

# Facts on Farmworkers in the United States

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Between 1 and 3 million migrant farmworkers leave their homes to plant, cultivate, harvest, and pack fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Hand labor is necessary for the production of the blemish-free fruits and vegetables that consumers demand.

Eighty-one percent of all farmworkers are foreign-born. Seventy-seven percent of all farmworkers were born in Mexico. They continue a long tradition of people from Mexico harvesting crops in the southwestern United States, including those who came here through the historic farm labor program known as “Bracero.” Larger numbers of Mexican farmworkers have more recently moved into other regions of the country, including the Northeast, some through the H-2A guest worker program.

Farmworkers are young: their average age is 31. The physically demanding work is difficult for older workers to perform.

Eighty percent of farmworkers are men. Men often must leave their families behind while they seek work, but some families work and travel together.

Five out of six farmworkers speak Spanish.

Fifty-two percent of farmworkers are not authorized to work in the United States. This lack of legal documentation and the fear of being deported make it difficult for workers to ask for improved working conditions and to obtain government-funded services.

The average hourly wage for farmworkers is \$5.94. Some are paid hourly and some earn a piece rate—where a set amount of money is paid for each container filled. Twelve percent of all farmworkers earn less than the minimum wage.

One-half of all individual farmworkers earn less than \$7,500 per year, and one-half of all farmworker families earned less than \$10,000 per year, far below the 2001 U.S. poverty level of \$17,650 for a family of four. Farm work is seasonal and workers cannot earn money when it rains, while waiting for crops to ripen, when they are sick, or when they are traveling to their next job.

Fifty-four percent of migrant teenagers drop out of school before graduation. Frequent moves and the need for teenagers to work and contribute to their family’s income make school attendance difficult. At least one-third of migrant children work on farms to help their families; others may not be hired but are in the fields helping their parents.

The hard physical labor, dangerous equipment, and pesticide exposure make agriculture one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States.

Migrant workers and their families have poorer physical health than the general population. While there are little nationwide data, the information available shows higher infant mortality rates (125 percent higher) and a life expectancy of 49 years as compared with a national average of 75 years.

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Sources: Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey 1997–98, USDOL, March 2000; Health Problems among Migrant Farmworker’s Children in the U.S, ERIC Digest, 1993.

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# Facts on Farmworkers in New York State

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Approximately 47,000 migrant farmworkers and their family members come to New York State each year. The majority of workers in New York are of Mexican origin. Others come from Jamaica, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other states within the United States.

Migrant workers live in almost every county in New York. They live in western New York along Lake Ontario and Lake Erie harvesting apples, grapes, and other fruits; in central New York planting and harvesting vegetables; in the Finger Lakes region trimming and harvesting grapes; in the Hudson Valley harvesting apples, onions, and corn; in the Champlain Valley harvesting apples; and on Long Island working in nurseries and harvesting a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Some migrant workers live and work on dairy farms and move frequently within the state. They often work 60- to 70-hour weeks and face the same poverty as workers who move from state to state.

Three hundred and eighty labor camps are approved to provide housing for 7,314 workers. In addition, there are many camps with fewer than five workers and therefore not inspected by state officials. However, the number of farmworkers in need of housing

exceeds the number of available housing units, and many workers must, on their own, find a place to stay.

Of children, 13,592, ages 0 to 21, qualify for services through the New York State Migrant Education Programs.

Approximately 200 labor contractors, or crew leaders, are licensed to operate in New York State.

In 2000, 1,903 workers entered New York under the H2A guest worker program.

Farmworkers are excluded from some of New York State's labor laws:

- disability insurance
- a day of rest
- overtime pay
- collective bargaining

Farmworkers are provided lesser coverage than other workers under some New York State labor laws:

- child labor
- unemployment insurance
- some health and safety protections

Sources: New York State Department of Education; New York State Department of Labor; New York State Department of Health

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