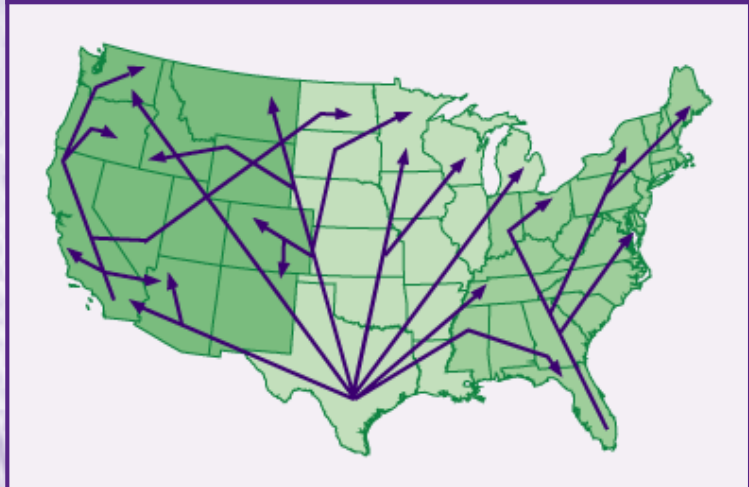


FARMWORKERS

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Farmworker Migrant Streams



Farmworkers Overview

Farming has always played a central role in American society, in both economic and cultural terms; for many people, rural America is identified with farming. The success of agriculture in the United States is due in part to farm labor. Farmworkers are among the hardest-working people in the country. Unfortunately, they are also among the poorest. Farmworker poverty leads directly to a lack of decent, safe, and affordable housing. Farmworkers face the entire range of housing problems: substandard housing quality, crowding, unaffordable housing costs, and low homeownership rates.

The history of farmwork in the U.S. shows different groups performing farm labor at different periods. Farmworkers, like other manual laborers, have often been ethnic minorities or immigrants. The historical pattern has been for farmworker populations to move out of farm labor and into other forms of employment. This process, which often takes generations to complete, leads to whole populations leaving farmwork, to be replaced by other groups. Currently, farmworkers in the U.S. are predominantly of Mexican descent or immigrants from Mexico.

Farmworkers, like the four other high needs areas and populations identified by HAC, are a marginalized population, often isolated from the communities where they live and work. This isolation is economic, social, political, and sometimes geographic in nature. In many rural communities, farmworkers occupy a social sphere that is distinct from the surrounding community.

One consequence of farmworkers' isolation is the general lack of information on farmworker demographics, economic conditions, and housing conditions in the U.S. Information on farmworkers as a distinct population is not available through the U.S. Census. The farmworker data presented in this report were gathered from two sources: the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, and a farmworker housing survey, coordinated by HAC.* The data presented in the social and economic characteristics sections of this analysis come from

* A report of HAC's farmworker housing survey, *No Refuge from the Fields*, is available at HAC's website, www.ruralhome.org.

FIGURE 4.1

Farmworker Place of Birth and Ethnicity

Place of Birth	Percent
U.S. Born	19%
Hispanic	9%
White	7%
African-American	1%
Foreign Born	81%
Mexican	77%
Other Latin American	2%
Asian	1%
Other	1%

Source: U.S. Department of Labor 2000. Data collected in 1997-1998.

NAWS reports from 1997-1998, while the data presented in the housing section come from HAC's farmworker housing survey conducted from 1997 to 2000.**

There are no current reliable statics for the total number of farmworkers in the U.S. The 1997-1998 NAWS did not calculate the total farmworker population, although the 1995 NAWS estimated the agricultural labor force to be 1.6 million people.¹

Social Characteristics

Eighty-eight percent of all farmworkers surveyed by NAWS were of Hispanic heritage. The next-largest sub-population of farmworkers is non-Hispanic whites, which represented 7 percent of surveyed farmworkers. Hispanic farmworkers were both U.S.- and foreign-born. The majority of farmworkers were born outside the U.S.; 81 percent of farmworkers were foreign-born and 19 percent were born in the U.S. (Figure 4.1). Seventy-seven percent of farmworkers were born in Mexico and an additional 2 percent were born in other Latin American countries.

** Both NAWS and the farmworker housing survey conducted by HAC provide vital information on the living conditions of farmworkers. However, there are distinct limits to both surveys. It must be kept in mind that both sources provide data on only active farmworkers. They provide limited information on the families of farmworkers, on the conditions of persons who were farmworkers in the past but have made the transition to other employment, on currently inactive or unemployed farmworkers, and on retired farmworkers.

