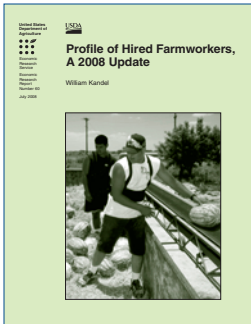


ERS *Report Summary*

Economic Research Service

July 2008

U.S. Department of Agriculture



This is a summary
of an ERS report.

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Profile of Hired Farmworkers, A 2008 Update

William Kandell

Current estimates indicate that more than 1 million hired farmworkers are employed in U.S. agriculture. Economic and demographic trends have elicited an increased interest in hired farmworkers, including the impact they have on U.S. agricultural production. While productivity gains have gradually reduced the total agricultural labor force, hired farmworkers continue to play an important role in this industry.

What Is the Issue?

Hired farmworkers make up a third of the total agricultural labor force and are critical to U.S. agricultural production, particularly for labor-intensive sectors such as fruits and vegetables. The hired-farmworker labor market is unique because it includes a relatively disadvantaged and sometimes mobile workforce, a large proportion of whom lack authorization to work in the United States. Although agriculture employs less than 2 percent of the U.S. labor force, recent economic and demographic trends such as agricultural production methods that permit year-round employment, expanding immigrant populations in nonmetropolitan counties, and growing concerns over U.S. immigration policies have increased interest in hired farmworkers.

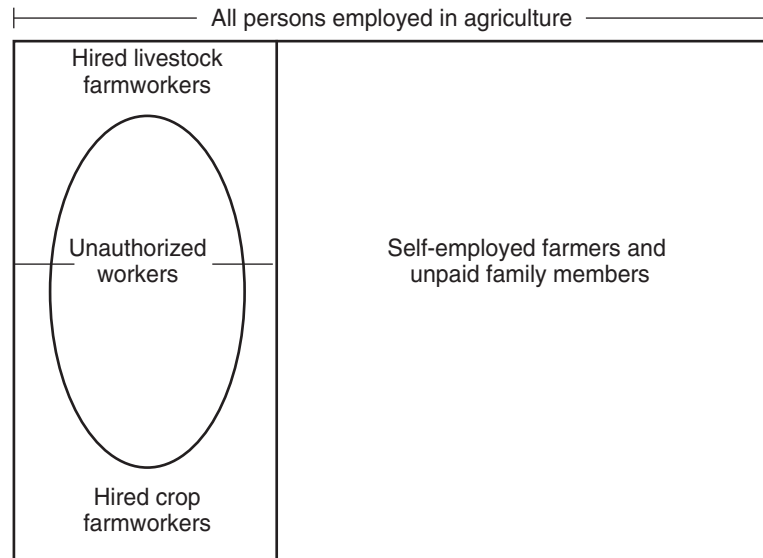
What Did the Study Find?

- In 2006, an average 1.01 million hired farmworkers made up a third of the estimated 3 million people employed in agriculture. The other 2.05 million included self-employed farmers and their unpaid family members.
- Productivity gains have gradually reduced the total agricultural labor force and the number of hired farmworkers within it.
- Expanding nonfarm economic opportunities for farmers and their family members have increased farmers' reliance on hired farm labor.
- Despite new patterns of Hispanic population settlement in rural areas, the geographic distribution of farmworkers has not changed significantly in the past decade. California, Florida, Texas, Washington, Oregon, and North Carolina account for half of all hired and contracted farmworkers.
- Hired farmworkers are disadvantaged in the labor market relative to most other U.S. wage and salary workers. On average, hired farmworkers are younger, less educated, more likely to be foreign-born, less likely to speak English, and less likely to be U.S. citizens or to have a legally authorized work permit.
- According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), which offers the most precise data available on farmworker legal status, half of all hired crop farmworkers lack legal authorization to work in the United States.

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Venn diagram of persons working in agriculture



Note: Social service utilization by farmworkers occurs within 2 years of being interviewed. Unauthorized immigrants are eligible for WIC and citizen children of unauthorized immigrants are eligible for Food Stamps and Medicaid.
 Source: ERS analysis of combined National Agricultural Workers Survey data, 2004-2006.

- Farmworker unemployment rates are double those of all wage and salary workers, but vary considerably by individual characteristics. Those working in field crops have twice the unemployment rate of livestock workers.
- Hired farmworkers earn less than other workers. Median weekly earnings of full-time farmworkers are 59 percent of those for all wage and salary workers. Poverty among farmworkers is more than double that of all wage and salary employees.
- Hired farmworkers who migrate between work locations are disadvantaged in the labor market and earn less than settled farmworkers. Disadvantages include poorer health and challenges to migrant children attending school.
- Housing conditions of farmworkers have historically been substandard because of crowding, poor sanitation, poor housing quality, proximity to pesticides, and lax inspection and enforcement of housing regulations.
- Agricultural work is among the most hazardous occupations in the United States, and farmworker health remains a considerable occupational concern. Farmworkers face exposure to pesticides, risk of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, inadequate sanitary facilities, and obstacles in obtaining health care due to high costs and language barriers.
- Hired farmworkers use select social services, such as Food Stamps, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program, Medicaid, and free school lunches, at higher rates than other wage and salary employees. Within the noncitizen crop farmworker population, authorized workers use those services at higher rates than unauthorized workers. Citizen farmworkers, whose poverty rates are a third those of noncitizen farmworkers, use such programs less than authorized noncitizen workers.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Principal data sources for this study include the Current Population Survey (CPS) March Supplement and Earnings File, NAWS, and the Census of Agriculture. Empirical support came from extensive research literature on hired farmworkers, including a previous Economic Research Service study that served as a baseline for elements of this report. CPS data allow for comparisons between hired farmworkers and workers in other occupations. This report used all other wage and salary workers as a reference group in order to compare the status of hired farmworkers relative to the total employed U.S. population (excluding farmworkers). In certain cases, hired farmworkers were compared with other occupations of similar skill levels.

Within each of the two groups consisting of farmworkers and other wage and salary employees as a group, CPS data also permit comparisons between workers with and without citizenship. Such comparisons are not equivalent to comparing authorized and unauthorized workers, but because legal status is such a critical socioeconomic characteristic, the citizen/noncitizen comparisons offer additional insight. NAWS data distinguished how hired crop farmworkers differ by unauthorized, authorized, and citizen legal status. Finally, data from the Census of Agriculture and the Agricultural Resource Management Survey place farm labor within the broader context of the agricultural sector.