

A Profile of U.S. Farm Workers: Demographics, Household Composition, Income and Use of Services, Richard Mines, Susan Gabbard and Anne Stierman, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, April 1997, 38 pages.
Review by Don Villarejo

This is the latest report on the findings of the on-going National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the largest cross-sectional survey of U.S. crop farm workers ever undertaken. The NAWS was begun in 1988 and comprises approximately 2,400 worker interviews each year. Agricultural employees within 288 counties in 25 states are represented.

The report was prepared for the federal Commission on Immigration Reform and contains a wealth of reliable data that is not available anywhere else. Findings from the 1994-95 NAWS are reported and, in many cases, compared with results obtained in earlier years, in some cases as early as 1988-89. The ability to study longitudinal changes, such as the changing share of immigrants in this labor force, makes the NAWS especially valuable.

From the perspective of immigration policy, the most important finding is that the proportion of foreign-born hired farm workers has increased sharply in just a few years. Their share of the hired farm labor force rose by 10% over the past seven years, to roughly seven of every ten U.S. crop farm workers.

At the same time the share of unauthorized immigrants increased from 7% to 37% of all hired farm workers, a remarkable increase in light of government efforts to exclude undocumented workers. This is persuasive evidence that the willingness of foreign-born workers to travel thousands of miles and cross national frontiers to obtain jobs, even short-term, low-paying jobs, far exceeds the capacity of the government of the United States to keep them out of the country. The increase in foreign-born

hired farm workers was mainly associated with the dramatic increase in the proportion of Mexican-born workers, from 53% of all U.S. hired farm workers in 1990-91 to 69% by 1994-95.

The report presents compelling evidence that hired farm workers who gained legal residence status as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) as well as other work-authorized groups are leaving agriculture and are being replaced in farm jobs by undocumented workers. But it is not able to determine why so many left farm work. The authors suggest that a huge labor surplus and the attendant decline in wages and working conditions might have been major factors in the displacement of authorized workers by newly arrived unauthorized workers.

Other findings from the 1994-95 NAWS are surprising as well. Most hired farm workers are quite young — two-thirds are under the age of 35. It was also found that the proportion of women in the hired farm labor force has declined significantly in recent years, from about one in four workers seven years ago to just one in five by 1994-95.

The 1994-95 survey also finds that hired farm worker households have very low family incomes — the median family income was between \$7,500 and \$10,000. Three-fifths of these households were in poverty as of 1994-95, a substantial increase from the 1990-91 finding that roughly half were in poverty. Median personal incomes of hired farm workers have remained very low — the NAWS findings show that the median has been in the range of \$5,000 to \$7,500 in every year since the survey began in 1988.

One-third of all hired farm workers owned no assets of any kind, and the most common asset owned was a vehicle. But 51% of all farm workers did not own a vehicle, which presents a difficult problem for workers who depend upon traveling to remote rural areas to earn their livelihoods. As a consequence, almost one in five farm

workers paid for rides to work.

Despite the high level of poverty, few hired farm workers utilize social insurance programs. The lowest levels of social service utilization are found among unauthorized workers. For example, just 5% of undocumented workers had collected unemployment insurance at any point in the two years prior to the interview, despite the fact that they experienced long periods without work between jobs. Just 7% of undocumented workers lived in households where anyone had utilized Medicaid and WIC, even though some household members might be eligible.

Though brief, this report is essential reading for those who are interested in farm labor market or immigration policy issues. At the same time, many important questions are left unanswered. For example, given the finding of a sharp increase in the numbers of foreign-born farm workers, is there a corresponding increase in migrancy, or are the new immigrants settling in the U.S.? Again, are there geographic patterns associated with the reported increases in immigrants, unauthorized workers, and young workers? What about literacy levels? Working conditions? Access to health services? Housing conditions? A thoughtful reader could easily enumerate dozens of questions that are not raised, let alone discussed.

Finally, the report does not address key policy issues that are being widely discussed in the public discourse concerning immigration policy. Have the substantial efforts of the Border Patrol to curb unauthorized workers in the U.S. had any deterrent effect? What about a guest worker program, proposed but soundly defeated in Congress' last session and likely to be raised again in the current session?

One would hope that the authors will address these and other issues in a future, more thorough report. In the mean-time, *A Profile of U.S. Farm Workers* is a marvelous, albeit brief update on the workers who bring food to our tables.

