

"Exploiting Migrant Farmworkers"- A Policy Brief Analysis

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Executive Summary:

The H-2A Temporary Agriculture Worker Program allows U.S. employers that face a shortage of domestic workers to hire foreign nationals for temporary or seasonal agricultural jobs. ⁽¹⁾ Their temporary status often leaves them without proper housing, healthy food, and adequate healthcare, worsening malnutrition, and related health problems. They usually arrive in late Spring and return to their home, in late Fall. ⁽²⁾ In 2008, 14.6% of all households in the United States were food insecure. ⁽³⁾ Occurrence was higher among Hispanic or Latino people (26.9%). ⁽³⁾ These farmers are often exploited because of their visa status, cultural and language barriers. Sometimes H-2A workers sign contracts with guaranteed kitchen access, only to arrive and learn their employer has what advocates call a “forced meal plan”, unlawfully charging money from farm worker’s paychecks. ⁽⁷⁾ Between 2006 and 2022, the average age of all crop production laborers increased slightly, from 39.6 to 40.6 years, but crop laborers' average age rose more significantly, from 37.2 to 41.6 years. This reflects a decline in young workers in U.S. agriculture, this means that U.S born American show less interest in farm labor, while the demand for H-2A workers has risen, partly due to an aging workforce. ⁽¹⁾

Problem:

Latino farmworkers face a variety of barriers in managing their diet. They work long hours in demanding conditions. ⁽⁴⁾ They often lack basic housing and kitchen accommodations for food storage and preparation and their housing and work sites are isolated and they frequently lack vehicles or driver’s licenses, which may limit access to healthy food sources. ^(5,6) Farmworker housing conditions are poor in both the local housing market and employer-provided labor camps, where issues such as

crowding, insufficient bathing facilities, pest infestation, and structural damage are prevalent. ⁽⁶⁾ A recent analysis by the American Immigration Council reveals that the demand for H-2A farmworkers in the U.S. has surged nearly 65% from 2017 to 2022, with two-thirds of U.S. counties employing these workers to address critical labor shortages in agriculture. Despite their essential role in food production, H-2A workers are particularly vulnerable to extreme heat, as many work in some of the hottest regions, like Florida and Texas,



Figure 15Source: Farmers working in a field in hot summers.
https://www.google.com/search?q=migrated+farmers+getty&sca_esv=c64f92f75d6f9f24&rlz=1C10NGR_enUS1079US1079&udm=2&biw=1536&bih=730&ei=BMA-Z4LzK-bptQPu7GOMQ&ved=0ahUKewiCheDr0-yJAXvmv4kEHbuYIwYQ4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=migrated+farmers+getty&gs_lp=EgNpbW

where temperatures often exceed 90°F (32°C). Advocates emphasize the need to protect these workers, highlighting that without them, American food production would suffer, impacting families facing high grocery prices. ⁽⁸⁾

About the study:

This study examined migrant seasonal farmworkers (MSFWs) in eastern North Carolina during the 2005 growing season, focusing on participants from the East Coast Migrant Head Start Program (ECMHSP). Most participants were from Mexico, with two from Guatemala, working in row crops and tobacco while living in temporary housing provided by employers. Out of 120 families involved in the ECMHSP, 59

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agreed to participate, but only 36 adults completed the interviews. Seventeen families were excluded due to not relying solely on migrant work for income. The remaining 42 families depended entirely on seasonal farm work; six withdrew from the study after relocating for work. In the final sample of 36 adults, 58% were couples with children, and all adult and teenage participants were engaged in farm work. The demographic data indicated that half had lived in North Carolina for over six months, with a significant portion originating from rural areas in southern Mexico or Guatemala. This study underscores the vulnerable conditions faced by migrant farmworkers and emphasizes the urgent need for protective policies in the agricultural sector. ⁽⁹⁾

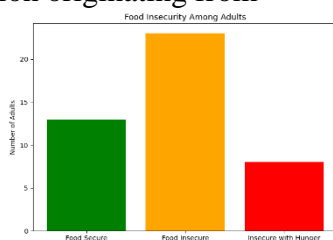


Figure 2 Source: Borre K, Ertle L, Graff M. Working to eat: Vulnerability, food

Current Policy Requirements:^(1,11)

