

# Farm laborers run high risk of health woes

Most in state lacking care, survey finds

By Andy Furillo  
Bee Staff Writer

California farm workers in the prime of their lives are far more likely than the general population to suffer health problems ranging from high blood pressure and obesity to tooth decay, according to a first-of-its-kind survey released Tuesday.

The survey of nearly 1,000 workers — conducted by the nonprofit California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis — also found that more than two-thirds of the state's 700,000-strong agricultural work force lacks health insurance, leaving them with the volatile combination of poor health and poor health care.

In fact, a third of the men and more than 12 percent of the women interviewed said they had never seen a doctor in their lives.

"The information is quite startling, if you consider that most of the folks are young Mexican men in their prime," said Don Villarejo, the director emeritus of the institute and a principal investigator on the survey, funded by the California Endowment.

In what is believed to be the most comprehensive effort ever, surveyors traveled to homes and labor camps throughout California to conduct extensive interviews and physical examinations of farm workers.

Such workers provide the nation with most of its fresh produce, leading Villarejo to add that the real question is "whether we want to have a population that is willing to do this kind of work in pain, literally, while we enjoy the benefits of their labor."

California Farm Bureau Federation spokesman Bob Krauter blamed farm worker health problems largely on the nation's unwillingness to establish a guest worker program.

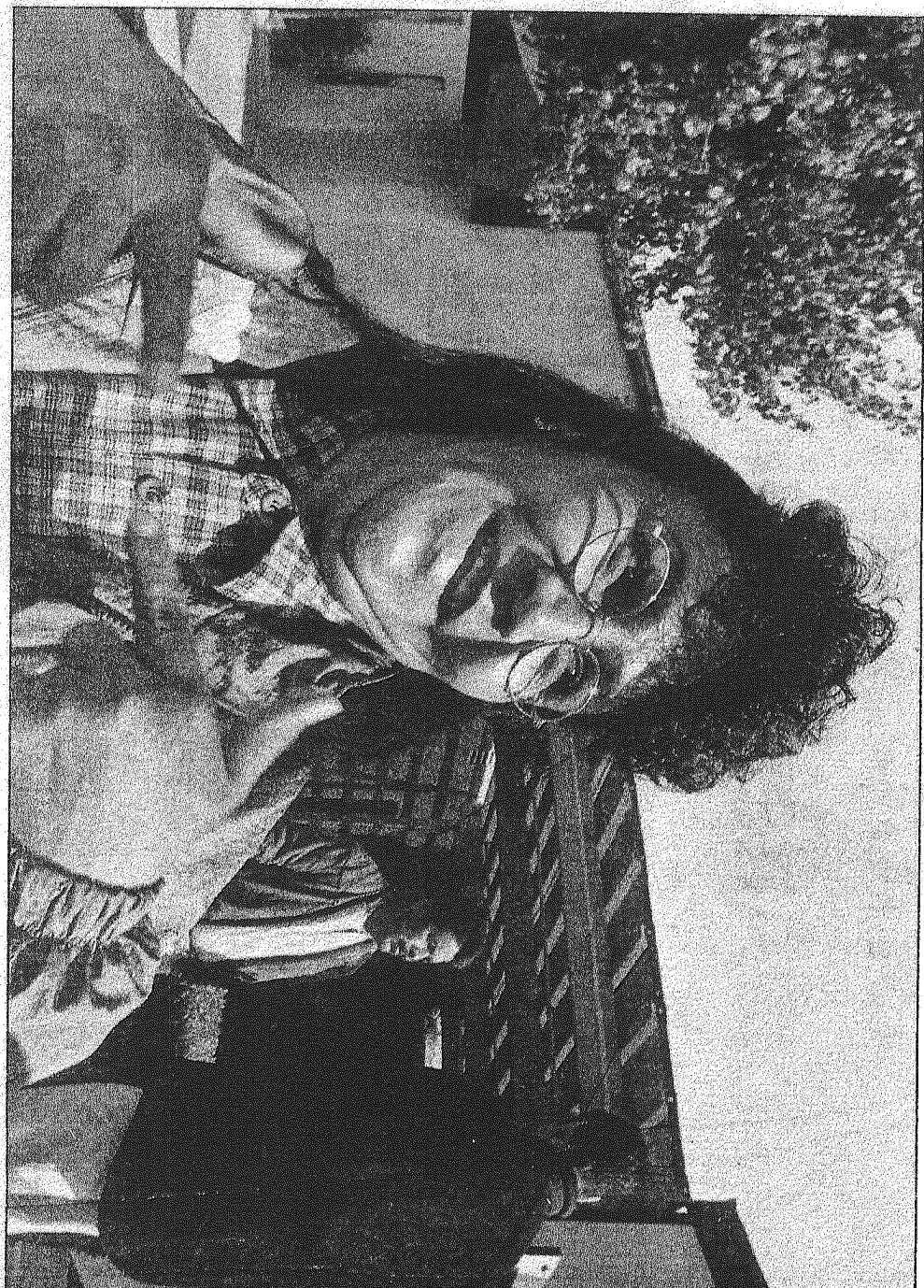
An estimated half of all farm workers are undocumented, which Krauter said leaves them reticent to go to a doctor for fear of deportation.

