

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

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New Research Shows Child Farmworkers Unprepared for Workplace Dangers

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New research published in the [American Journal of Industrial Medicine](#) reinforces just how dangerous [agricultural work is for children](#) in the United States and how unprepared most are for what they face in the fields.

More [US child workers die in agriculture](#) than in any other industry. Every day, [33 children are injured](#) while working on US farms. And they receive frighteningly little safety training, making their work in demanding environments even more dangerous.

201512_CRD_US_TOBACCO_PHOTO_11

Researchers from [Wake Forest School of Medicine](#) interviewed 30 child farmworkers, ages 10 to 17, and published their findings in two articles that describe how children are [pressured to work quickly](#), with little control over their hours or the nature of their work.

The children interviewed feared having their pay docked or being fired if they couldn't keep up.

They received little if any safety training. One 14-year-old worker said: When you're chopping with the machete, they say, Oh, be careful, like, to not hurt yourself, but that's basically it.

Children I've interviewed for Human Rights Watch investigations of [child labor in US tobacco farming](#) had similar experiences, working long hours in extreme heat with virtually no safety training.

One 15-year-old child worker told me his mom also a farmworker was hospitalized after being sprayed with pesticides, but even then, his

employer never told him how protect himself: He just said, Be careful. Thats all.

Telling a 14-year-old to be careful with a machete, or a 15-year-old to be careful around pesticides, is hardly adequate safety training. Safety training is essential for all workers, but children shouldnt be allowed to do such dangerous work in the first place.

Loopholes in US labor law make it legal for children as young as 12 to work unlimited hours on farms of any size with parental permission, as long as they dont miss school. There is no minimum age for children to work on small farms or family farms.

The new research shows the dire consequences of allowing children to work in such a dangerous sector. But [a bill](#) currently in the US House of Representatives would give child farmworkers the same protections as children working in other sectors, limiting their hours and raising the minimum age to begin work.

Members of Congress should enact this bill and ensure child farmworkers in the US are finally protected.

[redacted]
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

[redacted]
A 16-year-old tobacco worker standing in a tobacco field in North Carolina wearing her work clothes. I dont 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 Im gonna throw up. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

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

[redacted]
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 youre running Its awesome. I love it. Since Im working, I have to practice on my own because I cant go to practice. So on the weekends and Friday nights, Ill go out and run down the dirt path, and Ill just do that until Ive run three miles.

[redacted]
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 dont give us anything except for our checks. Thats it. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

[redacted]
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. Its hurting, he said. You feel like you need to throw up. 2015 Benedict Evans for Human Rights Watch

[redacted]
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 dont take us out of that area. They dont 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. Its 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

[redacted]
Alejandro, a 17-year-old almost six-foot-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.

[redacted]
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

[redacted]
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

[redacted]
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

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