

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/21/tobacco-fields-no-place-kids>

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A 16-year-old tobacco worker in North Carolina outside the mobile home where she lives with her mother, three sisters, two brothers, and nephew in North Carolina. Since she turned 12, she has spent her school summer vacations working as a hired laborer on tobacco farms to help support her family. With the money that I earn, I help my mom. I give her gas money. I buy food from the tobacco [work] for us to eat, she said. Then I try to save up the money so I can have my school supplies and school stuff like clothes and shoes. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

A 16-year-old tobacco worker standing in a tobacco field in North Carolina wearing her work clothes. I don't feel any different in the fields than when I was 12, she said. I [still] get headaches and my stomach hurts. And like I feel nauseous. I just feel like my stomach is like rumbling around. I feel like I'm gonna throw up. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Alejandro, a 17-year-old tobacco worker, in the living room of his family's mobile home in eastern North Carolina. I work in tobacco to help my mom pay some bills, he said.

Sofia, a 17-year-old tobacco worker, on a dirt road near her home in North Carolina. She said she trains for the cross-country team after working 50 to 60 hours a week in tobacco farming: The feeling when you're running is awesome. I love it. Since I'm working, I have to practice on my own because I can't go to practice. So on the weekends and Friday nights, I'll go out and run down the dirt path, and I'll just do that until I've run three miles.

Sofia, a 17-year-old tobacco worker, in a tobacco field in North Carolina. She started working at 13, and she said her mother was the only one who taught her how to protect herself in the fields: None of my bosses or contractors or crew leaders have ever told us anything about pesticides and how we can protect ourselves from them. When I worked with my mom, she would take care of me, and she would like always make sure I was okay. Our bosses don't give us anything except for our checks. That's it. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Matthew, a 16-year-old tobacco worker, outside the mobile home where he lives with his family. When you first eat and start working it hurts in your stomach. It's hurting, he said. You feel like you need to throw up. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Sara (left) and Susana, 16-year-old twin sisters who worked together on tobacco farms in 2015, sit in their bedroom in the clothes they wear to try to protect themselves in tobacco fields. They described working near areas where pesticides were being applied. Susana said, We are just working and the worker is on the tractor spraying almost very close to us. But they don't take us out of that area. They don't even warn us that it is dangerous. Nothing. We are just working and we cover ourselves well because the smell is very strong, and we get sick with the smell of that spray. Sara said, I feel dizzy, very dizzy because the smell is unbearable. It's very strong and my stomach begins to feel stirred. I feel as if I am going to faint right then and there from the smell. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Alejandro, a 17-year-old almost six-feet-tall, has been working in tobacco farming since he was 14. He told Human Rights

Watch he often loses his appetite while working in the fields, a symptom associated with nicotine exposure: You dont feel like eating Sometimes when I eat, I dont know, my stomach dont take it. And then the food that I eat makes me feel sick.

A 16-year-old tobacco worker in her backyard in North Carolina. She said, When I got hired, nobody asked my age. They didnt care. They just wanted people to work. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

An 18-year-old tobacco worker who started working in tobacco farming when he was 15. We leave here at 5 a.m. and get there at 6 a.m. We get back at 6 or 7 p.m., he said. I usually dont eat until 10 or 11 [a.m.], and the smell [of the tobacco] and an empty stomach, you cant hold it in. You vomit. It happened to me a couple days ago. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Dr. Sara Quandt and Dr. Thomas Arcury are faculty at Wake Forest School of Medicine. Children are not small adults, Dr. Quandt said. Dr. Arcury added, If we think about children as children, because thats what they are, were putting them to work in the nations most hazardous industry: agriculture. Were putting people who are not only biologically immature, but behaviorally immature and asking them to work with adults. Were putting them into a situation in which they are exposed to pesticides, theyre exposed to machinery and sharp tools, theyre exposed to the heat. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Dr. David Tayloe, Jr., a pediatrician in North Carolina, told Human Rights Watch that, Green Tobacco Sickness is all about exposure of the skin to green tobacco. And so the nicotine thats on the plant, in the plant, gets secreted out the pores of the plant, can be absorbed by the skin of a human being. And the nicotine can make you sick. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

Gloves used by Sofia, a 17-year-old tobacco worker. She told Human Rights Watch that she has to purchase her own protective gear. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

A portable toilet in a tobacco field in North Carolina. Teenage children interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported inconsistent access to bathroom facilities while working on tobacco farms.

