CRB
SHORT SUBJECTS

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Farmworkers in California: A Brief Introduction

While agriculture plays a smaller role in California's overall economy than it did for previous generations, the state remains the largest overall producer of agricultural goods by value in the country, and is one of the largest agricultural producing regions in the world. Despite this, the farmworkers that make much of the production possible face a number of disadvantages compared to California's population as a whole. They are at higher risk for living in poverty, are less likely to have health insurance, and typically lack the resources necessary to change their situation. This short subject provides a brief overview of the demographic characteristics and geographic distribution of farmworkers in California.

The Agricultural Economy

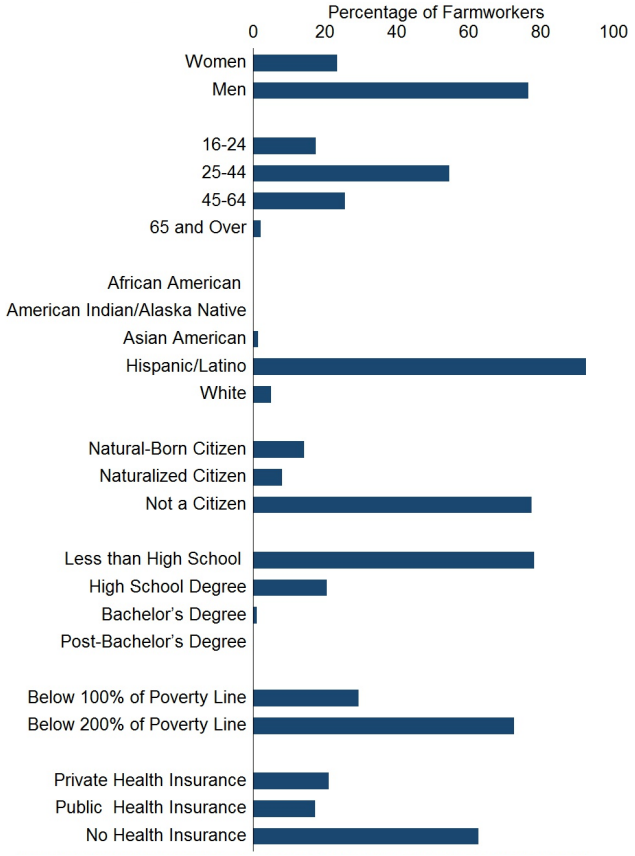
California's agricultural production accounted for sales of $43.5 billion of goods in 2011. This supports a large secondary economy including equipment manufacturing and seed, fertilizer and chemical production. It also accounts for $16.2 billion in net income paid to farm owners and $5.4 billion in salaries paid to farmworkers.[1]

Farmworker Characteristics

Figure 1 provides a breakdown of California's agricultural workforce using recent American Community Survey (ACS) data. Farmworkers are disproportionately male (77 percent). Most are between the ages of 25 and 44 (55 percent) though nearly 18 percent are under the age of 25 and about 26 percent are between the ages of 45 and 64.

The vast majority, 92 percent, of farmworkers in California are Latino. Of the remaining 8 percent, 5 percent are White, 2 percent are Asian American and 1 percent are African American. According to recent ACS data, 14 percent of all farmworkers in California were born in the United States. Another 9 percent were born elsewhere but have naturalized as U.S. citizens; the remaining 77 percent are noncitizens.

Figure 1: Key Characteristics of California Farmworkers, 2009-2011 ACS[2]



Estimated percentages are based on survey data and are subject to varying amounts of sampling error.

About 78 percent of farmworkers lack a high school diploma or equivalent. While 21 percent have a diploma or GED, just over 1 percent have a college degree. Hand-in-hand with low educational attainment is low pay for most farmworkers. The ACS estimates the median personal income of California farmworkers in 2011 to be $14,000. Roughly 30 percent of households with farmworker income are below the poverty line and 73 percent earn less than 200 percent of poverty (a threshold used in many public assistance programs).

