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# UNITED STATES FARMWORKER FACT SHEET

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## Who are Farmworkers?<sup>1</sup>

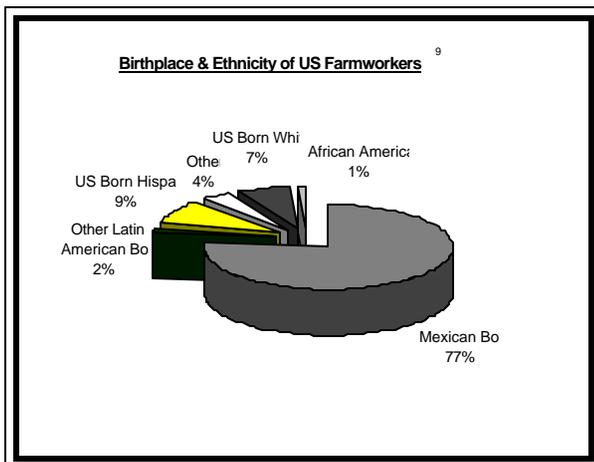
A **migrant farmworker** is an individual whose principal employment is seasonal agriculture and who travels and lives in temporary housing. Nearly 40% of migrant workers are “shuttle migrants,” who “shuttle” from a residence in Mexico, for example, to do work in one area of the US. Seventeen percent are “follow-the-crop migrants” who move with the crops. Most migrant workers are foreign-born.<sup>9</sup>

A **seasonal farmworker** is an individual whose principal employment is agricultural labor but who is a permanent resident of a community and does not move into temporary housing when employed in farm work. Forty-four percent of farmworkers are seasonal farmworkers, and the majority of these are US-born.<sup>9</sup>

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### Demographics

- X There are 2-3 million farmworkers in the US.<sup>11</sup>
- X The proportion of foreign-born workers rose from 10% in 1989 to 81% in 1998.<sup>9</sup>
- X Over time, the farmworker population has become increasingly male (now 80%). In the late 1980s, 25% of farmworkers were women; by the mid-1990s, the percentage had dropped to 19%.<sup>2</sup>
- X 2/3 of farmworkers are younger than 35 and almost 1/5 are in their first year of farm work.<sup>2</sup>



### Families and Living Arrangements

- X 3/5 of adult foreign-born farmworkers are married and have children; most of these workers live and work separately from their spouses and children.<sup>2</sup> 90% of these spouses and children live in Mexico.<sup>9</sup>
- X Of farmworker parents (both foreign-born and US-born workers), 50% are accompanied by their children.<sup>9</sup>
- X 56% of all farmworkers live with non-relatives in the US; the percentage is higher for foreign-born farmworkers.<sup>2</sup>
- X Most of the workers who live exclusively with non-relatives live in labor camps, often provided by the employer.<sup>2</sup> In 1997-98, 21% of all farmworkers received housing free from their employers.<sup>9</sup>

### Income and Poverty

- X Over 3/5 of farmworkers are poor,<sup>2</sup> and this is increasing. 75% earn less than \$10,000 annually.<sup>2</sup> The purchasing power of farmworkers has dropped more than 10% from 1989 to 1998.<sup>9</sup>
- X The average wage earned by farmworkers in 1997-98 was \$5.94/hour. More than 1 in 10 of all workers earned less than the minimum wage.<sup>9</sup>
- X Few farmworkers have assets. 44% own a vehicle. Only 14% own or are buying a house or trailer in the US, and 43% own or are buying a house outside the US.<sup>9</sup>
- X US citizens, “Green card” holders (Legal Permanent Residents), and people with other work authorizations earn \$5,000-\$10,000 more than undocumented workers, who earn between \$2,500 and \$5,000.<sup>2</sup>
- X Women earn less doing farm work than their male counterparts: the median income for female farmworkers is \$2,500-\$5,000, while the median income for male farmworkers is \$5,000-\$7,500.<sup>2</sup>
- X Despite their poverty, few farmworkers use social services. About 100,000 foreign-born farmworker households have been excluded from each of the major programs such as food stamps, Medicaid and WIC due to legislation passed by the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>2</sup>

### Legal Status

- X 22% of farmworkers are US citizens, 24% are Legal Permanent Residents, and 52% are undocumented immigrants. In 1989, only 7% of farmworkers were undocumented.<sup>9</sup>
- X The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 gave legal status to more than 2.5 million Mexican immigrants, including 33% of undocumented farmworkers.<sup>2</sup>
- X After the passage of IRCA, the proportion of undocumented farmworkers rose quickly as the newly legalized population left farm work for other occupations and brought their undocumented families to the US in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

## Farmworkers' Work Arrangements

### **H2 Guestworker Program**

Similar to the Bracero program of the 1940s, the H2 Guestworker program was created by the US government to address a perceived labor shortage. H2A refers specifically to agricultural work.

