



Center for Worker Health

Wake Forest University School of Medicine

POLICY BRIEF

Latinx Child Tobacco Workers in North Carolina

Summary

Children as young as 10 years old work legally on farms in the United States (US). In North Carolina, these children are most often Latinx. Many of these children, including those under 16 years old, work in tobacco production. Tobacco work exposes children to the tobacco plant and nicotine, as well as to excessive heat and pesticides.

Several child farmworkers aged 10-15 who completed in-depth interviews in 2016 described the mechanical, heat, and pesticide risks they experience when working in tobacco. Of 107 child farmworkers aged 10-15 who completed survey interviews in 2017, 56 (52%) worked in tobacco. They ranged in age from 12 to 15; 66% were boys and 34% were girls. Their work included topping (88%) and barning (4%) tobacco, as well as cultivating (46%) and harvesting (23%). Their work week ranged from 5 to 69 hours, with 16 (29%) working more than 40 hours per week.

All agricultural work is hazardous, with tobacco production exposing child workers to nicotine, heat, and pesticides. The age limits for child agricultural employment should be updated to reflect the same measure of safety found in non-agricultural employment. At a minimum, a regulation that prohibits the employment in tobacco of children under age 16 years should be implemented, and resources should be authorized for the enforcement of this regulation.

Why does it matter?

Agriculture is a hazardous industry, with workers experiencing high rates of injury, illness, and death. Tobacco farming in particular has adverse effects on human health.¹ Working in tobacco increases exposure to nicotine, excessive heat and pesticides.²⁻⁴ The health hazards of tobacco work are especially great for children.⁵ Yet, in the US, farms legally employ children aged 10 to 15 years, and many of these children work in tobacco. Children of any age can work on the farms of their parents. In response to a 2015 Human Rights Watch report,⁶ the tobacco industry promised to remove children under age 16 years from their supply chain.

¹Arcury TA, Quandt SA. *J Agromedicine*. 2006;11:71-81; ²Quandt SA et al. *J Occup Environ Med*. 2001; 43:844-52; ³Arnold TJ et al. *New Solut*. 2020;30:111-26; ⁴Arcury TA et al. *Am J Ind Med*. 2021;64:602-19; ⁵Quandt SA, Arnold TJ. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020: 163-95; ⁶Wurth M, Buchanan J. Human Rights Watch 2015.

What did the researchers do?

In 2016, researchers completed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 30 Latinx child farmworkers aged 10 to 17 years working across North Carolina; 4 of these children were under 16 years old and had worked in tobacco. In 2017, they completed structured interviews with 202 Latinx child farmworkers aged 10 to 17 years; 56 of these children were under 16 years old and reported working in tobacco in the last week they did farm work.

What did the researchers find?

- 107 of the 202 child farmworkers who completed interviews in 2017 were aged 10 to 15 years.
- 56 (52%) of these 10 to 15 year old children reported that they had worked in tobacco in the last week they had worked before they completed their interview. Others could have worked in tobacco during 2017, either earlier or later in the season.
- These 56 child tobacco workers ranged in age from 12 to 15 years, and included boys and girls.



