



# Reality Check: Today's Child Labor Issues in U.S. Tobacco Farming

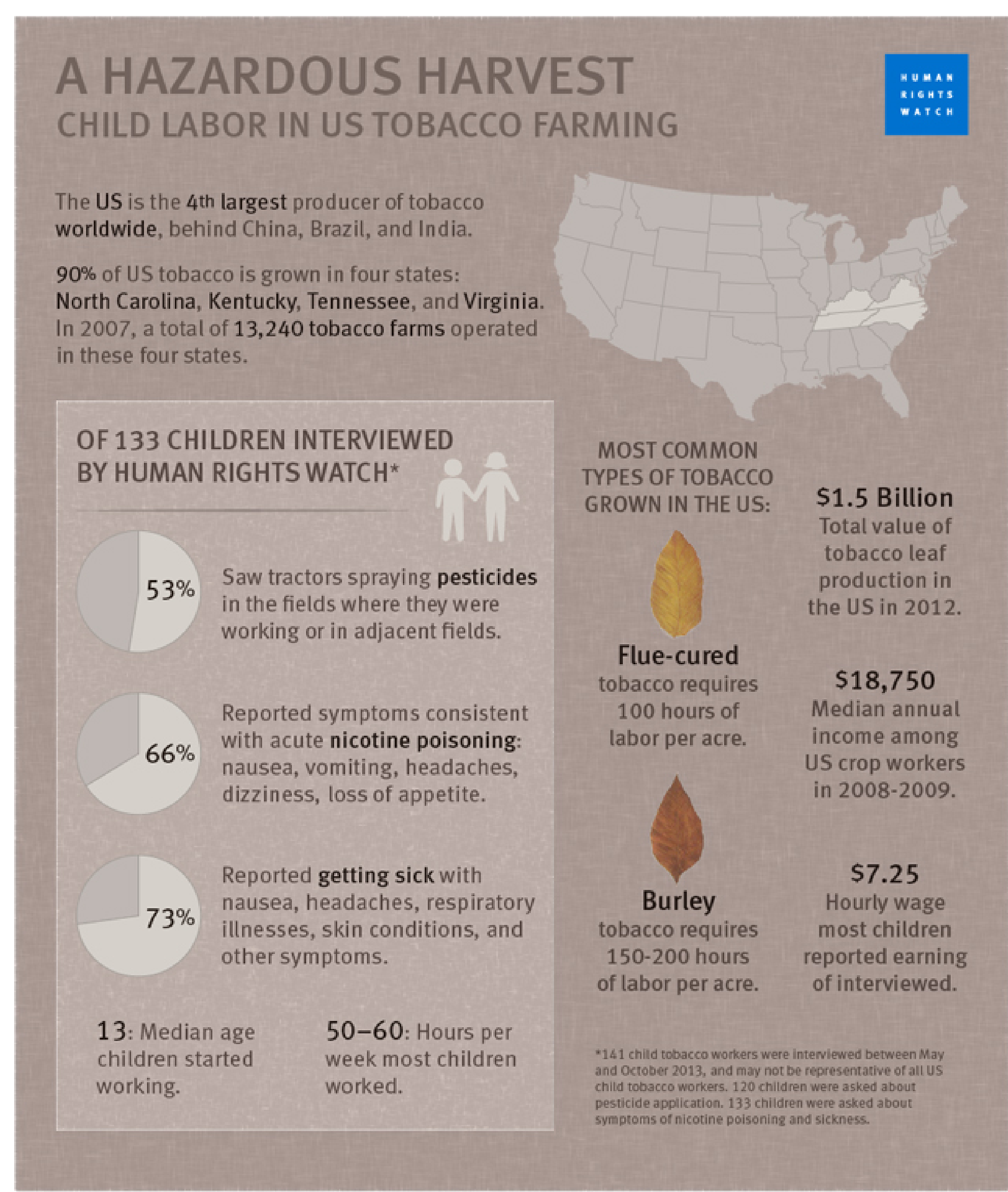
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## Key Questions

- What forms of child labor exist in America?
- What actions, if any, is America taking in an effort to eliminate child labor?

## Why Does This Issue Matter?

- U.S. law prohibits the sale of tobacco products to children yet they can legally work on tobacco farms
- Several hundred thousand children work in U.S. agriculture every year (most of Hispanic decent)
- The world's largest tobacco companies purchase their tobacco from U.S. tobacco farms
  - None have child labor policies that protect children from hazardous work
- Agriculture is the most dangerous industry open to younger workers
  - 2/3 of children under 18 who died from occupational injuries were agricultural workers
  - 1,800 nonfatal injuries to children under 18 working on U.S. farms
- Child labor working conditions:
  - Working long hours
  - Extreme heat without shade or breaks
  - Inadequate or no protective gear
  - Lifting of heavy loads
  - Usage of heavy tools and machinery
  - Lack of safety training leading to accidents
    - Children often cut or puncture themselves
    - 17 year-old boy cut off 2 fingers with a mower used to trim small tobacco plants
    - Climbing several stories without protection to hang tobacco in barns
- Health Effects:
  - Children reported suffering from Acute Nicotine Poisoning (Green Tobacco Sickness), resulting in vomiting, nausea, headaches, and dizziness
  - Exposure could affect brain development
  - Children reported tractors spraying pesticides in nearby fields which drift over to them making them feel dizzy, vomit, difficulty breathing, and a burning sensation in eyes
  - Many pesticides used in tobacco production are neurotoxins
  - Long-term effects: alteration of the nervous system, cancer, problems with learning and cognition, reproductive issues
- Lack of protection under U.S. Law:
  - Children working in agriculture can work longer hours, at younger ages, and in more hazardous conditions than children in any other industry
  - Children as young as 12 can be hired for unlimited hours outside of school hours
  - No minimum age to work on small farms
  - At age 16 children are allowed to have jobs deemed dangerous and hazardous by the U.S. Department of Labor; in all other sectors children must be 18 to do hazardous work
  - Labor Department proposed regulations in 2011 to prohibit children under 16 from working on tobacco farms, but they were withdrawn in 2012
  - OSHA had fewer health and safety inspectors in 2011 than in 1981, even though there are twice as many workplaces.
- Initiative to Eliminate:
  - Human Rights Watch sent letters to 10 U.S. & Global tobacco companies and met with them to encourage them to adopt policies, or strengthen existing policies, to prevent hazardous child labor in their supply chains



## Conclusion & Future Research

Due to the fact that America is a developed country, the subject of child labor is often not thought of as an issue. Many people believe that America would not have such issues and that the country has laws and regulations to cover just about anything. However, child labor is one issue that the U.S. continues to struggle with and grasp an understanding of the practices that are really occurring in different industries all around the county, perhaps most notably in the tobacco industry. OSHA, a U.S. regulatory agency structured to control occupational health and safety, has over time lessened their number of safety inspections as well as their budget. These acts only deepen the concern as to whether OSHA and the U.S. government will have the proper funds to ensure the protection and safety of workers. With continued growth and exposure, Americans should work towards establishing stricter laws and regulations pertaining to child labor.

## References

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