H2 workers are foreign workers who are imported by the US government from Latin American & Caribbean countries to work for a specific period of time. H2 workers cannot apply for Legal Permanent Residency and can only work for the employer who applied for their visa. Over 10,000 Mexicans came to North Carolina alone as Guestworkers in 1999.

Specific standards have been established to regulate H2A workers' housing conditions, wages, hours worked and compensation for injuries. However, each year legislation is introduced to reduce regulations and enforcement of standards.

### **Farm Labor Contractors**

At least 20% of farmworkers are hired by "crew leaders," who are contracted by farmers. Farmers pay crew leaders, who are often former farmworkers, who in turn pay workers after taking a cut for themselves.

### **Citizens and Legal Permanent Residents**

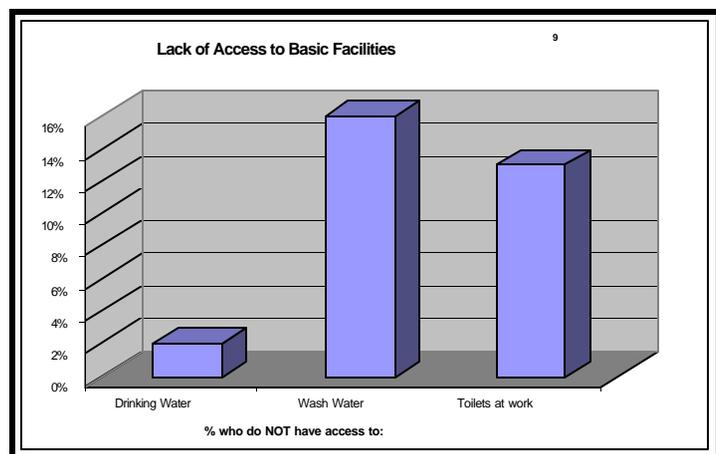
46% of workers are citizens or Legal Permanent Residents. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 granted many immigrant workers amnesty, which meant they were able to stay in the US legally. Some stayed in farm work; others moved on to other types of work. In addition to those granted amnesty, some documented farmworkers were granted political asylum from their countries or are children of workers who gained legal status. Other farmworkers are US citizens.

### **Undocumented Workforce**

Many farmworkers immigrate to the US without authorized documents. Border crossing is very dangerous and expensive—some *coyotes* (border smugglers) charge thousands of dollars to assist willing migrants. Other farmworkers enter the US on temporary work or tourist visas and stay after their visas expire. Despite the risk, thousands of workers (mostly unaccompanied men) cross the US/Mexico border each year seeking work in the United States.

## Health of Farmworkers and their Families

- Farm work is the second most dangerous occupation in the US.<sup>3</sup>
- Farmworkers suffer from the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries of any workers in the US.<sup>1</sup>
- Farmworkers suffer higher incidences than other wage-earners of heat stress, dermatitis, influenza, pneumonia, urinary tract infections, pesticide-related illnesses and tuberculosis.<sup>3</sup>
- Infant mortality rates are considerably higher among migrant farmworkers than the rest of the US population.<sup>4</sup>
- Children of migrant farmworkers have high rates of parasitic infections, malnutrition and dental disease. Children of migrant farmworkers are less likely to be fully immunized than other children.<sup>3</sup>
- Few, if any, migrant farmworkers have health insurance, and very few are covered through Medicaid.<sup>1</sup>
- Substandard farmworker housing conditions lead to increased prevalence of lead poisoning, respiratory illnesses, otitis media and diarrhea.<sup>5</sup>
- Barriers to receiving health care include lack of transportation, hours of clinic operation incompatible with agricultural work hours, cost of health care, limited or no interpreter service, and frequent relocation in order to seek farm work.<sup>1</sup>
- Only 28% of farmworkers report that they would get compensated if they were sick on the job.<sup>9</sup>



### **Health Legislation Affecting Farmworkers**

- 1987- Field Sanitation Standards  
Requires only growers who employ more than 11 workers to provide toilets, potable water and hand washing facilities in the fields.
- 1995 - Worker Protection Standards  
Requires that growers do the following: display basic health and safety information, ensure that workers receive pesticide safety training, and restrict workers' access to fields during and after pesticide applications for a Restricted-Entry Interval, with warnings informing workers to stay out of the area.