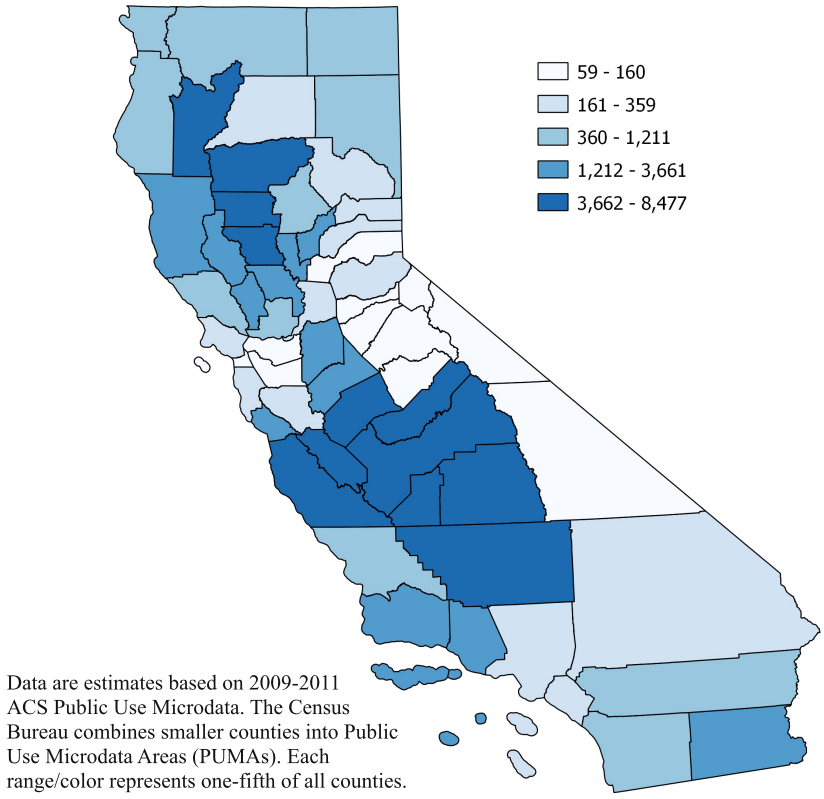
Lack of health coverage is another common problem for farmworkers. Today, only about 37 percent have

health insurance. Of those with insurance, 19 percent are covered by a private plan through their employer, 2 percent purchase their insurance directly, and another 16 percent are covered through public insurance such as Medicare or Medi-Cal. The majority, 63 percent, lack insurance coverage for health care expenses.

Geographic Distribution of Farmworkers

Monterey, Fresno, and Kern counties have the largest number of farmworkers in the state (regardless of population). Figure 2 takes the population of the counties into account and maps the number of farmworkers per 100,000 population. Counties with the lowest proportions of farmworkers are located in the Los Angeles basin, the Bay Area, and Sierras. In general, the counties with the highest rate of farmworkers are in the Northern Sacramento Valley and the Southern San Joaquin Valley. Of these, Tulare, Madera, Monterey, and San Benito counties have the highest proportion of farmworkers. These counties may face unique challenges since sizable portions of their workforce are farmworkers and thus are more likely to lack health coverage and face financial insecurity.

Figure 2: Farmworkers (per 100,000 Total Population) by County[2]



Data are estimates based on 2009-2011 ACS Public Use Microdata. The Census Bureau combines smaller counties into Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). Each range/color represents one-fifth of all counties.

Immigration from Mexico

Mexico is the largest contributor of California farmworkers. However, according to National Agricultural Workers Survey data, the percentage of Mexican immigrants has declined since its peak in 2000, when 79 percent of farmworkers were born in Mexico.[3] Since then the percentage of Mexican-born farmworkers has dropped to 68 percent.

The characteristics of Mexican-born farmworkers are also changing. In 1997, 5 percent of farmworkers were indigenous Mexicans. That number had risen to 15 percent by 2009. Historically the largest Mexican sending region was west central—Colima, Guanajauto, Jalisco, and Michoacan. In the early '90s, 55 percent of all immigrant farmworkers were born in those 4 states. Since then, that number has dropped by ten percent, while the number of immigrants from the Pacific South—Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca—has quadrupled from 5 percent to 20 percent.

Citations

1. California Department of Food and Agriculture. (2012). *California Agricultural Statistics Overview.*
2. United States Census Bureau. (2012). American Community Survey 2009-2011 Public Use Microdata.
3. United States Department of Labor Employment & Training Administration (2009). *National Agricultural Workers Survey.*

Further Reading

Alicia Bugarin and Elias Lopez, Ph.D. (1998). *Farmworkers in California*. California Research Bureau. http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/CRBReports.html

Prepared at the request of Senator Ricardo Lara, Chair of the California Latino Legislative Caucus, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the CRB report "Farmworkers in California."

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