In addition, it must be kept in mind that both instruments are surveys, rather than enumerations, and their data are not as representative as Census data. Because these data sources are surveys, they do not allow for an estimate of the total farmworker population, the total number of farmworker households, or for distribution along any scale, whether migrant stream, state, county, or town.



On average, immigrant farmworkers surveyed by NAWS resided in the U.S. for 10 years. This average masks the diversity of farmworker experience: 32 percent of foreign-born farmworkers lived in the U.S. less than three years, while 27 percent resided in the U.S. for over 15 years. The large percentage of farmworkers who lived in the country for only a few years may indicate that for these people, farm labor in the U.S. is a temporary strategy, aimed at earning enough money to meet their needs in their home countries or to move into other employment.

As is to be expected, farmworkers are generally working age. The average age of farmworkers surveyed by NAWS was 31. Thirty-six percent of farmworkers were under the age of 25, 49 percent were between the ages of 25 and 44, and 15 percent were age 45 or older. These numbers are for active farmworkers, and did not include the families of farmworkers or farmworkers who had found employment outside the fields or who were retired.

Most farmworkers are male; 80 percent of those surveyed by NAWS were male. Over half of all farmworkers were married, 43 percent were single, and 5 percent were widowed or divorced. Forty-five percent of farmworkers had children. One-third of farmworkers with children had only a single child, another third of farmworkers had two children, and the remaining third had three or more children. Fifty-three percent of these children resided in the U.S. and 47 percent were non-resident children.

Economic Characteristics

Farmworkers are divided into two labor patterns. A large number of farmworkers are migrant workers, traveling to different regions and different states following crop seasons and labor demand. Approximately 56 percent of farmworkers surveyed by NAWS were migrants. Migrant farmworkers generally can be categorized according to one of three migration streams: the Eastern stream, originating in Florida and extending up the East Coast; the Midwestern stream, originating in Texas and extending to the Great Lakes and Plains states; and the Western stream, originating in California and extending along the West Coast. The states of Florida, Texas, and California are termed the “home base” states for these respective migration streams.

The approximately 44 percent of farmworkers who do not migrate reside in their communities year-round. A large proportion of these farmworkers live in the home base states of California, Texas, and Florida, which have longer growing seasons.

The majority of migrant farmworkers have home bases within the U.S. While 58 percent of migrant workers surveyed had their home base in the U.S., the remaining 42 percent had their home base in another country of origin. In general terms, the home base is also recognized as the location where migrant farmworkers reside for the longest periods during the year. When migrant farmworkers shift to non-migratory work, they generally settle in home base states.

A common misconception is that all farmworkers are illegal aliens. According to the 1997-1998 NAWS survey, 22 percent of farmworkers are U.S. citizens and 24 percent are legal residents.* However, reliable statistics for the legal status of farmworkers are among



* An additional category of legal workers not included here is H-2A temporary laborers. Farmworkers with H-2A status were not included in the NAWS survey.

the most difficult to obtain. The figures from the NAWS survey, for instance, have varied widely over the years. In 1989, NAWS reported that 7 percent of farmworkers were unauthorized residents, the 1995 NAWS survey reported a rate of 37 percent unauthorized, and in 1998, NAWS reported that 52 percent of surveyed farmworkers were unauthorized.²

Farmworkers are among the poorest populations in the country. In 1997 through 1998, one-half of all individual farmworkers earned less than \$7,500 per year and one-half of all farmworker families earned less than \$10,000 per year. In the U.S. as a whole, only 9.5 percent of households earn under \$10,000 annually. In addition, 61 percent of all surveyed farmworkers had poverty-level incomes, compared with the national average of 12.4 percent.

Farmworkers and Food Processing Workers

A trend impacting farmworkers is the growth of food processing jobs in rural areas. Processing work includes the preparation and packaging of meat, poultry, dairy products, fruits, and vegetables. In 2000, there were over 760,000 food processing workers in the United States; almost one-third of these workers were employed in meat packing or poultry and fish processing plants. Approximately half of the meat and poultry processing jobs are located in rural areas.³

As a result of employment opportunities in food processing, some farmworkers have left work in the fields. Wages for food processing are slightly higher than for farmwork, although they are still relatively low; the average pay for chicken plant workers was \$8 per hour in 2000.⁴ Food processing workers continue to have severe housing needs. There is an ongoing debate on whether food processing work should be considered farmwork or should remain a separate category; the results of this debate will impact the federal and state resources that are dedicated to meeting farmworker needs. One side of the debate notes that much of the same populations conduct both farmwork and processing work, and that households or even individuals may be employed in both tasks during any given year. In addition, processing workers have low incomes and high needs, including housing needs. The other side of the debate recognizes the needs of processing workers, but points to the limited resources that target farmworker needs. This side believes these limited resources can best be used to serve the most needy population — farmworkers, who as a group earn less and have less steady employment than processing workers.

