cutting machine with hydraulic vice grips for a small manufacturer when he mistakenly pressed an incorrect button and caused the hydraulic vice to crush his finger. Thankfully, the February 2024 injury is unlikely to cause permanent damage. On-site supervisors for the minor were reportedly unaware that operation of the metal-forming machine was a prohibited task for minors under Iowa Code Chapter 92. The WCLU investigator ultimately issued a warning letter to the company.



### After parent report, smoothie cafe warned for dozens of 'hours' violations

Case Number 2024-002197

The mother of a minor employee of a smoothie cafe called the Wage and Child Labor Unit in March 2024 to report that underage workers were being scheduled past 9 p.m. and for shifts over six hours while school was in session. Investigators reviewed the employer's records and found 26 instances of hours violations under child-labor law. Due to the low severity of the violations and lack of prior violations, DIAL issued a warning letter and advised the owner that the maximum penalty for the violations could have cost them \$13,000.



### Confusion over conflicting state and federal laws leads to over-scheduled teens

Case Number 2024-000830

Norwalk

The parent of a 15-year-old fast-food employee noticed their child had been scheduled to work beyond 9 p.m. several times and called the WCLU in March 2024. Investigators corresponded intermittently with the business owner and, five months after the initial complaint, visited the location to explain and answer questions about discrepancies between state and federal law. Those differences emerged following passage of Iowa’s 2023 child-labor law, which allows some practices, including later work hours for young teens, that remain illegal under federal law. The unit closed the case by issuing a warning letter, which noted that “any instance of an employee under 16 years of age working [restricted hours] could be considered a violation.”



### 14-year-old health-care worker scheduled too early in the morning

Case Number 2024-000919

Ames

A father contacted the WCLU in April 2024 after learning his 14-year-old daughter had been scheduled to work at 6 a.m. — an hour earlier than allowed by law — on two occasions at the same health-care facility that employed the daughter’s mother. An investigator contacted the facility’s business manager, who identified a lack of appropriate training for a new manager and promised to immediately correct the issue. A verbal warning was issued.



### Young worker needed surgery to put pin in finger after attempt to operate crane

Case Number 2024-001212

Sioux City

A manufacturing company received a warning letter from DIAL after hiring a 17-year-old to paint ceiling beams using a powered hoisting apparatus — restricted work activity for a minor. In June 2024, the employee was attempting to move a beam when he injured his left hand, which required surgery to place a pin in the middle finger. The owner took responsibility for his ignorance of the employee’s age, and DIAL issued a warning letter.



### Large manufacturer repeatedly put minors in hazardous jobs

Case Number 2024-000877

Farley

In March 2024, DIAL received anonymous tips from an employee who witnessed a 17-year-old coworker welding, using an overhead crane and operating a power grinder — all prohibited activities for workers under 18. At a WCLU investigator’s request, the employer provided employment records indicating that the company had hired several 17-year-olds for hazardous work, including welding. Investigators also obtained photo evidence of the underage worker performing prohibited tasks and pointed out six employment records since 2018 that show a minor being hired for a prohibited occupation.

Investigators met with the manufacturer’s owners, who conceded that there was a concerning pattern of hiring minors for prohibited occupations. After the conference, however, an investigator noted, “I was unable to find any violations ... in regards to child labor.” But the July 18 warning letter sent to the business said that the investigation had discovered violations of Iowa Code and urged the owners to comply with the law.



### Manufacturer's belt sander claimed 17-year-old's fingernail

Case Number 2024-001363

Guttenberg

A 17-year-old employee of a manufacturing business peeled off his fingernail in July 2024 while attempting to clean small parts with a belt sander — a prohibited task for minors. Despite at least one other witness to the injury, the minor continued work and did not seek medical attention until later, when his mother saw the wound. Because of the employer’s cooperation, DIAL investigators opted to issue a warning letter.



### Fast-food owner warned for 23 'hours' violations involving 14- and 15-year-olds

Case Number 2024-001733

A concerned mother called the WCLU in October 2024 after learning that her child and other 14- and 15-year-old employees of a fast-food restaurant were

being scheduled to work past 9:00 p.m. and for more than 28 hours per week, in violation of state and federal child labor law. On investigation, the Unit found 23 "hours" violations related to employees under 16. The owner was issued a warning letter and a notice that if any further violations were found, the \$11,500 penalty could be added to the future penalty amount.

## Cases with no child-labor violations found despite concerning circumstances



### No penalty for teen's chemical burns received while loading pesticides onto plane

Case Number 2024-000974

While employed by a central Iowa agricultural services firm in July 2023, a 16-year-old was among those assigned to help load pesticide containers onto a plane without proper personal protective equipment. When the workers attempted to repair a hose leak, the pesticide splashed over them, causing chemical burns worsened by the lack of nearby fresh water to rinse pesticide off their skin and clothing. Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) investigators fined the employer \$3,100 for violations of Iowa Code Chapter 206, which requires Commercial Pesticide Handlers to be at least 18.

WCLU investigators received the case from IDALS in April 2024 and noted that IDALS uncovered evidence of child-labor violations (Chapter 92). According to the Closure Report, "Acknowledging violations and possible further penalties in regards to Iowa Code Chapter 92 is not quantified [sic], as the greater safety measures are laid out in the qualifications of a licensed Commercial Pesticide Handler and the employer is aware that further violations jeopardize the operation of such a business." No warning letter, violation or fine was issued by the WCLU.



### Pork producer avoided penalty for grain-auger injury due to parent-owner exception

Case Number 2024-001364

Multiple part-owners are involved in the business operations of a system of hog-producing farms. In July 2024, a 16-year-old child of two part-owners was in a grain bin when the teeth of a grain auger grabbed his fingers and cut off the tip of his right index finger. Under normal child labor rules, the minor — who had reportedly been working since age 14 — would be prohibited from operating a grain auger, as it is a highly dangerous piece of machinery. However, because his parents are part-owners, DIAL found no code violation.



### Investigator took contractor at their word that they didn't employ minors, closed case

Case Number 2024-001332

WCLU investigators received an email in July 2024 expressing concerns that local minors were working night shifts on a construction site. After being directed to a subcontractor on the site, WCLU requested the business' W2 and application records. Finding no evidence of minor employment in the records sent by the company, the investigator closed the case without visiting the worksite or seeking further evidence.