

MIGRANT FARMWORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Migrant farmworkers and their families live and work in every state in the country. Many of these workers are United States citizens or permanent residents in this country. They are primarily of Mexican origin but others come from Jamaica, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and other countries. Between one and three million migrant farmworkers leave their homes each year to plant, cultivate, harvest and pack fruits, vegetables and nuts. Other migrant farmworkers are employed in the fishing, meat packing and dairy industries.

Here are some facts about our nation's farmworkers.

- 81% of all farmworkers are foreign-born.
- 77% 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 "Braceros" program started in the early 1940s to bolster our work force as "soldiers of the fields and railroads" to help the U.S. win World War II.
- The number of Mexican and other Latino farmworkers throughout the country, including the Northeast, has grown in recent years due, in part, to programs like the H-2A guest worker plan.
- The average farmworker age is only 31 years since it is difficult for older workers to perform such physically demanding labor.
- 80% of farmworkers are men who often must leave their families behind while they seek work.
- Five out of six farmworkers are native Spanish speakers.
- 12% of all farmworkers earn less than the minimum wage.
- Half of all farmworkers earn less than \$7,500 per year and half of all farmworker families earn less than \$11,000 per year, far below the 2002 U.S. poverty level of \$18,100 for a family of four.
- Much farm work is seasonal and workers cannot earn money in bad weather, while waiting for crops to ripen, when they are sick, or when traveling to their next job.
- There is only a 50.7% high school graduation rate among migrant teenagers. Frequent moves and the need to have them contribute to family income make school attendance difficult. At least one-third of migrant children work on farms to help their families; others may not be hired directly but are in the fields helping their parents.

- Hard physical labor, dangerous equipment, and pesticide exposure make agriculture one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States.
- Migrant workers and their families have poorer physical health than the general population. While there is little nationwide data, the information available shows elevated infant mortality rates and shorter life expectancy than the national average.

MIGRANT FARMWORKERS IN NEW YORK STATE

- Approximately 47,000 migrant farmworkers and their family members come to New York State each year.
- Migrant workers live in almost every county in New York ranging from along Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, through the Finger Lakes and Leatherstocking regions, the Hudson and Champlain Valleys down to Long Island.
- Jobs include pruning and harvesting in the vineyards and orchards, as well as cultivating and harvesting a vast array of vegetables, where hand labor is necessary for the production of the blemish-free produce that consumers demand.
- Some migrant workers also live on dairy farms and move frequently within the state. They often work 60-70 hour weeks and face the same poverty as workers who move from state to state.
- The number of farmworkers in need of housing exceeds the number of units available in state approved migrant camps and many workers are left on their own to find a place to stay. In addition, there are many camps with fewer than five workers and therefore not inspected by state officials.
- Close to 14,000 children and youth, ages 0–21, qualify for services through New York State Migrant Education programs.
- Approximately 200 labor contractors, or crewleaders, are licensed to operate in New York.
- 1,903 workers entered New York in the year 2000 under the H2A guest worker program.
- Farmworkers are excluded from New York State labor laws providing for:
 - disability insurance
 - a day of rest
 - overtime pay
 - collective bargaining

- Farmworkers are provided less coverage than other workers under some New York State labor laws.
 - child labor
 - unemployment insurance
 - some health and safety protections

FARMWORKERS AND OUR COMMUNITIES

Our communities are enriched each year by the migrant farmworkers and their families who make essential contributions to this nation's agricultural production. Their presence has many positive impacts on the areas where they work.

- Migrant farmworkers provide the labor for agriculture, the #1 industry in New York State. Without farmworkers, New York's agricultural industry could not survive. They are indispensable to the system.
- They provide a labor force for an industry in which both experience and surveys demonstrate that area residents are unwilling to work.
- Farmworkers help to preserve a way of life. The rural and agrarian way of life on which our society was founded is sustained through the continuation of our farming communities that depend on farmworkers.
- The population of farmworkers and their families stimulate the general economy by increasing the sales of retail stores and private services. Farmworkers are frequent consumers of goods and services within the communities where they work. They purchase and use the same commodities and services as the rest of us, such as food, clothing, housing, utilities, auto essentials, and entertainment.
- Farmworkers pay more in taxes than they take out. They pay sales taxes, Social Security, income taxes, and driver's licenses and fees. Though they are required to pay these taxes, as non-residents they are not able to realize many of the benefits.
- The diversity afforded our community in general and our school systems in particular by farmworkers and their families, provides us with expanded knowledge and options in viewing the world around us. Having the opportunity to share and explore foreign cultures, and our own through comparison, expands our understanding and problem solving abilities. We have much to learn from one another.
- Farmworkers and their families often remind us of some of the values that we as a society seem to have almost forgotten. Family, both nuclear and extended, is a primary value among the majority of farmworkers. Many of them are forced to leave their families behind when they come to work here. Each payday they send money back to their families. The money may go to wives and children, or it may be the children who are working here and sending money to their parents.

- Love of community is another strong value that is shared within the migrant population. One group of men from Oaxaca was found to be sending 25% of each of their paychecks back to their hometown to support their community's health clinic. Their support included paying the salary of the clinic's doctor.
- Faith and courage are highly observable characteristics among farmworkers. Strong faith is found both in terms of spirituality and organized religion. Faith and courage are required to travel to an often-unknown destination, facing uncertain work and living conditions, with limited or no familiarity with the language, and serious concern about the reception the community will provide upon your arrival. Combined with separation from family and friends, work on isolated farms is a very real source of emotional pain for many workers. Camps are often located far from downtown areas with limited transportation available. Access to telephones for personal calls is limited, and a costly luxury. Use of pay phones is subject to language barriers. Incoming calls are virtually out of the question.
- The work ethic exhibited by farmworkers is extraordinary. They often toil 12 to 14 hours a day, 7 days a week during the harvest season. Farm work is both strenuous and dangerous. High heat and humidity are frequently part of the work environment. Stoop labor and heavy containers are also common components of the tasks performed.
- Education is valued. Often farmworkers attend English language classes at the end of the long workday. Many families have made tremendous sacrifices to see that their children receive an education.

Most people are unaware that they probably eat something almost every day that has been handled by a migrant farmworker. These diligent laborers help make it possible for us to spend a mere 9% of our per capita income on food—less than any other nation in the world. In addition, they contribute to our economy, enrich our culture, and give our society far more than they take from it. Let us welcome them.

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