Teach about child labor in America’s tobacco fields using this Common Core-aligned package from The New York Times Upfront!

FROM THE SEPTEMBER 21, 2015, ISSUE

The package includes:

- **FOUR-PAGE ARTICLE** on child tobacco workers in the U.S., with a sidebar on child labor around the world
  - IN-DEPTH LESSON PLAN on child tobacco workers in the U.S.
  - UP CLOSE (close-reading skills activity)
  - ANALYZE THE GRAPH (graph activity on child labor around the world)
  - ARTICLE QUIZ (comprehension, analysis, and in-depth questions)
Heritage or Hate?

A racist mass murder in the South has reignited the debate about Confederate symbols—and what they really stand for p. 18
Your body gets really itchy sometimes, or you feel like throwing up.

—SARAY CAMBRAY ALVAREZ, 14, IN NORTH CAROLINA
How a loophole in America’s child labor laws lets teens work dangerous jobs harvesting tobacco

BY ALESSANDRA POTENZA

Every summer for the past four years, Saray Cambray Alvarez has woken up at dawn to work in tobacco fields. Before entering the long rows of tobacco plants in Wilson, North Carolina, Saray, now 14, pulls a black plastic garbage bag over her body to protect her skin from leaves dripping with nicotine dew. If they touch her skin, she gets dizzy and sometimes throws up. In the 90-plus degree heat and humidity, she has trouble breathing and may wait an hour for a sip of water.

“You get very thirsty,” says Saray, who works 12-hour shifts. “It’s too hard for me, and it’s too hot.”

Even though we think of child labor as a thing of the past, many teenagers like Saray—and children younger than her—spend their summers laboring in tobacco fields, mostly in North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, which together produce 90 percent of U.S. tobacco. Many are American citizens whose Hispanic immigrant parents may or may not be in the U.S. legally. These teens usually have to work to help their struggling families get by.

In the fields, they face harsh working conditions: They inhale pesticides, deal with the effects of nicotine poisoning, and work in extreme heat. Studies have shown that workers on tobacco farms have about the same level of nicotine in their bodies as regular smokers. Health experts believe that the long-term effects of nicotine poisoning and exposure to pesticides in children may include damage to their developing brains, respiratory problems, and cancer.

“It’s almost as if these kids have a regular smoking habit,” says Margaret Wurth, an expert on children’s health at Human Rights Watch, a New York-based group that tracks human rights around the world. “They’re absorbing so much nicotine in the fields.”

Child Labor in the U.S.

Child labor still exists in many places (see “Child Labor Around the World,” p. 10), and in the U.S. it was rampant until the early 1900s, when almost 2 million children under 15 worked in American coal mines, in garment factories, and on farms. Poor families, especially immigrants, often depended on their children’s incomes to survive.

Several states passed laws regulating child labor in the 1800s. (Massachusetts was the first, in 1836.) But these laws were relatively weak and often weren’t enforced. The situation changed in 1938, when passage of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act set rules for the age at which children could be employed, what kinds of jobs they could do, and

Download an infographic on child labor at upfrontmagazine.com
for how many hours. Because family farming was widespread back then—and parents needed their children to work alongside them—agricultural work was treated differently. And today, that disparity remains in effect.

For non-farm work, federal law sets 14 as the minimum age and restricts work for children under 16 to eight hours a day. For jobs the Labor Department considers “hazardous”—like mining, excavation, and explosives manufacturing—the minimum age is 18. But children as young as 12 are allowed to work on farms for unlimited hours, as long as they don’t miss school. (For kids working on their families’ farms, where presumably their parents are looking out for their well-being, there’s no minimum age.)

More than 500,000 minors work on farms in the U.S., according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Those who don’t work in the tobacco fields may pick tomatoes in California, cucumbers in Michigan, and oranges in Florida; they follow seasonal work from state to state and are often paid less than the federal minimum wage, $7.25 an hour. Though farmwork can provide income for their families, it’s one of the most dangerous kinds of work young people can do.

Federal data shows that in 2012, three fourths of the children under 18 who died from work-related injuries—22 in total—were agricultural workers. And about 2,000 minors working on U.S. farms suffered non-fatal injuries, often involving the use of sharp blades or heavy machinery like tractors. Children working on tobacco farms, who usually earn at least $7.25 an hour, face the added threat of nicotine poisoning.

