

OPINION

Unhealthy in the fields

Study reveals farm workers don't receive care

Even on Thanksgiving weekends in times less bountiful than these, when our luck is running low and the economic winds are blowing cold, we Americans know how to keep a smile. Look on the bright side, we tell ourselves; at least we have our health.

Not so for the men and women who tended and picked the food we've eaten these last few days. As the first comprehensive study of California farm worker health revealed last week, even in these times of plenty, good health looks to them more like a luxury than something they can take for granted.

The study, sponsored by the California Endowment, the state's largest foundation, and conducted by the California Institute of Rural Studies, shows that 70 percent of the people whose labor grew today's feast have no health insurance. They rarely get medical care. A third of male farm workers have never been to a doctor. Half have never been to a dentist. Seven in 10 have never seen an eye-care professional.

It is not because the 700,000 people who work in California's field are hale and hearty.

The participants in the study received physical exams, which yielded troubling results. Male farmer workers under age 44, who make up the bulk of the work force, are about twice as likely as other Americans of the same age to have high blood pressure. They also are more likely to be overweight, have elevated cholesterol and below-normal concentrations of hemoglobin, a condition that signals anemia. All those findings create risk for future chronic disease.

"It is a tragedy and more than a little ironic that the labor force that is responsible for producing such a great abundance of health food in California should themselves be suffering from the effects of inadequate diet," the study notes.

Others less polite will call it a shame. When the suffering of farm workers pricked the nation's conscience in the 1930s and 1960s, California could at least tell itself that many of the rest of us had hard lives and little health, too. In this day of unprecedented riches and bulging budget surpluses, our excuses are running out.