



Search

# United States Farmworker Factsheet

Fact Sheets

[Facts About North Carolina Farmworkers](#)

[Farmworkers and Immigration](#)

[Farmworkers' Vital Contribution to North Carolina's Economy](#)

[North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts](#)

[United States Farmworker Factsheet](#)

*Labor laws allow children as young as twelve years old to work in agriculture with their parent's consent. However, children of all ages can be found working in the fields.*

[Source](#) [more facts](#)

## ACTIONS

- [Disaster Preparedness for Farmworkers](#)
- [Take Action on Overtime for Farmworkers](#)

[more actions](#)



Farmworkers are some of our nation's most vital workers, as their labor enables us to enjoy high quality, low-cost, fresh fruits and vegetables all year round. Despite farmworkers' economic and cultural contributions to the communities where they live and work, they continue to be the some of the lowest paid, least protected, and unhealthiest workers in the United States.

### OVERVIEW OF FARM WORK

Agricultural labor includes planting, cultivating, harvesting and preparing crops for market or storage.<sup>1</sup>

Migrant farmworkers travel from place to place to work in agriculture and move into temporary housing while working; seasonal farmworkers work primarily in agriculture, but live in one community year-round.<sup>1</sup>

Farmworkers are usually employed by farm owners or by "crew leaders," who serve as intermediaries between growers and workers.

The H2A program allows foreign "guestworkers" to perform seasonal farm work under a temporary work visa designed for agricultural workers in the United States.

### FARMWORKERS DEMOGRAPHICS

There are two to three million farmworkers in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The states with the highest farmworker population are California, Texas, Washington, Florida, Oregon, and North Carolina.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly 80% of farmworkers are male, and most are younger than 31.<sup>4</sup>

Most farmworkers are married and/or have children; yet almost six out of ten farmworkers live apart from their immediate family members.<sup>4</sup>

Of farmworkers in the United States, 75% were born in Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

According to a 2005 survey, 53% of farmworkers are undocumented (without legal authorization), 25% are United States citizens, and 21% are legal permanent residents.<sup>6</sup>

Immigrant farmworkers often leave their home countries to seek a better life for their families. Immigration to the United States has increased notably since the 1994 signing of NAFTA,<sup>5</sup> a free trade agreement that has driven over two million Mexican farmers out of business.<sup>6</sup>

### "AGRICULTURAL EXCEPTIONALISM"

Farmworkers were excluded from nearly all of the major federal labor laws passed in the 1930s.

Some of the laws have been amended to include workers on large farms, but exemptions remain in the following laws:

- Labor organizing: Farmworkers were excluded from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which protects workers acting collectively to form unions.
- Minimum wage: The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) originally excluded all farmworkers, and was amended in 1978 to mandate minimum wage for workers on large farms only.
- Overtime pay: The FLSA has never been amended to provide overtime for farmworkers, and only a few states have passed laws requiring it. Child labor laws: The FLSA sets 12 as the minimum age for farm work, not 16 as in other jobs.

**“Every time we sit at a table to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and children who have been exploited for generations.”**

**– Cesar Chavez, Co-Founder, United Farm Workers**

## **ECONOMIC PROFILE**

Low wages: Farmworkers’ average annual income is \$11,000; for a family it is approximately \$16,000.<sup>4</sup> This makes farm work the second lowest paid job in the nation (after domestic labor).<sup>7</sup>

Piece-rate pay: Farmworkers are often paid by the bucket; in some states they earn as little as 40¢ for a bucket of tomatoes or sweet potatoes. At that rate, farmworkers have to pick around two tons of produce (125 buckets) to earn \$50.<sup>8</sup>

Few social benefits: Despite their poverty, most farmworkers are not eligible for social services. Less than one percent of all farmworkers use general assistance welfare, only two percent use social security, and fewer than 15% are Medicaid recipients.<sup>4</sup>

