



# NCFH

National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.

## **FACTS ABOUT FARMWORKERS**

### **Basics**

It is estimated that there are over 3 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States.<sup>1</sup> These farmworkers travel throughout the U.S. serving as the backbone for a multi-billion dollar agricultural industry.<sup>2</sup> According to the 1997-1998 findings of the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the average age for farmworkers is 31; 80% are men, 84% speak Spanish; 12% are able to speak English; and the median level of education is the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>3</sup>

### **Economic Contribution**

Migrant farm labor supports the 28 billion dollar fruit and vegetable industry in the U.S.;<sup>4</sup> 85% of which are hand harvested and/or cultivated.<sup>5</sup> The production of fruit and vegetable crops in the U.S. has steadily increased over the last decade. Without the seasonal influx of migrant farm labor during peak periods the production of many fruit and vegetable crops would not be possible.<sup>6</sup> The presence of farmworkers has been shown to increase the overall economic output of the regions in which they work. Eliminating the presence of farmworkers or switching to less labor-intensive crops has been shown to have a negative impact on regions and to reduce the number of jobs available to permanent local residents.<sup>7</sup>

### **Legal Status**

The farmworker population is racially and culturally diverse, and there are varying opinions on their legal status. The data from the most recent NAWS study indicates that 52% of farmworkers are not citizens or legal residents of the United States<sup>8</sup>, while another report from the same time period argues that the majority of migrant and seasonal farmworkers are U.S. citizens or legal residents.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of their residency status, many farmworkers report experiencing prejudice and hostility in the communities in which they live and work.

### **Wages and Benefits**

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers represent some of the most economically disadvantaged people in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> According to the most recent findings of the NAWS, nearly three-quarters of U.S. farmworkers earn less than \$10,000 per year and three out of five farmworker families have incomes below the poverty level.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the low wages, farmworkers rarely have access to workers compensation, occupational rehabilitation, or disability compensation benefits.<sup>12</sup> Only 12 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands provide farmworkers with workers compensation to the same degree as other workers; in 13 other states, farmworker coverage is optional but not required by state law.<sup>13</sup> Although many farmworkers fit eligibility profiles for programs such as Medicaid and the Food Stamp Program, very few are able to secure these benefits. Migrant health centers estimate that less than 12% of their revenues are derived from Medicaid, and it is believed that fewer than 25% of eligible farmworkers receive food stamps.<sup>14, 15</sup> Different state eligibility requirements and the lack of portability or reciprocity in Medicaid and SCHIP, create administrative barriers to coverage for mobile populations. Therefore, when farmworker families move from state to state seeking employment, Medicaid and SCHIP benefits stop at the state border, making Medicaid and SCHIP unobtainable for most farmworkers and their families.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, after a lifetime of work, many farmworkers are unable to prove their claim for Social Security benefits.<sup>17</sup>

## **Housing**

Farmworker housing is often substandard or non-existent. The housing that does exist is often very overcrowded, and lacks adequate sanitation and working appliances, and contains severe structural defects. Under these conditions, many farmworkers are unable to store food safely, prepare a warm meal, or even shower after a long day of working the fields. In addition, a recent study found that 22 percent of farmworker housing units had serious structural problems and 26 percent of the units were directly adjacent to pesticide-treated fields.<sup>18</sup> The same study also found that 29 percent of farmworkers paid more than 30 percent of their income for housing.<sup>18</sup> Building farmworker housing has been shown to increase a region's economic output, and to create jobs for local residents.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service, the Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development all provide housing services to migrants and can be contacted with farmworker housing questions.<sup>20</sup>

## **Health and Social Services**

The health status of migrant farmworkers is at the same standard of most Third World Nations, while the country in which they work, the United States, is one of the richest nations on earth.<sup>21</sup> Unsanitary working and housing conditions make farmworkers vulnerable to health conditions no longer considered to be threats to the general public. Poverty, frequent mobility, low literacy, language, cultural and logistic barriers impede farmworkers' access to social services and cost effective primary health care.<sup>22</sup> Economic conditions make farmworkers reluctant to miss work in order to seek health services. Farmworkers are not protected by sick leave and risk losing their jobs if they miss a day of work.<sup>23</sup> These circumstances cause farmworkers to postpone seeking health care unless their condition becomes so severe that they cannot work. At this point, many farmworkers must rely on expensive emergency room care for their health care needs. Migrant health centers provide accessible care for farmworkers, but existing centers have the capacity to serve fewer than 20% of the nation's farmworkers.<sup>23</sup>