Tobacco companies say they’re following the law and have even instituted additional protections. Some, like Reynolds American, whose cigarette brands include Camel, and Altria Group, which sells Marlboro, recently adopted policies banning their tobacco growers from hiring children under 16. But these policies are hard to enforce, and labor experts say that federal law needs to be strengthened to better protect minors.

“Our labor laws date back to a different era in agriculture, which was dominated by family farms,” says Wurth of Human Rights Watch. But today, farming is different, she says. “These kids are hired workers. They’re working 60 hours a week on large commercial tobacco farms.”

‘We Need to Pay the Bills’

Esmeralda Juarez started working on tobacco farms at 12. Because of the nicotine and the heat, the 16-year-old often suffers from nausea and dizziness in the fields. She’s also experienced other problems. She was sometimes harassed by a labor contractor who pulled at her clothes

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**TREACHEROUS WORK**

73%

**PERCENTAGE** of children working in the tobacco fields who say they suffer from nausea, headaches, respiratory illnesses, skin conditions, or other symptoms.

13

**MEDIAN AGE** children start working in the tobacco fields.

50 to 60

**NUMBER** of hours per week children typically work in the tobacco fields.

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**Median Age**

children start working in the tobacco fields.

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**Number of Hours** per week children typically work in the tobacco fields.

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**PHOTO: BASHIR SHAZLI/INQ/DAG NITRO/SOCCKETTY IMAGES**

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**CHILLO LABOR**

Around the World

An estimated 170 million children worldwide toil in dangerous jobs for long hours and little or no pay, according to the International Labour Organization. Many are forced to work to help their impoverished families; others are kidnapped and enslaved in mines or factories. Often, they don’t attend school. In Tanzania, children work shifts of up to 24 hours crawling through cramped tunnels hunting for gold. In Haiti, they serve as maids in private homes, where they’re often beaten and abused. And in Thailand, minors are enslaved on fishing boats for years on end. Since 2000, when major international efforts began to combat the problem, experts say the number of child laborers has declined by 30 percent. But more needs to be done, they add, including better enforcement of child labor laws and stronger measures to make sure that kids are enrolled in school. “Undoubtedly, progress has been made in the last couple of decades,” says Kailash Satyarthi, an activist who’s worked to end child labor in India. “[But] great challenges still remain.”

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**PHOTO: MARCUS BLEASDALE/VII**

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**PHOTO: PROBAL RASHID/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES**

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**PHOTO: RASHID SHAH/INQ/DAG NITRO/SOCCKETTY IMAGES**

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**PHOTO: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH 133 CHILD TOBACCO WORKERS**

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**PHOTO: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**
and called her “princess” and “baby.” Most tobacco farms, she says, have no bathrooms, and she can’t make herself go in the woods, as other women do.

“I wait until I get home. I just hold it in,” she says. “There’s nothing good about this job, except that you get paid.”

Eddie Ramirez, 16, recalls summers when he worked with many 12- and 13-year-olds, even a 10-year-old. Contractors often take advantage of young workers, he says, recounting times when he wasn’t paid what he earned. Yet, for four years, he kept going back to the tobacco fields to help his mother pay for rent and food.

“My mom, she worries I might get hurt at work,” he said last summer. “I tell her, ‘We need to pay the bills.’”

For years, public-health experts and child advocates have sought to bar minors from the tobacco fields—noting that even countries like Brazil and India prohibit it—but their efforts have been blocked. In 2011, the Labor Department proposed banning anyone under 16 from working in tobacco fields or operating a tractor on any kind of farm. But after encountering intense opposition from farm groups and Republican lawmakers, the Obama administration withdrew the proposal in 2012. Agricultural organizations said the regulations would hurt family farms and make it harder for young people to learn farming skills.

From Tobacco to Banking

In April, lawmakers introduced bills in Congress to bar minors from working in direct contact with tobacco. But the legislation has stalled in committees. That means that a lot of children will continue working in the tobacco fields.

That’s what Celia Ortiz of Pink Hill, North Carolina, did every summer for seven years. For her, working in the fields turned out to be a stepping-stone to a better life. She was brought to the U.S. illegally by her parents from Mexico when she was 3. Without a Social Security number, she had few options other than to harvest tobacco. At times, she worked on farms so big that it took her up to three hours to finish one row of tobacco plants. That meant that she could get stuck in the field for hours without being able to drink water. She often felt dizzy during her 12-hour shifts, because of either the nicotine or the pesticides. She threw up regularly.