## Education Profile

### Adult Education

- 84% of farmworkers are native Spanish-speakers, while 12% are native English speakers and 4% speak other languages.<sup>9</sup>
- The median highest grade of school completed by farmworkers is 6<sup>th</sup> grade. 20% complete less than 3 years of schooling, while just 15% complete 12 years or more. In 1997-98, 73% of farmworkers completed their education in Mexico, 21% in the US.<sup>9</sup>
- An estimated 85% of farmworkers have difficulty obtaining information from printed materials.<sup>9</sup>

### Migrant Children

- In 1994, a study showed that 60% of migrant students drop-out of school (down from 90% in the 1970s).<sup>8</sup>
- By the time a migrant child is 12 years old, he/she may be working in the fields between 16-18 hours per week.<sup>6</sup>
- The average migrant child may attend 3 different schools in one year. For many children it takes roughly 3 years to advance one grade level.<sup>6</sup>

### Legislation Affecting Farmworker Children

- The 1982 US Supreme Court Case, Plyler v. Doe, ruled that all children have access to public education and that a student cannot be denied because of her/his immigration status. It is against the law to refuse to register a child because she/he does not have a birth certificate or social security number. In July of 1999, California's Proposition 187, which denied undocumented children the right to educational services, was ruled unconstitutional.
- The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act prohibits schools from providing any outside agency—including the Immigration and Naturalization Service—information from a child's file exposing his/her legal status without parental consent.

### Labor Laws Affecting Farmworkers

- 📖 **1935 - National Labor Relations Act**  
Protects workers who organize into unions to bargain collectively, but excludes farmworkers and domestic workers.
- 📖 **1935 - Social Security Act**  
Originally excluded all farmworkers, denying them unemployment, old-age, and disability benefits. In 1950, the law was amended to include many agricultural workers.
- 📖 **1938 - Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)**  
Requires employers to pay at least the minimum wage, but farmers were not required to do so until 1978. Farmers owning small farms are still not required to pay minimum wage. The FLSA excludes farmworkers from receiving overtime pay. In addition, the FLSA sets 12 as the minimum age for farm work, making agriculture the only industry that allows children under the age of 16 to work.
- 📖 **1963 - Farm Labor Contractor Registration Act**  
Requires all crew leaders to register with the federal government, keep appropriate wage records and provide accurate information to workers regarding promised employment.
- 📖 **1976 - Federal Unemployment Tax Act**  
Requires employers to pay a tax from which workers may benefit in case of unemployment, but includes only farmworkers employed on large farms (10 workers or more per year).
- 📖 **1983 - MSAWPA**  
Under the Migrant & Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, farmworkers must receive a written statement of wages earned and hours worked. As well, housing of farmworkers must meet health and safety standards.

### Farmworkers Organizing for Justice

- 📖 **United Farm Workers (UFW)**  
[www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org), 661-822-5571  
The United Farm Workers, based in California, was founded in 1962 by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. The UFW organizes the boycott of Pictsweet mushrooms.
- 📖 **Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)**  
[www.floc.com](http://www.floc.com), 419-243-3456  
Baldemar Velasquez founded FLOC in 1967 in Toledo, Ohio. FLOC successfully conducted a boycott of Campbell Soup products in Ohio (1979-1986), and in March 1999 called a Boycott of NC-based Mt. Olive Pickle products.
- 📖 **Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN)**  
[www.pcun.org](http://www.pcun.org), 503-982-0243  
80 treeplanters & farmworkers in Oregon founded PCUN in 1985. In the spring of 1999, PCUN won a major victory in its boycott of NORPAC, Flav-r-pac & West-pac fruits and vegetables when Gardenburger agreed to stop using NORPAC produce in its vegetarian burgers.
- 📖 **Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW)**  
[www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org), 941-657-8311  
This community-based worker organization in Southwest Florida is currently organizing tomato workers. They have won wage increases for workers and have established a successful consumer cooperative. CIW organizes the boycott on Taco Bell.
- 📖 **Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas**  
914-651-5570  
A grassroots farmworker organization, CITA empowers farmworkers in New York state to change their lives of social and economic marginalization into lives of dignity and justice.