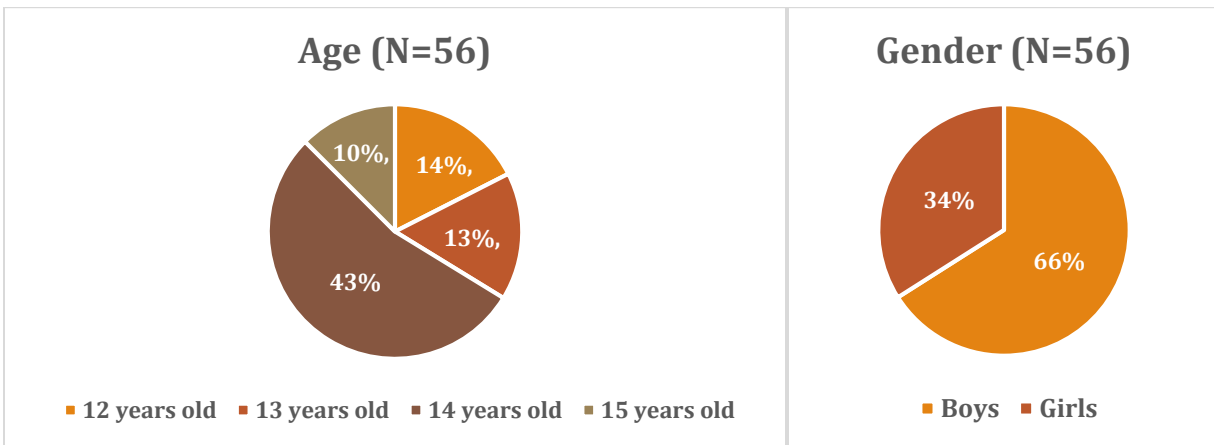
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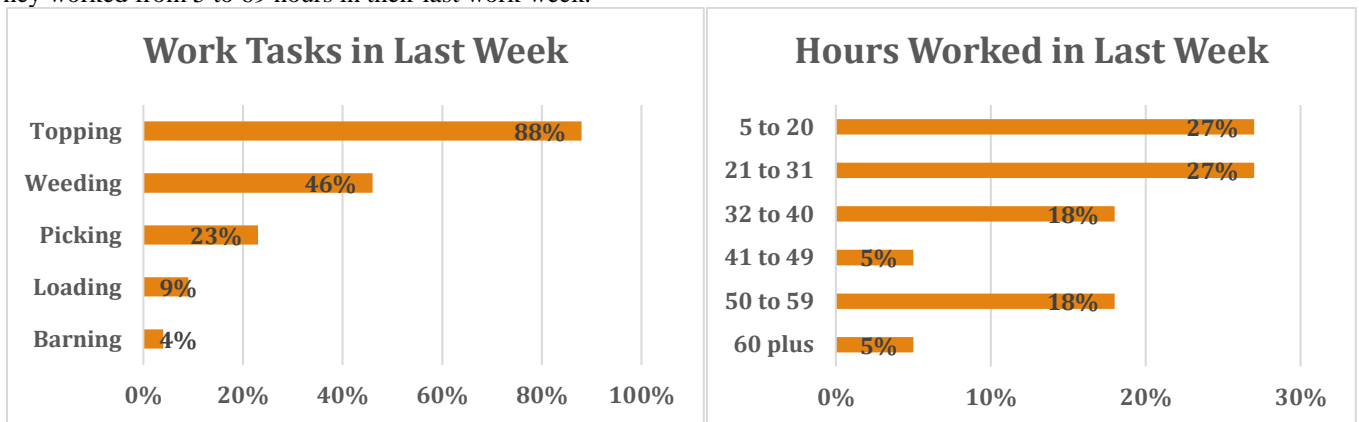
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Findings continued



- These child tobacco workers completed several different tasks in their last work week (they could report more than one task).
- They worked from 5 to 69 hours in their last work week.



- Four of the child farmworkers who completed in-depth interviews in 2016 were 10 to 15 years old and worked in tobacco. They noted some of the conditions in which they worked.
 - A 16-year-old girl (participant 30) reported that young children commonly worked in tobacco and that she worked picking tobacco in a crew that consisted almost entirely of other children aged 13 to 17.
 - A 12-year-old boy (participant 4) described planting tobacco, “When we sit down, when planting the tobacco, there's like a wheel there. And it has like a bar there that's flat, so we can put our feet down. And my feet almost got caught there in the wheel one time.”
 - A 15-year-old boy (participant 7) stated that while working in tobacco, “I get hot and you sweat a lot there...and you also have to take another shirt so that you can change.”
 - Participant 29, another 15-year-old boy who worked in tobacco commented, “I mean you don't really feel it because you get used to [heat] I guess. But if it's really, really hot like above 95, 100, I mean you do feel it and it's sweating a lot. It's pouring and you take more breaks” [#29].
 - Finally, participant 21, a 15-year-old boy, discussed pesticide exposure when working in tobacco, “And on the tobacco, you have to have long sleeves sometimes, if you want to, and you can't wear shorts 'cause the chemicals can hit you and it can – if you're not used to it, it will leave you like rashes or like little stuff. And sometimes you do have to wear like a bandanna over your mouth 'cause they probably just sprayed like chemicals into it. Probably like overnight, the people sprayed the chemicals and the next day you have to wear a bandanna over you and something to cover your face.”

Recommendations

- The age limits for agricultural employment should be reevaluated in the context of current labor laws in sectors outside of agriculture and updated to reflect the same measure of safety.
- At a minimum, a regulation that prohibits the employment in tobacco of children under age 16 years should be implemented, and resources should be authorized for the enforcement of this regulation.