

# NYS Residents Report Positive Impact of Undocumented Farmworkers

## Overview of the Study

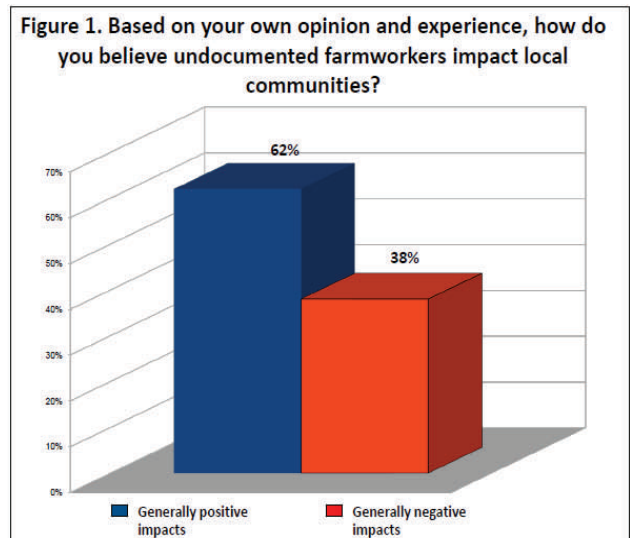
Over the past two years the Cornell Farmworker Program (CFP) has been engaged in research that examines public perceptions of undocumented immigrant farmworkers in New York State. The Survey Research Institute at Cornell University conducted the survey as part of their annual Empire State Poll, interviewing 1,100 New York State residents. The group included a random cross sample of 800 households and an over sample of 300 rural households. The results are representative within  $\pm 3.5$  percentage points. Respondents answered questions on the topics of immigration, community impact and overall interest in agriculture.

## How do Undocumented Farmworkers Impact Local Communities?

By **Mary Jo Dudley** and **Sarah Alexander**, Cornell University

Respondents were asked about the specific impact that undocumented farmworkers have on their community. The responses were open-ended and recorded verbatim. They were then analyzed and divided into categories based on whether the response expressed that the impact of farmworkers was generally positive, generally negative, both negative and positive, that there was little or no impact, or if the respondent was unclear as to whether or not the impact was positive or negative.

**Figure 1** illustrates that looking exclusively at responses which clearly indicate a negative or positive impact, 62% reported a positive impact and 38% reported a negative impact. Some respondents (11%) mentioned both positive and negative impacts when surveyed.



Source: Cornell Farmworker Program, Empire State Poll Data, 2007, 2008

## Who Wants to Work on a Farm?

While the most popular response regarding the impact of undocumented farmworkers was that they fill jobs that locals do not want, a large number of people did report that the undocumented workers were taking jobs from legal residents. Farm owners interviewed by the Cornell Farmworker Program consistently expressed difficulty in finding reliable local labor to work on their farms. According to the National Agricultural Worker Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor (2006), the average farm worker makes between \$10,000 and \$12,499 each year.

Aside from those employed on dairies, most farm work is seasonal, meaning that work is generally not available in the same geographic area year round, so workers must travel in order to maintain steady employment. The migratory requirements for consistent employment in the field of farm labor also make the jobs unappealing for those who are not able or willing to move frequently with the various planting/harvesting seasons. Though New York State residents may be interested in these jobs, employers note that local workers will not leave their current employment for 6-8 weeks of work, regardless of the rate paid per hour. Employers also stated that local residents are often unprepared for the physical demands of farmwork and for working outdoors, which includes exposure to a wide range of weather conditions.



## How does the Public View the Impact of Farmworkers?

As can be seen in figures 2 and 3 respondents indicated that there are major differences in perception regarding the impact of undocumented farmworkers on local communities. Of those respondents that viewed farmworkers as making a positive contribution, 40% stated that undocumented farmworkers fill jobs that legal residents do not want and 37% actually praised undocumented farmworkers for providing farmers with the labor they need to keep food prices low. In stark contrast to this perception, of those who considered them as having a negative impact, 46% were worried that undocumented farmworkers were taking jobs from legal residents/citizens or driving down wages. An additional 33% expressed concern that undocumented farmworkers are a drain on taxes and services.