## Agriculture Yesterday and Today



One hundred years ago, agriculture in the US was characterized by the small family farm. This is no longer the case. Today, agribusiness is dominated by large corporate farms. More than just cultivating crops and livestock, these corporate farms oversee everything from planting seeds and applying pesticides to harvesting, grading, packaging, selling and distributing food products to supermarkets, university cafeterias, hotels and other buyers.

This consolidation enables corporations to market their products more efficiently and sell them to consumers at lower costs. However, despite its new breadth, agribusiness often fails to address issues such as environmental damage, sustainability, crop diversity, self-sufficiency for farmers and a decent standard of living for laborers.

*Did you know<sup>10</sup> . . .*

*. . . 71% of every food income dollar goes to corporate food processors?*

*. . . 23% of every food income dollar goes to farmers?*

*. . . 6% of every food income dollar goes to farmworkers?*

### **Changes in U.S. Agriculture in the Past Century<sup>10</sup>**

#### Late 1800s - Early 1900s

↑71% of farms in 1860 were under 100 acres in size

↑1910- Each US farmer fed 7.1 persons (6.1 in the US and 1 abroad)

↑19.8 million people lived on farms in the early 1900s

#### Today

↑Average size of today's farm is 588 acres; Small farms comprise almost 80% of total farms, but less than 25% of agricultural production

↑Each US farmer provides food for 97 people in the US and 32 people abroad each year; US has less than 7% of world's land, but produces 13% of world's farm commodities

↑18.5% of labor force, less than 2% of US population, works on farms

### **STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS**

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Student Action with Farmworkers is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change. SAF accomplishes its mission by coordinating summer internships, providing year-round opportunities for direct service, and carrying out community education, advocacy, and community and labor organizing work.

- *Into the Fields:* SAF coordinates summer internships with NC and SC farmworker agencies for college students attending school in the Carolinas and students of farmworker families.
- *Sowing Seeds for Change Symposium:* SAF collaborates with a different university or farmworker organization each year to coordinate an annual conference for students, faculty, farmworkers and farmworker advocates.
- *Internship Directory:* SAF produces a national web-based directory of agencies describing their intern and volunteer needs, so that students can match their interests and experience to an agency near them.
- *Campus and Agency Trainings:* SAF conducts trainings across the US on educating others about farmworkers; developing an internship program with local farmworker organizations; grassroots fundraising and more.

#### **Resources:**

- Resource Lending Library
- The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers Lives, Labor & Advocacy Book (\$21.95)
- *Into the Fields: Mobilizing Students to Work with Farmworkers on Campuses and in Communities* Manual (\$10)
- *Fields Without Borders/Campos Sin Fronteras* Documentary Publication (\$10)
- *Recollections of Home/Recuerdos de Mi Tierra* Documentary Publication (\$10)
- Sample Academic course syllabi
- *From the Ground Up* Newsletter
- *College Choices Guide/ Guía de Elecciones de Universidades*
- List serve: Subscribe to SAF's email list serve by emailing the word "subscribe" to <[farmworkers-request@duke.edu](mailto:farmworkers-request@duke.edu)>

#### **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT FARMWORKERS?**

- Educate yourself about farmworkers, agriculture and labor
- Organize an event for union representatives to speak to your community or campus groups
- Intern/Volunteer with a local agency that works with farmworkers
- Organize your own speaking/awareness raising "tour" at local religious groups, schools, and clubs
- Support and inform others of farmworker-called boycotts
- Support local food cooperatives, farmers' markets and organic grower associations that are pro-labor
- Organize an event for national Farmworker Awareness Week

#### **Sources**

1 The Farmworker Health Alliance, NC Farmworker Factsheet; 2 National Agricultural Workers Survey, USDOL, April 1997; 3 National Center for Farmworker Health; 4 Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, 1989; 5 National Advisory Council on Migrant Health, 1993; 6 David Bell, "The Nation's Invisible Families Living in the Stream," MEMO; 7 *Children of La Frontera*, ERIC; 8 [http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed423097.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed423097.html); 9 National Agriculture Workers Survey, US DOL March 2000; 10 Agriculture Council of America, and Paul Lilly, North Carolina State University; 11 Report of the Commission of Agricultural Workers, 1992