

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Health-related Inequities Among Hired Farm Workers and the Resurgence of Labor-intensive Agriculture

Executive summary

**Health Program
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan**

2012

Executive Summary

America's 1.8 million hired farm laborers are among the nation's most vulnerable employees. They suffer widespread health disparities, including lack of access to health care and health insurance, and are at a greater risk of workplace injury or death. Many also labor without the workplace rights or protection that federal and state laws afford to almost all other workers.

Farm laborers typically are young, married, Spanish speaking, low income adults born in Mexico. Most newcomers come without their nuclear family, and many send money home to support their families. The National Agricultural Worker Survey conducted in 2007-2009 found that nearly all the newcomers, many from villages in Southern Mexico and Central America, were undocumented. Language and cultural differences, high annual turnover in the farm labor force, and concerns of both employers and workers regarding immigration status confound researchers trying to assess farm worker health across the United States.

Here are some of the things we know about hired farm workers:

- They are five times more likely to have an occupational fatality than workers in all industries combined.
- Seventy-five percent lack health insurance, the highest proportion of any major occupational category.
- Minor children of hired crop farm workers are uninsured at three times the rate of other minor children and at almost twice the rate of those at or near the federally defined poverty level.
- Scientific measures of mortality, including life expectancy, among hired farm workers are not available.
- Fifty percent of hired farm workers in California reported they had never visited a dentist.
- Real wage rates for farm laborers, which had been flat for 20 years, have increased recently as a result of increases in minimum wage rates at the federal level and in several states. Nearly one-fourth of crop farm worker families live in poverty.
- Workers increasingly are relying on private market housing as fewer employers provide on-farm dwellings or labor camps. Many hired farm worker families share a single-family residence with other families, contributing to extreme overcrowding.
- California is one of the few states to require unemployment insurance coverage for all workers.
- Even though employers and hired farm workers contribute to Social Security and Medicare through Federal Insurance Contributions Act payroll taxes, unauthorized workers are prohibited from receiving benefits.
- Since 1985, farmers increasingly have turned to agricultural service businesses for temporary workers instead of hiring farm workers directly.
- Seasonal workers, small farms and unauthorized immigrants are not likely to benefit from health care reform or health insurance subsidies because hired farm workers are excluded from employer and individual insurance mandates.

- American agriculture depends more on hired farm workers now than in the past because of increases in U.S. production of labor-intensive crops such as vegetables, fruit and ornamentals, and a decline in the number of family farms.

A few large farms, including Reiter Affiliated Companies of California and Stemilt Growers Inc. in Washington, have responded to hired farm workers' health disparities by providing company-funded medical clinics for employees. In 2010, the Western Growers Assurance Trust opened the new Cedar Health and Wellness Center in Salinas, California, which serves up to 80 patients a day. Patients pay \$5 per visit for the bilingual, confidential and cost effective health care option.

Health disparities could be reduced among hired farm workers more broadly under existing U.S. law. Examples:

- Persuade eligible farm laborers and their families to take advantage of Medicaid; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children; food stamps; and the federal earned income tax credit.
- Add more field inspectors to the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
- Create an independent public oversight review board focused on agriculture.
- Provide information to farm laborers about their rights and responsibilities under U.S. law.
- Improve housing for unaccompanied men who are farm laborers.
- Focus public attention on the agriculture industry's increased reliance on contractors and custom agricultural service businesses.
- Expand and strengthen the public health workforce that serves hired farm workers and farm families.

Other steps to eliminate disparities in the workplace would require policy changes. They include:

- Raise the federal minimum wage to \$10 per hour.
- Change the immigration law as it affects agriculture. About half of hired crop farm workers and one-third of hired livestock workers are undocumented to work in the United States.
- Give agricultural and domestic workers the right to engage in collective action to improve wages and work conditions under the National Labor Relations Act.
- Apply provisions of existing federal labor standards for retail, wholesale trade, transportation, construction and manufacturing industries to hired farm workers.

Learn more in a white paper prepared for The Kresge Foundation by Don Villarejo.