These results point to some confusion over the impact and role of farmworkers. They express two polarized perceptions of employment and economic reality. The first is that undocumented workers are truly filling a need for farm labor or that they are stealing jobs and driving down wages. The second is that they are hurting the economy by collecting welfare and not paying taxes or that they are helping it by supporting farmers and increasing the availability of affordable food.

### Who's Paying for What?

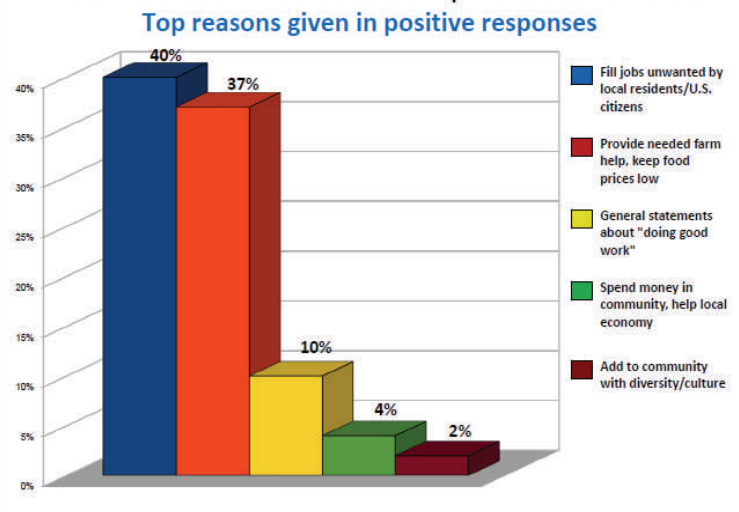
Some respondents perceived that undocumented farmworkers were a drain on taxes and services. They worried that they collected welfare, filled up emergency rooms and doctors' offices without paying their bills and that they sent their children to public schools without paying taxes. In reality, undocumented workers are unable to collect social services such as welfare or food stamps because without documentation they do not have the requisite social security number needed to file an application for these programs.

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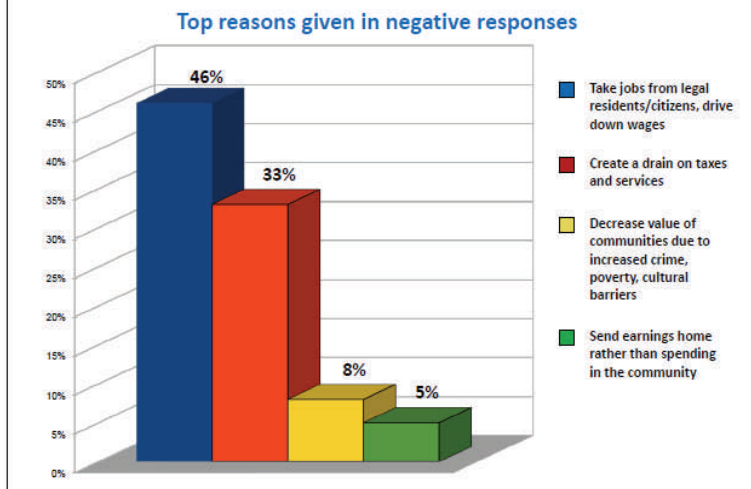
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**Figure 2. Based on your own opinion and experience, how do you believe undocumented farmworkers impact local communities?**



Source: Cornell Farmworker Program, Empire State Poll Data, 2007, 2008

**Figure 3. Based on your own opinion and experience, how do you believe undocumented farmworkers impact local communities?**



Source: Cornell Farmworker Program, Empire State Poll Data, 2007, 2008

In May 2008, the *New York Times* reported that undocumented farmworkers take up a strikingly small share of healthcare costs in the U.S. They opt for alternatives to professional health care services due to prohibitive costs. Healthcare workers explain that the undocumented farmworkers only come in for true emergencies. The article also stated that undocumented people do pay their own bills in most cases. Finally, while the children of farmworkers do attend public schools, the belief that they do not pay taxes is fallacious. Taxes and fees, including federal and state income tax and social security are deducted from their paychecks – despite being barred from tapping into most of the social services that these taxes finance. They also spend money in the communities where they live, contributing to and stimulating the local economy.