One factor that contributes to farmworkers' low incomes is the seasonal nature of farmwork. Farmworkers surveyed, on average, spent 47 percent of each year performing farmwork and another 8 percent of their time performing other types of work. The experiences of farmworkers during unemployment vary based on whether they are U.S.- or foreign-born, with many foreign-born farmworkers returning to their home countries.

Despite their low incomes and periodic unemployment, farmworkers report low utilization rates for various forms of public assistance. The most common form of assistance, according to NAWS, was unemployment insurance, yet only 20 percent of farmworkers received unemployment benefits. Only 13 percent of farmworkers received assistance from Medicaid, and only 10 percent were aided by the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Food Stamp programs.

Housing Characteristics

According to the farmworker housing survey conducted by HAC, farmworkers most commonly live in single-family homes and apartments; single-family homes comprised 42 percent of the surveyed units, and 21 percent of the units examined were apartments (Figure 4.2). Employers owned 25 percent of the surveyed units, and 57 percent of those employer-owned units were provided free of charge. These findings differ from the 1997-1998 NAWS data, which show that employers owned 28 percent of farmworker-occupied units, and 75 percent of employer-owned units were provided free of charge.

FIGURE 4.2

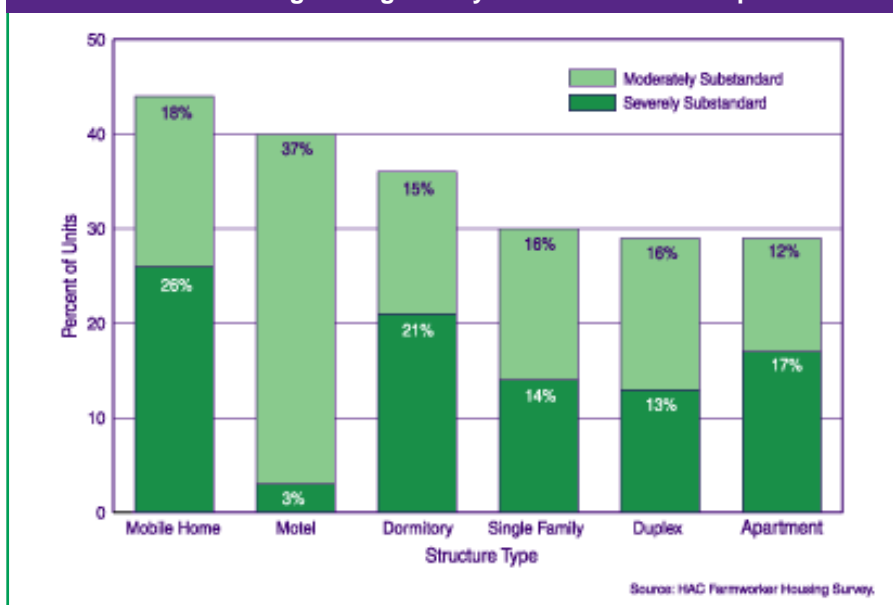
Surveyed Farmworker Housing by Type and Source

Type of Housing	All Housing Market	Private Owned	Employer-Owned
Single Family	42%	43%	39%
Apartment	21%	24%	14%
Mobile Home	15%	14%	14%
Duplex/Triplex	15%	15%	13%
Dorm/Barracks	4%	1%	15%
Motel	2%	3%	.1%
Campsite/Tent	.5%	.5%	.5%
No Shelter	.1%	—	—

Source: Housing Assistance Council Farmworker Survey.

FIGURE 4.3

Substandard Housing among Surveyed Farmworker Occupied Units



Due to their low wages, farmworkers face significant difficulties in finding affordable housing. The median monthly housing cost for farmworkers who participated in HAC’s survey was \$380. Approximately 34 percent of these farmworkers were cost-burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their monthly income for housing. Among all surveyed cost-burdened households, over 85 percent included children.