In 2012, at 19, Ortiz was granted a temporary permit to stay and work after President Obama eased restrictions for undocumented youth brought to the U.S. as children. She quit the tobacco fields right away, got a certificate as a pharmacy technician, and began working at a pharmacy. Ortiz is now 22 and works in customer service at the banking company Wells Fargo. But she’ll never forget her time harvesting tobacco.

“Sometimes,” she says, “you really feel like you’re going to die in the middle of the field,”

—CELIA ORTIZ

‘Sometimes, you really feel like you’re going to die in the middle of the field.’

What They Did for Their Summer Vacation

A loophole in America’s child labor laws lets teens work dangerous jobs harvesting tobacco.

Before Reading

1. **List Vocabulary:** Share with students the challenging general and domain-specific vocabulary in this article. Encourage them to use context clues to infer meanings as they read and to later verify those inferences by consulting a dictionary. If desired, distribute or project the **Word Watch** activity to guide students through this process.

2. **Engage:** Ask students if they’ve had summer or after-school jobs and what kinds of regulations have protected them (mandatory breaks, restrictions on dangerous tasks, etc.).

Analyze the Article

3. **Read:** Have students read the article, marking the text to note key ideas or questions.

4. **Discuss:** Distribute or project the close-reading activity **Up Close: What They Did for Their Summer Vacation** for students to work on in small groups. (Note: The questions on the PDF also appear on the facing page of this Teacher’s Guide, with possible responses.) Follow up with a class discussion. If you’re short on time, have each group tackle one or two of the questions. Collect students’ work or have each group report its findings to the class.

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Summarize the author’s purpose in the first three paragraphs of the article.

Author's purpose, text structure
(The author’s purpose here is to draw the reader’s attention by describing the dangerous conditions one teen tobacco worker faces. The author also introduces a central idea of the article—that although Americans think of child labor as a thing of the past, it continues in the nation’s tobacco fields.)

Use evidence from the text to explain why child farmworkers have fewer protections than children who work in other kinds of jobs.

Analyze cause & effect, cite text evidence
(The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act regulated child labor by limiting work hours, banning children from certain dangerous tasks, etc. However, “because family farming was widespread back then—and parents needed their children to work alongside them—agricultural work was treated differently.” These differences remain in place today, even though many child farmworkers are employed by commercial farms rather than their own families.)

Why do you think so many teens are willing to tolerate the harsh conditions in the tobacco fields?

Make inferences, cite text evidence
(The author notes that many young tobacco workers are “American citizens whose Hispanic immigrant parents may or may not be in the U.S. legally. These teens usually have to work to help their struggling families get by.” Because their families need them to help pay the bills, and because they can get many working hours in the tobacco fields, these teens may feel that they have little choice but to tolerate the dangers.)

In the article, the author states that farmwork is “one of the most dangerous kinds of work young people can do.” How does the author develop that claim?

Analyze author’s claims
(The author cites data to back up her claim. For example, she notes that three fourths of children under 18 who died from work-related injuries in 2012 were agricultural workers and that about 2,000 child farmworkers suffered non-fatal injuries in that same year. She also describes specific farmwork dangers, like sharp blades and heavy machinery, and notes that young tobacco workers face the “added threat of nicotine poisoning.”)

The idea of regulating child farm labor has been controversial. Use the text to compare the position of the Obama administration with the position held by farm groups and many Republican lawmakers.

Compare & contrast, cite text evidence
(The Obama administration has proposed restrictions, such as banning children under 16 from working in tobacco fields or operating a tractor. But farm groups and many Republican lawmakers have opposed these restrictions, arguing that they “would hurt family farms and make it harder for young people to learn farming skills.”)

Study the photos that appear with the article. What do they add to your understanding of the topic?

Integrate multiple sources
(Both photos illustrate the enormous size of the tobacco fields in which teens labor, helping readers visualize the difficulty of the work. In addition, the photo of Saray shows how impossible it must be to avoid touching the giant—and toxic—leaves of the tobacco plants.)

Extend & Assess

5 Writing Prompt
Write a brief essay stating a central idea of this article and describing the key details and reasoning the author uses to develop that central idea.