## **Legislative Protection**

Agriculture is consistently ranked one of the three most dangerous occupations in the nation.<sup>24</sup> Exposure to the elements, pesticides and dangerous equipment are common in farm labor. Falls, heat stress, dehydration and pesticide poisoning are frequent injuries. However, agriculture is not subject to the safety legislation that protects workers in other industries.<sup>25</sup> Laws have been put into place that allow small farms with less than 11 workers to be exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act.<sup>25</sup> Only recently has OSHA required employers of eleven or more farmworkers to provide toilet facilities or drinking water for workers in the fields.<sup>26</sup> The EPA and OSHA regulate pesticide production and application and both require that workers receive comprehensive training. However, recent studies found that a significant number of migrant and seasonal farmworkers still were not receiving training<sup>26</sup>. The EPA estimates that 300,000 farmworkers are poisoned by pesticides each year.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Larson, Alice; Plascencia, Luis. "Migrant Enumeration Study". Washington, D.C.: Office of Minority Health, 1993

<sup>2</sup>Economic Research Service, "Farm Income and Costs". US Department of Agriculture. 2002

<sup>3</sup>United States Department of Labor. "National Agricultural Workers Survey" March 2000

<sup>4</sup>Hawkins, Daniel. "Monograph Series: Introduction." Buda, TX: National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2001

<sup>5</sup>Oliveira, V.; Efland, J. Runyan; and Hamm, S. "Hired Farm Labor Use on Fruit, Vegetable, and Horticultural Specialty Farms." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1993.

<sup>6</sup>Runyan, Jack L. "Profile of Hired Farmworkers, 1998 Annual Averages" 1998

<sup>7</sup>Slesinger, Doris P. "Economic Impact of Migrant Workers on Wisconsin's Economy", 2003

<sup>8</sup>Runyan, Jack L. "Profile of Hired Farmworkers, 1998 Annual Averages" 1998

<sup>9</sup>United States Department of Labor. "National Agricultural Workers Survey" March 2000

<sup>10</sup>Oliveira, V.; Efland, J. Runyan; and Hamm, S. "Hired Farm Labor Use on Fruit, Vegetable, and Horticultural Specialty Farms." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1993.

<sup>11</sup>United States Department of Labor. "National Agricultural Workers Survey" March 2000

<sup>12</sup>Villarejo, Don Ph.D. "The Occupational Health Status of Hired Farm Workers." Davis, CA: California Institute for Rural Studies, 1999

<sup>13</sup>Davis, Shelley. "Improving Farmworker Access To Workers Compensation Benefits." Migrant Health Newsline. Buda, TX: National Center for Farmworker Health, November/December 2003.

<sup>14</sup>National Association of Community Health Centers, Inc. Medicaid and Migrant Farmworker Families: Analysis of Barriers and Recommendations for Change. Washington, DC: National Association of Community Health Centers, Inc., July 1991.

<sup>15</sup>Public Voice for Food and Health Policy. Migrant Nutrition Study Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, undated

<sup>16</sup>Arendale, Elizabeth "Monograph Series: Medicaid and the State Children's Insurance Program". Buda, TX: National Center for Farmworker Health, 2001

<sup>17</sup>National Advisory Council on Migrant Health. 1993 Recommendations of the National Advisory Council on Migrant Health. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Primary Health Care, May 1993.

<sup>18</sup>Holden, Christopher. "Monograph Series: Housing". Buda, TX: National Center For Farmworker Health, 2001

<sup>19</sup>Sills, Erin O.; Alwang, Jeffrey; and Driscoll, Paul (Department of Agricultural Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Virginia Tech University). "The Economic Impact of Migrant Farmworkers on Virginia's Eastern Shore." Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, 1993."

<sup>20</sup>Holden, Christopher. "Monograph Series: Housing". Buda, TX: National Center For Farmworker Health, 2001

<sup>21</sup>Leon, Edgar. "The Health Condition of Migrant Farmworkers." Julian Samora Institute 2001

- <sup>22</sup>Villarejo, Don Ph.D. "The Occupational Health Status of Hired Farm Workers." Davis, CA: California Institute for Rural Studies, 1999
- <sup>23</sup>National Advisory Council on Migrant Health. 1993 Recommendations of the National Advisory Council on Migrant Health. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Primary Health Care, May 1993.
- <sup>24</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office. Hired Farmworkers Health and Well-Being at Risk: Report to Congressional Requesters. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, February 1992.
- <sup>25</sup>Embrey, Kay. "Farmworkers in the United States". Ithaca, NY: Cornell Migrant Program, 2002
- <sup>26</sup>Larson, Alice. "Environment/Occupational Safety and Health". National Center for Farmworker Health. 2000
- <sup>27</sup>Villarejo, Don Ph.D. "The Occupational Health Status of Hired Farm Workers." Davis, CA: California Institute for Rural Studies, 1999