

Facts About North Carolina Farmworkers

Farmworkers play a vital role in cultivating the food we eat everyday, and North Carolina has one of the largest farmworker populations in the nation. Even though 85% of our fruits and vegetables are harvested by hand,¹ farmworkers remain largely invisible.

Overview of Farm Work

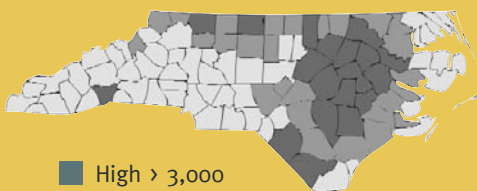
Agricultural labor includes planting, cultivating, harvesting and preparing crops for market or storage.³

Migrant farmworkers travel from place to place to work in agriculture and move into temporary housing while working; seasonal farmworkers work primarily in agriculture, but live in one community year-round.³

Farmworkers are usually employed by farm owners or by “crew leaders,” who serve as intermediaries between growers and workers.

The H2A program allows foreign “guestworkers” to perform seasonal farm work under a temporary work visa designed for agricultural workers in the United States.

NC Farmworker Density



High > 3,000

Medium 1,000–2,999

Low < 1,000

Demographics of North Carolina Farmworkers

North Carolina ranks sixth in the nation in the number of migrant farmworkers.⁴

There are approximately 150,000 farmworkers and their dependents in North Carolina each growing season,⁴ but this estimate is considered low. In the United States there are two to three million farmworkers.⁵

Even though the overall number of farmworkers in North Carolina has decreased over the last 20 years, the number of migrant farmworkers has nearly doubled.⁶

Ninety-four percent of migrant farmworkers in North Carolina are native Spanish speakers.⁶

Nationally, most farmworkers are unaccompanied males whose families still live in their home countries.⁷

The US Department of Labor reports that 53% of farmworkers nationally are undocumented (working without legal authorization), 25% are US citizens, and 21% are legal permanent residents.⁷

Farmworkers' Impact on North Carolina

Agriculture, including food, fiber and forestry, contributes over \$59 billion annually to North Carolina's economy and represents 22% of North Carolina's income.⁸

Each farmworker's labor contributes over \$12,000 in profits to North Carolina's economy annually.⁹

Major North Carolina crops requiring hand labor include: tobacco, Christmas trees, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, apples, bell peppers, and other fruits and vegetables. Many farmworkers also work in greenhouses and nurseries.¹⁰

“It’s just ridiculous that we, the ones that are feeding the whole world, are the ones that [live in such poor conditions].”

—Wayne County Farmworker, North Carolina²⁰



Economic Profile

Poverty: Nationally, farmworkers' average annual income is \$11,000; for a family it is approximately \$16,000.⁷ Farmworkers on the East Coast earn about 35% less than the national average.¹⁰

Hard work, low pay: At 40¢ per bucket (5/8 bushel), a farmworker must pick and haul two tons of sweet potatoes to earn \$50.¹¹

Few wage protections: Most farmworkers are exempt from minimum wage laws, and all are exempt from overtime provisions, despite long work days during peak harvest.¹²

Few benefits: Despite pervasive poverty, less than one percent of farmworkers collect general assistance welfare nationwide. Only ten percent of farmworkers report having health insurance through an employer health plan. Fewer than four out of ten workers interviewed said that they would receive unemployment benefits if out of work.⁷

Hunger: Nearly five out of ten North Carolina farmworkers cannot afford enough food for themselves and their families.¹³

Health Profile

Poor housing: Research suggests that the health of North Carolina farmworker families is at risk due to substandard housing.¹³ State regulations require only one wash tub for every 30 workers, one shower for every 10 workers, one toilet for every 15 workers, and do not require mattresses or telephone access in case of emergency.¹⁴

Overcrowding: Seven out of ten farmworkers on the East Coast live in crowded conditions.¹⁵

Pesticide exposure: Up to 44% of farmworker families live in housing directly adjacent to agricultural fields, increasing likelihood of pesticide exposure.¹⁴ A 2006 study in Eastern North Carolina showed that most farmworker children are routinely exposed to pesticides.¹⁶

High rates of illness: Farmworkers face higher incidences than other wage-earners of heat stress, dermatitis, urinary tract infections, parasitic infections, pesticide-related illnesses and tuberculosis.¹⁷ Eight out of ten North Carolina farmworkers surveyed had skin disease.¹⁸

Limited Workers' Compensation: In North Carolina, very few farmworkers are covered by workers' compensation. Only farmers employing ten or more year-round workers or any H2A worker are required to carry workers' compensation insurance.¹⁹

Limited access to care: Barriers to receiving health care include lack of transportation, limited hours of clinic operation, cost of health care, limited interpreter services, and frequent relocation in order to seek farm work.¹⁷

North Carolina Farmworkers are Organizing for Change

In 2004, a historic labor agreement was signed between the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the North Carolina Growers Association, and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, unionizing H2A guestworkers for the first time in the nation. The contract includes sick pay, bereavement leave, hiring security, protection from unjustified firing and a grievance procedure allowing workers to report problems on the job without fear of retaliation.

Get Involved!

Visit www.ncfarmworkers.org to learn more and to take action in support of farmworkers.

The Farmworker Institute is a project of the NC Council of Churches' Farmworker Ministry Committee, whose members include the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Farmworker Unit of Legal Aid of North Carolina, National Farm Worker Ministry, North Carolina Farmworker Health Program, Student Action with Farmworkers, and Triangle Friends of the United Farm Workers.



Sources: 1 Olivieri, VJ. US Dept. of Ag., 1993; 2 Quandt, SAF. Public Health Reports, 2004; 3 Public Law 104-299, 1996; 4 Larson, A. Farmworker Enumeration Study, 2000; 5 Report of the Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1992; 6 NC Employment Security Commission, 2005; 7 National Agricultural Workers Survey, US Dept. of Labor, 2005; 8 NC Dept. of Ag., 2004; 9 Sutter, S. NC State University, 1988; 10 Ward, L. East Coast Analysis of NAWs, 1998; 11 Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938, 1978; 12 US Dept. of Labor, Prevailing Wage Surveys, 2002; 13 Early, J. Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 2006; 14 NC Migrant Housing Act, 1989; 15 Housing Assistance Council, 2001; 16 Arcury, T. American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 2006; 17 National Center for Farmworker Health; 18 Krejci-Manwaring J. Journal of Ag. Safety & Health, 2006; 19 NC General Statute 97-13b; 20 WRAL, 2005; 21 National Farm Worker Ministry, 2006. Full citations available at www.ncfarmworkers.org.

Published by the NC Farmworker Institute with funds from the Office of Rural Health and Community Care, NC Farmworker Health Program, 2007