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## Alberta failing to ensure safe, fair work for teens

As students return to school across Alberta today, thousands of teens will again be juggling their time between education and employment. But a new report released today by Parkland Institute warns that many Alberta teens are working in prohibited occupations or face unsafe workplaces, and that the provincial government has failed to effectively enforce the employment regulations in place to protect them.

The report, *Illegal and Injurious: How Alberta Has Failed Teen Workers*, written by Athabasca University Labour Relations Professor Bob Barnetson, found that as many as 70 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds in the province may be employed in prohibited occupations, and that more than half of all employed teens experience work-related injuries each year. Regulations intended to balance school and work are lower in Alberta than in other Western provinces, and violations are common.

“Like all jurisdictions, Alberta recognizes that young workers are more vulnerable than other employees, and has put in place specific regulations to protect them,” Barnetson explains. “The problem is that the rules are frequently ignored by employers, and the complaints-driven enforcement system is failing to adequately protect teens from illegal and unsafe work.”

For example, Barnetson points out that in 2013/14 there were just 8,500 inspections for health and safety violations across Alberta’s 154,000 businesses, meaning that a business will face inspection on average only once every 18 years.

“Compounding the lack of effective monitoring of workplaces in Alberta is the fact that there are almost no meaningful penalties for violations if they are discovered, so employers have little incentive to follow the rules,” says Barnetson, adding that only four prosecutions related to teen employment have happened in Alberta since 2000.

“This situation leaves parents and even teens themselves with the difficult task of trying to ensure their workplaces are safe and fair,” says Barnetson. “It’s a recipe for the kinds of endemic problems we’re seeing across the province.”

The report makes a series of recommendations to improve compliance with Alberta’s teen employment laws, including more worker and employer education, effective monitoring of teen employment, and increased enforcement and punishment for violations.

Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The report *Illegal and Injurious: How Alberta Has Failed Teen Workers* is available for download on Parkland’s website at [parklandinstitute.ca](http://parklandinstitute.ca).

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