Farmworkers often face crowded housing conditions as a result of their low incomes and high housing costs. Crowded units are those with more than one person per room, excluding bathrooms. Excluding dormitories and barracks (structures designed for high occupancy), almost 52 percent of the units surveyed by HAC were crowded. This figure is almost ten times as high as the national average. Among the surveyed farmworker units that were crowded, 74 percent had children present.

Among the units in the farmworker housing survey, 17 percent were severely substandard and an additional 16 percent were moderately substandard, according to criteria established by HAC. Mobile homes were the type of unit most likely to be severely or moderately substandard, and 44 percent of mobile homes were in this condition (Figure 4.3).

Substandard housing conditions, both moderate and severe, indicate that landlords who rent units to farmworkers frequently fail to provide adequate property maintenance and upkeep. Serious structural problems, which include sagging roofs, house frames and porches, were evident in 22 percent of the HAC-surveyed units,

and 15 percent had holes or large sections of shingles missing from their roofs. Foundation damage was evident in 10 percent of all surveyed units. Interior problems were also prevalent in units surveyed; holes were noted in the walls of 22 percent of the units, and unsanitary conditions, such as rodent or insect infestation, were evident in 19 percent of the units.

Most farmworker-occupied units have common household appliances such as a stove, refrigerator, bathtub, and toilet. However, 22 percent of the HAC-surveyed units had at least one of these appliances and fixtures missing or broken. Eleven percent of surveyed farmworker units lacked a working stove. More than 8 percent of surveyed farmworker housing units lacked a working bath or shower, and more than 9 percent lacked a working toilet. Almost 52 percent of the surveyed units lacked access to a working laundry machine, and almost 43 percent lacked a working telephone.

The full extent of the housing crisis facing farmworkers is revealed by the statistics for farmworkers who face multiple housing problems simultaneously. Of all the substandard units surveyed by HAC, excluding dormitories and barracks, 20 percent were both substandard and crowded. Farmworkers living in substandard housing and who were cost-burdened represented 11 percent of all units surveyed. Substandard units with households both crowded and cost-burdened comprised 19 percent of all substandard units and 6 percent of all units surveyed. These housing problems were encountered both by single adults and



families; households with children occupied 65 percent of substandard units. Additionally, farmworker housing units with numerous serious problems are very likely to have children living in them. Children were living in 70 percent of the surveyed units that were both substandard and crowded. Among the units that were substandard and crowded and whose households had housing cost burden, 94 percent had children present.

In addition to high housing costs, crowding, and substandard housing, farmworkers encounter unique environmental hazards related to housing, particularly the danger of exposure to pesticides. Overall, 26 percent of HAC-surveyed units were directly adjacent to fields where pesticides were applied. Among units next to treated fields, 53 percent lacked a working tub/shower, laundry machine, or both. Children lived in 60 percent of all surveyed units adjacent to fields where pesticides were applied.

There are differences in housing problems faced by farmworkers in different migrant streams. The two areas with the greatest confluence of serious farmworker housing problems according to HAC's survey of units are Florida and the Northwest region. Compared with California, the Northwest region had greater percentages of surveyed households with incomes below area medians, cost-burdened households, and substandard units and a slightly higher percentage of crowded units. Compared with upstream areas of the Eastern migrant stream, Florida also had higher percentages for each of these categories. Although both regions had substantial problems with housing cost and quality among the surveyed units, the weight of these problems varied

somewhat. While the Northwest had the highest percentages of households below median income and cost-burdened households of any of the regions, Florida led all of the other regions in its percentage of substandard units and crowded units.

Addressing the Needs

Farmworkers are the only high need population in this report defined according to occupation, rather than ethnicity or location. As noted above, the history of farm labor in the U.S. shows different ethnic groups employed as farmworkers during different periods. Currently, farmworkers in the U.S. are predominantly of Mexican descent or immigrants from Mexico. If the historic patterns continue, these populations will eventually shift away from farm labor towards other forms of employment. The growth of food processing and manufacturing sectors in rural areas may open up new employment opportunities for farmworkers. Evidence from the following case study of farmworkers in Kern County, California, indicates that farmworkers are finding employment in transportation, construction, and warehousing. In addition, farmworker families in Kern County have made education for their children a priority and are using education as a means of social mobility.

Despite the barriers of low wages and high needs, a substantial number of farmworkers are able to attain a higher quality of life. With the support of family and social networks, community-based organizations, and government programs at local, state, and federal levels, some farmworker families are able to meet their housing needs. Future editions of *Taking Stock* will hopefully find smaller numbers of farmworkers among the U.S. rural populations with high housing needs.