Mike Scholl, who heads the Farm Bureau's rural health and safety project, said the organization is concerned about farm worker health and has sought to improve health facilities in the state's agricultural areas.

The California Agricultural Workers Health Survey provides somewhat of a census of farm workers, who often are overlooked by standard demographic studies.

Of the 971 interviewed by the project last year, with an average age of 34, more than 60 percent had six years of education or less; their annual incomes ranged from \$7,500 to \$9,999, 96 percent identified themselves as Mexican, Latino or Hispanic and most were foreign born.

Among its findings, the survey reported that male farm workers between the ages of 20 and 34 were more than 2½ times as likely as their peers in the general U.S. population to be suffering from high blood pressure (21 percent compared to 8 percent). Male farm workers in the 30-44 age group also were diagnosed far more frequently with high blood pressure. Farm workers were found to have significantly higher serum cholesterol counts and were more likely to be overweight than the nation's population at large.



Farm worker Mercedes Antunez talks in Fresno about the problems she and her family have had in finding health care. She was attending a news conference Tuesday during which findings from the California Agricultural Workers Health Survey were announced.

Even when compared with the overall Latino population, as measured by the 1980 U.S. census, the farm workers' weight problems were significantly worse.

Combining the blood pressure, weight and cholesterol data, one physician familiar with the survey said that California farm workers run a high risk of suffering from chronic health problems such as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes.

Dr. Marcia Sablan, who runs the Sablan Medical Clinic in rural Fresno County, attributed the farm workers' health problems to "bad lifestyles" developed since moving to California from Mexico.

Indeed, the survey found male farm workers four times more likely than other men to show signs of iron-deficiency anemia, a reflection of poor nutrition.

Nearly 70 percent of the farm workers reported having no access to health insurance. About 16 percent said their employers offered health insurance, but only 11 percent could afford to take advantage of it. Government programs provided insurance coverage to 7 percent of respondents.

Half of men and 40 percent of women had never visited a dentist — while at least a third reported a decaying, broken or missing tooth. Two-thirds of respondents had never had their eyes checked.

Eighteen percent said they had suffered an occupational injury, but only a third knew their employers are required to provide workers' compensation insurance.

Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, said she was struck by the survey's findings concerning the lack of workers' compensation coverage and wants to bring that issue up during the next legislative session.

"It provides an opportunity for the Legislature to ... not only protect the rights of farm workers, but to make sure they understand what their rights are," she said. Romero suggested that nothing

in the survey should come as a surprise to Californians, given poverty endemic in the farm force.

But David Lighthal, director of the California Institute for Studies, said the survey sends a documentary message "for the first time we have a titic basis to address it." He is California Endowment president Peggy Hinz said the organization will establish a ribbon task force of labor, government and government representatives to study the problem further. A goal of issuing recommendations by the spring. "Based on study," she said, "there is an lot that needs to be done."