

COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Canada's Agriculture Industry

“How has COVID-19 affected the health risks migrant workers face when moving to Canada to work in the agricultural sector, and what impact does this have on Canadian agricultural output?”

By: Azeban (Daniela Lopez Loncar, Krisha Mansukhani, Rhamel Roomes-Delpeache & Samantha Cheung)

20% of Canada's agricultural workforce are Temporary Foreign Workers(TFW), many of whom are supported by the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), which enables workers to work for 8 months a year.[1][2] While Canada has opened the border to those migrant workers with valid permits, COVID-19 has caused many of what would-be migrant workers to question their safety while travelling to and working in Canada. In this study, our team looks at whether these concerns are warranted and the economic effect a lack of migrant workers could have on Canada's agricultural industry.

SAWP only supports individuals from Mexico and the Caribbean leading to a large representation of migrant workers from Mexico and Jamaica on farms. These countries have 10.02, 2.04 cases of COVID-19 per 10 000 respectively, compared to Canada's 25.73 cases per 10 000.[3] Based on our research, individuals who have reported recently travelling from Mexico and the Caribbean make up a very small portion of cases in every rural region in Canada, the median being 1 case. This would imply they are getting sick at a rate much smaller than in their home country. A significant portion of the data studied contains individuals who have not reported their recent travel history and this may skew the results. Due to the missing travel information, it is inconclusive whether working in Canada poses a greater risk to migrant workers.

It was necessary to consider factors besides geography that migrant workers face. Migrant farmworkers are often housed together, which may increase the risks of infection considerably. A relationship between areas of large migrant worker populations and number of cases should reflect these risks. Our team plotted a comparison between health regions across Canada and of COVID-19 cases per 10,000 to map out these relations, but, the only distinct positive relationship, reflecting a higher amount of risks, was for health regions in Quebec. Furthermore, the majority of migrant workers are under 40 years of age[4] – comparing cases in areas with no migrant workers to those with workers this age range should also be indicative of the risks of infection. Our team found that there was no significant relationship present.

While looking into the economic agricultural consequences, we looked into average hours worked and agricultural output. Due to the pandemic, the total hours worked by the agricultural sector were at its lowest in April 2020. Ontario and Quebec had the lowest percentage of businesses that predicted to remain partially or fully operational for 6 months or more, and a large proportion of businesses predicted to be unable to operate. This is strongly correlated with the number of COVID-19 cases confirmed in both provinces. The lower number of hours spent working in certain industries during COVID-19 can be a challenge while hiring temporary foreign workers for several provinces such as Quebec and Nova Scotia. The total value of Canadian agricultural, fishing, forestry and hunting imports from all countries in April 2020 was significantly lower as compared to April 2019. The decrease in imports due to COVID-19 has also played a role, given that the Consumer Price Index and Exchange Rates of Canadian top importers have been rising but the value of imports decreases.

The decrease in agricultural imports and the possibility of a reduction in domestic supplies due to the deficit of foreign workers and COVID-19 will negatively affect Canadian agricultural output. Moreover, due to a large portion of unreported travel history and a lack of citizenship-based data we are hesitant to agree that migrant workers are more susceptible to COVID-19 in Canada, compared to their home countries based on the data we collected. A proactive step to building a more conclusive result would be collecting data on the ethnicity and citizenship of individuals getting sick. This was a large challenge we faced which skewed our results.

[1]<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00002-eng.htm>

[2]<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00002-eng.htm>

[3][Canada Struggles to Attract Migrant Farm Staff](#)

[4]https://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_FF_TR_2017_01_E.xls