EDITORIAL

For the last three years, the staff of *Public Health Reports* has struggled to make the journal as engaging and readable as possible. We have searched for a variety of articles to appeal to every part of the public health world, hoping that we will inspire our readers to dip into pieces beyond their own specialties.

We have taken advantage of our alliance with the Association of Schools of Public Health to redesign the magazine's look. Glenn Pierce at the Magazine Group has produced new layouts for our cover, features, scientific contributions, and departments. And Bill Ravanesi has joined our staff as a photo consultant.

As always, we welcome comments and suggestions at <phr@nlm.nih.gov>. ■

LETTERS

Youth Employment Versus Exploitative Child Labor

I was pleased to see the article "Child Labor: Still with Us after All These Years" by Landrigan and McCammon [*PHR*, Nov./Dec. 1997, p. 466–73]. Dr. Landrigan continues to play a critical leadership role in bringing this important topic to the attention of the public health community.

I believe, however, that the issues of health and safety for working children and adolescents would be better served by more clearly differentiating between illegal and exploitative employment of children in conditions such as sweatshops and what I have come to call youth employment. These two types of child labor differ in their root causes, magnitude, and impact on children's health and well-being. Further, strategies for prevention, while overlapping, are distinct.

Exploitative child labor involves comparatively small numbers of young people—most frequently children and adolescents of color—who work out of economic necessity. Sweatshop-type labor is typically hidden from our view: in illegal garment shops, in the fields where migrant workers harvest crops.

Youth employment, on the other hand, is the norm in American society. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics employment estimates for 1996, approximately 43% of 16- to 17-year-olds are in the labor force at any single time. As Landrigan and McCammon cite, 80% of youth in this country are employed at some point before they leave high school. While economic need is a factor for a substantial portion of these youth, survey findings suggest that the large majority of adolescents, 70% to 80%, work for spending money. And, whereas sweatshop labor is typically invisible, youth employment is in full view. We expect young workers to serve us French fries and bag our groceries. Each summer, public jobs programs work to place teenagers in jobs and nationwide school-to-career initiatives promise to place more students in the workplace as part of their academic learning experience.

Failure to clearly distinguish between child labor in sweatshop-like conditions and employment of young workers in standard jobs enables the general public to distance themselves from the problem—to point the finger at sweatshops in New York and California fields—while sending their own children off to work without awareness of the potential risks.

Yet most of the statistics cited by Landrigan and McCammon pertain to youth working in these standard jobs. In Massachusetts, where we conduct surveillance of work-related injuries to young people, over 60% of all injured teens are employed in five industries: restaurants, grocery stores, department stores, retail bakeries, and nursing homes.

While young workers employed in these industries are often in violation of child labor laws—particularly laws pertaining to hours of work and work permits[1]—most of the injured youth in Massachusetts appear to be employed in jobs that are legal though not necessarily healthful and safe. Examples include a 15-year-old boy pumping gas for seven hours in zero-degree weather who suffered second- and third-degree frostbite on all of his fingers and several toes and a 17-year-old nursing home assistant who temporarily lost sight in her eye when a chemical she was using to wash dishes splashed in her face. Notably, the two most recent occupational fatalities among children and adolescents in Massachusetts were boys who died while working for family businesses—one run over by a street sweeper while working after school at his father's asphalt