

## Focus on Farmworkers

## How Many Farmworkers Are There?

by Scott Hirsch, AFOP

**H**ow many migrant and seasonal farmworkers are there in the United States? This is a question that has perplexed researchers, government officials, and farmworker service providers and advocates for years, and it is a question that does not have a simple answer.

As you may remember from the orientation conference, estimates of the number of farmworkers in the U.S. range from less than 500,000 to more than 4 million depending upon what sources you use. There are many reasons why this number varies so greatly. Even though the U.S. population is counted every ten years by the Census Bureau, farmworkers often go undercounted. As the Department of Labor recently announced in the *Federal Register*, "Farmworkers [are difficult to count because they often]:

- have no fixed addresses;
- are highly migratory;
- have limited English-speaking ability;
- have low educational levels;
- work intermittently in various agricultural or non-agricultural occupations during a single year;
- have only casual employer-employee links;
- live in rural, often remote areas; and
- are unfamiliar with or distrustful of government agencies/agents, such as Census enumerators."

Clearly, it is impossible to count all the farmworkers by going from house to house as Census enumerators do. For one reason, farmworkers may not be involved in agriculture when the Census is taken in March, even though they earn most of their income through farmwork in the summer months. In fact, they may not even live in traditional "households" that are visited by Census takers.

To get around the problem of "counting" farmworkers, some scientists have tried estimate the number of farmworkers working in the United States based on

how much agricultural work is actually done or how much farm owners pay for that agricultural work. For instance, if researchers know exactly how many tons of strawberries are grown in a year and how much farmers paid out in wages, they can estimate how many people it took to harvest the strawberries.

There are problems associated with this method of counting farmworkers, too. For instance, this method does not account for the fact that some harvesting is done by labor contractors, growers, and their families—individuals that we typically do not think of as your typical low-income migratory worker. In addition, the estimates produced using this method are calculated using an average number of full-time man hours, possibly underestimating the number of workers if there were many individuals who worked part-time or for only a short time during the year.

Although farmworkers are extremely difficult to count, some organizations are attempting to collect statistical information on farmworkers in order to make generalizations their overall characteristics. For instance, the Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) collects detailed demographic information on a small sample of farmworker families. AFOP, too, is collecting information about §402 clients' backgrounds, income levels, and work histories through the National Farmworker Database. Information like this can give us a picture of what farmworkers' lives are like without providing an exact number of workers.

Even with all the research being done by NAWS, AFOP, the Census Bureau, and others, it is impossible to know for sure how many farmworkers there are in the United States. The real tragedy is that without an accurate count of the number of low-income farmworkers in the U.S., we cannot effectively communicate the plight of their condition to Congress or to the general public. Perhaps soon, using a variety of counting methods, we can get a more accurate estimate. **A**