

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/05/dispatches-no-virginia-tobacco-fields-are-not-place-children>

Campaign and Advocacy

Help us continue to fight human rights abuses. Please give now to support our work

ZamaHRW

[Share this via Facebook](#)

[Share this via Twitter](#)

[Share this via WhatsApp](#)

[Share this via Email](#)

[Other ways to share](#) [Share this via LinkedIn](#)

[Share this via Reddit](#)  [Share this via Telegram](#)  [Share this via Printer](#)

"Are you saying my parents were stupid?"

From Virginia lawmaker Jonny Joannou, it seemed like a reasonable question. If working on the tobacco farm as a child was fine for many Virginians, why should the state ban it now?

The moment came during a committee hearing of the Virginia House of Delegates I attended Tuesday on a [bill](#), introduced by Delegate Alfonso Lopez, that would make it illegal to hire children under 18 to work in direct contact with tobacco, unless the child's parent or grandparent owned the farm. I was there to support the restrictions based on Human Rights Watch's extensive [research](#) on the topic. At the moment, the state's child labor law, like federal law, exempts child farm workers from the protections enjoyed by all other children who work.

Still, the lawmaker's question is one I wrestle with. My grandfather grew up working on a farm in Texas, and my dad worked construction in Louisiana at age 12. Now I'm fighting to stop children from doing dangerous jobs, including on tobacco farms where they risk poisoning by nicotine and pesticides. Am I shaming my grandfather and the millions like him who have sent children to work?

If Joannou had directed his question to me, this is what I would have said:

I like to think our parents tried to do what's best. Children when they are old enough can gain valuable skills and work ethic from jobs that are safe and don't interfere with their education. I want this for my kids, too.

But we now know things our parents didn't - about car seats, lead-free paint, folic acid, and of course cigarettes. When it comes to child labor, we also know more now about the effect pesticides used on tobacco, many of which are known [neurotoxins](#) have on children's still-developing bodies. While the long-term effects of nicotine absorption through the skin have not been studied, a recent US Surgeon General's [report](#) suggests that nicotine exposure during adolescence may have lasting consequences for brain development. Almost [two-thirds](#) of the more than 140 child tobacco workers we interviewed reported suddenly becoming ill at work with vomiting and nausea, dizziness, difficulty breathing and other symptoms consistent with acute nicotine poisoning.

The House committee swiftly killed the bill, leaving Virginia's 12-year-olds free to work unlimited hours on tobacco farms in the state this summer. Afterwards, Joannou [admitted](#) that he hadn't worked on a farm as a child, although he did wash dishes in a family-owned restaurant.

I don't think that real-life farmworker parents, many of whom are desperately poor and largely uninformed about risks in the field, are stupid for sending their children to do work that is currently absolutely legal. But I don't think it's smart for legislators to ignore the best evidence we have now on the risks faced by children working tobacco.

The Human Rights Consequences of Parental Notice of Abortion in Illinois

Children and Families Sent to Harm by the US Remain in Mexico Program

[Share this via Facebook](#)

[Share this via Twitter](#)

[Share this via WhatsApp](#)

[Share this via Email](#)

[Other ways to share](#) [Share this via LinkedIn](#)

[Share this via Reddit](#)  [Share this via Telegram](#)  [Share this via Printer](#)

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in 90 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

Get updates on human rights issues from around the globe. Join our movement today.

Human Rights Watch is a 501(C)(3)nonprofit registered in the US under EIN: 13-2875808