

Thank you, Chairwoman & Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to speak today on this important issue. My name is Lauren Murfree, and I am a policy analyst with the Indiana Community Action Poverty Institute. Today, I want to contribute what I experienced working as a teenager at a restaurant to our conversation and to remind you why child labor laws exist.

Thanks to being employed by an unscrupulous employer, I was injured on the job, landing me weeks of prescription medications and physical therapy. At 16, I was injured at my workplace, causing sciatic nerve damage, which kept me up all night due to searing pain down my back and legs.

Before the injury, I balanced my restaurant shifts with my high school classes, needing to contribute to my household to keep us afloat despite receiving Section 8 housing, SNAP, and WIC. My age, gender, and family's poverty status all increased my vulnerability in the workplace, a power difference my employer exploited. At night, those of us who were minors at my place of work would be told to clock out before cleaning – a form of wage theft. We all knew if we spoke up, we would likely be fired and replaced. Experiences like mine are part of the reality that should be shaping the debate about child labor laws in Indiana.

In Indiana, there has been a [significant increase in child labor violations](#) within the last decade. Young workers are [three times more likely](#) to suffer wage violations than other workers. We know that [most violations in the food service industry](#) are typically due to overworking or hazardous work conditions, but we still don't have a complete picture of what is happening. What we do know that [penalties for violations in Indiana are trivial](#), with most first violations - including hazardous conditions for children receiving warnings and second hazardous condition violations fines of \$100 dollars.

The absence of strong regulations and enforcement places the onus on the youth in these contexts to speak up and push back against employers that take advantage of them. We need to recognize that – particularly for youth in poverty - adults retain the most power, and in turn, can cause the most harm. We are stealing from the futures of our youth for the profits of these businesses when we loosen protections on youth employment.

As Hoosiers, we value excellence in all we do, and supporting businesses that places profits over children's well-being contradicts this value, allowing mismanaged organizations to flourish. Regulations exist to protect vulnerable youth against predatory employers, not those who are supportive of minors and do their due diligence.

*My employer during my youth, was not supportive and even attempted to dissuade me from claiming workers' compensation, when I was injured on the job. ***

Sadly, in my case, those who employed me during my youth did not have my health in their thoughts. These are the kinds of employers that labor laws and penalties are meant to address. I'd like to encourage you to include in the bill a report to the legislature from the Indiana Department of Labor on child violations from the last decade and to consider increasing penalties for violations, especially those that have the potential to result in physical harm. Thank you for letting me speak today on this important issue.