A tobacco field in North Carolina. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

I first met "Elena" two years ago at a pizza parlor in eastern North Carolina. She was 13 at the time, about to finish eighth grade and begin her second summer as a hired laborer on tobacco farms.

I was in North Carolina investigating hazardous child labor on tobacco farms in the United States, where under federal labor law, it's legal to hire 12-year-olds to work on tobacco farms.

I asked Elena how she felt while she worked in tobacco, and she said, "Sometimes I felt like I needed to throw up. I felt like I was going to faint. I would stop and just hold myself up with the tobacco plant."

This past July more than two years later I went back to North Carolina and interviewed Elena again. She was taller and more confident. She had gotten her braces removed, and finished two years of high school. But she was still spending her summers working in the tobacco fields. "I don't feel any different in the fields than when I was 12," she told me. "I get headaches and my stomach hurts. And I feel nauseous. I just feel like my stomach is like rumbling around. I feel like I'm going to throw up."

The symptoms she described headaches, nausea, dizziness are consistent with acute nicotine poisoning, or "Green Tobacco Sickness," which happens when workers absorb nicotine through the skin while handling tobacco.

The long-term effects of absorbing nicotine through the skin are uncertain, but [research](#) on smoking suggests exposure to nicotine during adolescence can be linked to mood disorders, and problems with memory, learning, impulse control, and attention later in life. Pesticide exposure has been associated with reproductive health problems, cancer, neurological problems, and other issues.

Even though Elena is 16 now, she says still gets sick in the tobacco fields. And even though she looks like a young woman, she is still a child under international law.

Each year, an unknown number of children work long hours as hired workers on U.S. tobacco farms, exposed to nicotine, toxic pesticides, extreme heat, and other dangers. My colleagues and I interviewed 141 children ages 7 to 17 for [a report](#) last year documenting hazardous child labor in tobacco farming. We urged the U.S. government and the world's largest tobacco companies to ban anyone under 18 from hazardous work in the crop.

The U.S. government and Congress haven't changed the law or regulations to protect child tobacco workers. But last year, two of the largest U.S.-based tobacco companies [banned](#) children under 16 from working on farms in their supply chains. This was an important step forward, but they left out 16- and 17-year-olds.

Other companies that buy tobacco from the United States ban children under 18 from the most dangerous tasks in tobacco farming, but some have loopholes that allow 16- and 17-year-olds to do hazardous work in certain circumstances. None of the companies have policies sufficient to protect all children from danger on tobacco farms.

We went back to North Carolina during the tobacco season this year to find out what was happening to the teenagers excluded from protection. Almost all of the teenagers we interviewed for a new [report](#) described the same symptoms Elena did: nausea, vomiting, headaches, and dizziness. Many also described being exposed to pesticides while they worked, and said they felt immediately ill after working near spraying.

Sixteen-year-olds are not the same as adults. Most of us probably intuitively know it's true, remembering what we were like at 16. But [research on the teen brain](#) has shown that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain used for problem-solving and controlling impulses, continues developing throughout the teenage years and into the early 20s. The prefrontal cortex is particularly susceptible to the effects of stimulants like nicotine.

Most of the children I interviewed had no idea that the work they were doing could have long-term consequences for their health. No one had ever trained them on the hazards of tobacco farming and how to protect themselves.

Even with better training, research suggests that the most mature 16- and 17-year-old children may not be well-equipped to navigate dangerous situations like pesticides being sprayed in the field next to them -- when adults are in charge. Studies have shown teens feel less vulnerable to harm and do not always take the same safety precautions as adults, even when they have received the same training.

Despite the evidence, some companies appear to believe that 16-year-olds should be allowed to work in tobacco fields. Teenagers should have access to safe jobs where they can develop work ethic and skills and add to their family's income. But not on tobacco farms, where they'll be exposed to toxins that could have lasting consequences on their health.

Tobacco farms are no place for children. Even though 16- and 17-year-olds may look fully grown, they are not adults. And they deserve protection.

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