

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/16/us-ban-hazardous-child-labor-tobacco-farming>

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Bills Before Congress Set 18 as Minimum Age

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The [US](#) Congress should promptly enact legislation introduced on April 16, 2015 that would provide needed protections for children working in US tobacco farming, Human Rights Watch said today. Bills were introduced simultaneously in the Senate by Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois and in the House of Representatives by Representative David Cicilline of Rhode Island.

The legislation would prohibit children under 18 from working in direct contact with tobacco. Children working in tobacco are particularly vulnerable to acute nicotine poisoning marked by headaches, vomiting, and dizziness from contact with tobacco plants. Current US law allows children as young as 12 and even younger on small farms to work in agriculture for unlimited hours outside of the school day, with no special provisions to protect them from nicotine exposure.

Children shouldn't be doing jobs that make them sick, said [Jo Becker](#), children's rights advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. The proposed legislation is a common-sense measure to protect children in the US from the dangers of nicotine exposure.

A 2014 Human Rights Watch [report](#) documented conditions for children working on tobacco farms in four states where 90 percent of US tobacco is grown: North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Two-thirds of the children interviewed reported vomiting, nausea, headaches, and dizziness while working on tobacco farms, all symptoms consistent with acute nicotine poisoning. Many worked 50 to 60 hours a week in extreme heat, and also reported exposure to toxic pesticides.

Health studies have found that nicotine exposure during adolescence causes mood disorders, attention deficit, and lasting cognitive deficits. A US Labor Department [bulletin](#) issued in March states that children and adolescents who handle tobacco may be more sensitive to chemical exposures, more likely to suffer from GTS [nicotine poisoning], and may suffer more serious health effects than adults.

In recent months, key entities in the tobacco industry have adopted new policies to keep children out of tobacco farming. In December 2014, the two biggest US tobacco companies Altria Group and Reynolds American independently announced that beginning in 2015 they would prohibit their growers from employing children under 16. These companies manufacture some of the best-selling cigarette brands in the world, including *Camel*, *Marlboro*, and *Winston*. Two of the largest tobacco growers associations in the United States adopted similar policies opposing the employment of children under 16 in tobacco farming. Some multinational companies, including Philip Morris International and Japan Tobacco International, already had child labor policies in place that are more protective than US law.

The tobacco industry is recognizing the dangers of tobacco farming for children, but voluntary policies aren't enough, Becker said. Industry policies need to be backed by law and government enforcement.

Even under the new policies, most tobacco companies allow 16- and 17-year olds to perform dangerous tasks that expose them to nicotine, Human Rights Watch said. International labor law ratified by the US prohibits hazardous work for children under 18.

The proposed legislation would apply only to children working for hire, and would not affect children working on their family's farm. Fifty national and state organizations have [endorsed](#) the proposed bills.

US child labor laws haven't kept up with the known dangers of nicotine, putting children's health at risk, Becker said. Both the House and Senate should act on these bills without delay.

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