## **HEALTH PROFILE**

Dangerous work: Agriculture is consistently ranked as one of the three most dangerous occupations in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Pesticide risks: Farmworkers suffer from the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders of any workers in the country,<sup>12</sup> as well as significant rates of eye injuries.<sup>11</sup>

Health concerns: Farmworkers face higher incidences than other wage-earners of heat stress, dermatitis, urinary tract infections, parasitic infections, and tuberculosis.<sup>11</sup> Poor health of children: Children of migrant farmworkers have higher rates of pesticide exposure, malnutrition and dental disease than the general population. Children of migrant farmworkers are also less likely to be fully immunized than other children.<sup>11</sup>

Housing effects: Poor migrant housing conditions lead to increased prevalence of lead poisoning, respiratory illnesses, ear infections and diarrhea.<sup>11</sup>

Limited insurance: Only ten percent of farmworkers report having employer-provided health insurance.<sup>4</sup>

Obstacles to health care: Barriers to receiving health care include lack of transportation, limited hours of clinic service, cost of health care, limited or no interpreter service, and frequent relocation in search of farm work. Farmworkers are not protected by sick leave and risk losing their jobs if they miss work.<sup>11</sup>

## **FARMWORKERS ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE**

Across the country, farmworkers are organizing for justice and empowerment to improve their conditions. Some organizations leading this work include:

Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW): a community-based organization in Southwest Florida that won a boycott against Taco Bell in 2005 that aimed to improve wages and working conditions of tomato pickers. [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org)

Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC): a labor union in Ohio and North Carolina that pioneered three-way labor agreements between workers, growers and corporate food processors. In September 2004, FLOC won an historic

contract with the Mt. Olive Pickle Company and the NC Growers Association. [www.floc.com](http://www.floc.com)

Treeplanters & Farmworkers United of the Northwest (PCUN): Oregon's union for farmworkers, nursery, and reforestation workers, whose goal is to empower farmworkers to understand and take action against systematic exploitation. [www.pcun.org](http://www.pcun.org)

United Farm Workers (UFW): founded by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. The UFW brought national attention to the farmworker cause in the 1960s and has since won union contracts in states across the country. [www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org)

### **EDUCATION PROFILE**

Low education levels: The median highest grade of school completed by farmworkers is sixth grade. Thirteen percent of farmworkers have completed less than three years of schooling, and 13% have completed high school.<sup>4</sup>

Children in the fields: By the time a migrant child is 12, he/she may work in the fields between 16-18 hours per week,<sup>5</sup> leaving little time for school work.

Unstable schooling: The average migrant child may attend as many as three different schools in one year. For many children it takes roughly three years to advance one grade level.<sup>6</sup>

High drop-out rates: A 1994 study showed that 60% of migrant students in the United States drop out of school (down from 90% reported in the 1970s).<sup>10</sup>

### **GET INVOLVED!**

Contact one of these national support organizations linking the broader community with farmworkers:

National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM): [www.nfwm.org](http://www.nfwm.org)

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF): [www.saf-unite.org](http://www.saf-unite.org)

### **SOURCES:**

1 Public Law 104-299, 1996; 2 Report of the Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1992; 3 Larson, A. Farmworker Enumeration Study, 2000; 4 National Agricultural Workers Survey, US Dept. of Labor, 2005; 5 Hemispheric Social Alliance, 2003; 6 Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2003; 7 Rural America, 2002; 8 US Dept. of Labor, Prevailing Wage Surveys (NC), 2002; 9 Migration Education Messages and Outlook (MEMO), 1994; 10 Education Resources Information Center, 1998; 11 National Center for Farmworker Health; 12 Natl. Institute for Occupational Safety & Health, 2004; 13 Olivieri, VJ. U.S. Dept. of Ag., 1993; Agricultural Council of America & Lilly, P. NC State University, n.d. Full citations available at [www.ncfarmworkers.org](http://www.ncfarmworkers.org). Published by the NC Farmworker Institute with funds from the Office of Rural Health and Community Care, NC Farmworker Health Program, 2007

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