6 Classroom Debate
Should the U.S. pass a law banning minors from working in direct contact with tobacco?

7 Quiz
Photocopy, print, or project the article quiz.

8 Graph & Infographic
Photocopy, print, or project the graph on child-labor hot spots (p. 11 of this Teacher’s Guide) for students to analyze. Then download the infographic available on our website and have students write questions for their classmates to tackle.
1. Summarize the author's purpose in the first three paragraphs of the article.

2. Use evidence from the text to explain why child farmworkers have fewer protections than children who work in other kinds of jobs.

3. Why do you think so many teens are willing to tolerate the harsh conditions in the tobacco fields?

4. In the article, the author states that farmwork is “one of the most dangerous kinds of work young people can do.” How does the author develop that claim?

5. The idea of regulating child farm labor has been controversial. Use the text to compare the position of the Obama administration with the position held by farm groups and many Republican lawmakers.

6. Study the photos that appear with the article. What do they add to your understanding of the topic?
Kids at Work

Federal law in the United States has restricted most kinds of child labor since the early 20th century (see article, p. 8). But in many other parts of the world, it’s still a way of life. Between 150 million and 170 million kids worldwide are classified as child laborers. These kids do work—paid or unpaid—that often keeps them out of school and “is considered detrimental to their health and development,” according to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). As the bar graph at right shows, most are in developing regions of the world.

1. About ____ percent of children in Latin America & the Caribbean are child laborers.
   a 6
   b 8
   c 11
   d 15

2. The child labor rate in West & Central Africa is about ____ percentage points higher than the rate in South Asia.
   a North Africa
   b West Africa
   c Southern Africa
   d Eastern Africa

3. Based on the graph, which region of Africa appears to have the lowest child labor rate?
   a Eastern & Southern Africa
   b West & Central Africa
   c Middle East & North Africa
   d South Asia

4. Eastern & Southern Africa have 102 million kids ages 5 to 14. About how many are laborers?
   a 19 million
   b 27 million
   c 42 million
   d 55 million

5. You can infer from the graph that the child labor rate for Central & Eastern Europe ____.
   a is lower than the rate for North America
   b is shrinking
   c is growing
   d none of the above

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Child labor is seen as both a cause and an effect of poverty. Why do you think that is so?

2. UNICEF reports that the number of children engaged in child labor globally has declined by almost one-third since 2000. What factors do you think might have contributed to the decline? Do you think it will continue?

3. Why do you think UNICEF and other organizations that track child labor have reported that the practice is difficult to monitor?
CHECK COMPREHENSION

1. The article is mainly about
   a tobacco farming in U.S. history.
   b child labor practices all over the globe.
   c the plight of young tobacco workers.
   d hidden dangers on family farms.

2. Which of the following is NOT mentioned in the article as a danger tobacco workers face?
   a flooded fields
   b extreme heat
   c nicotine poisoning
   d pesticides

3. In 1938, the ____ established rules for child employment in the U.S.
   a Occupational Safety and Health Act
   b Civil Rights Act
   c Fair Labor Standards Act
   d Federal Trade Commission Act

4. According to the article, why did the law mentioned in question 3 treat farmwork differently from other kinds of employment?
   a Farmwork was seen as more dangerous than factory work.
   b Parents relied on children to work on family farms.
   c Farmwork was already highly regulated.
   d Unlike most other kinds of employment, farmwork was seasonal.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

5. What literary device does the author employ in the article title “What They Did for Their Summer Vacation”?
   a simile
   b alliteration
   c flashback
   d irony

6. Which conclusion can you draw from the article?
   a Child labor on tobacco farms is not likely to be banned anytime soon.
   b Work on tomato farms is as dangerous as work on tobacco farms but does not get the same attention.
   c New tobacco-company policies are expected to put an end to child labor on tobacco farms.
   d In the U.S., child labor exists only on tobacco farms.

7. Select the sentence from the text that best supports your answer to question 6.
   a “She often felt dizzy during her 12-hour shifts . . .”
   b “But the legislation has stalled in committees.”
   c “. . . it’s one of the most dangerous kinds of work . . .”
   d “Esmeralda Juarez started working on tobacco farms at 12.”

8. You can infer that Margaret Wurth of Human Rights Watch says “These kids are hired workers” to emphasize that teen tobacco workers
   a should not complain about conditions.
   b deserve better protections under labor law.
   c are learning marketable job skills.
   d none of the above

9. Why does the author compare workers on tobacco farms to regular smokers? How are the two groups alike?

10. Based on what you’ve read, what rules, if any, would you like to see in place regulating youth employment on farms? Explain your response.