- ✓ Housing Space & Ventilation: 50 sq. ft. for sleeping, 100 sq. ft. if cooking/living together, 7-ft ceilings, lockers 36" from beds, 1 window per unit (10% floor area, opens to outdoors).
- ✓ Bathroom, Laundry & Water: 1 toilet per 15 workers, 1 shower per 10, transport to laundromats if no on-site laundry, 35 gallons of water per person/day for all needs.
- ✓ Kitchen & Food Storage: 1 stove per 10 workers or 1 per 2 families, sanitary surfaces, fridge (<45°F), waste disposal, pest control (sealed containers, sprays).
- ✓ Employers must guarantee work for at least three-fourths of the total hours stated in the contract.

Problems with Current Policies: ^(2,5,8,9,10)

- ✓ Poor housing conditions and lack of proper kitchen facilities, leading to health issues and malnutrition.
- ✓ Exploitation of workers through unlawful wage deductions for "forced meal plans."
- ✓ Limited transportation to access healthy food and barriers to SNAP due to immigration status and lack of knowledge.
- ✓ Increased food insecurity among H-2A workers, particularly Hispanic or Latino workers.
- ✓ Limited healthcare access and insufficient knowledge on malnutrition, leaving workers vulnerable to illnesses.
- ✓ Exploitation due to temporary visa status, cultural differences, and language barriers, making it hard for workers to advocate for their rights.
- ✓ Insufficient protections against extreme heat conditions, especially in states like Texas and Florida.

Policy recommendations:

- ✓ Increase space to 100 sq. ft. per worker; improve ventilation for a healthier environment.
- ✓ Improve bathroom access (1 per 10 workers) and provide on-site laundry.
- ✓ Ensure fully equipped kitchens and refrigeration below 45°F for food storage.
- ✓ Provide 50 gallons of water per person per day to ensure they are hydrated.
- ✓ Educate on different health problems and their causes, including meal planning and cooking classes.
- ✓ Provide weekly transportation for grocery shopping and access to proper nutrition.

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Citations:

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- 11) U.S. Department of Labor. Housing Standards for Rental and Public Accommodations: H-2A. Published 2024. Accessed November 21, 2024. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/26g-housing-standards-for-rental-and-public-accommodations-H-2A>

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Appendix:

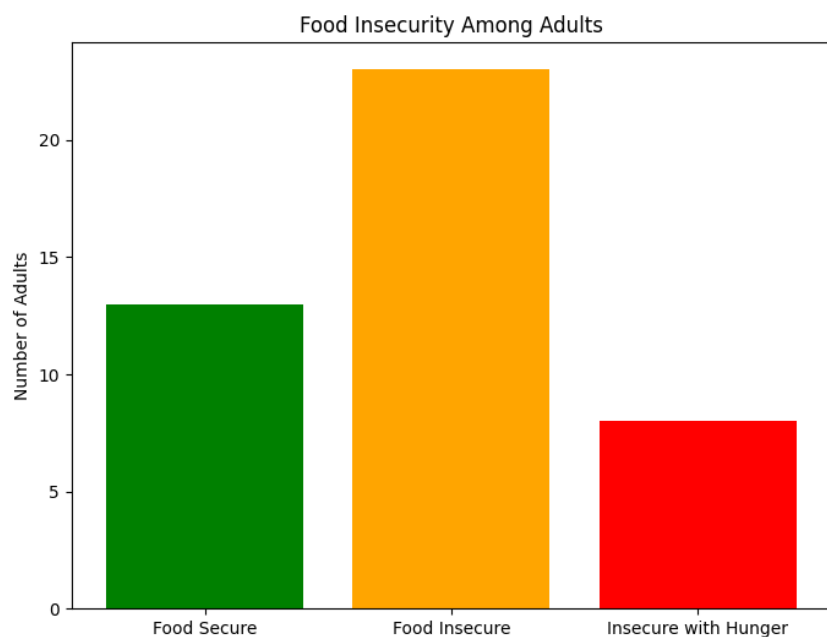
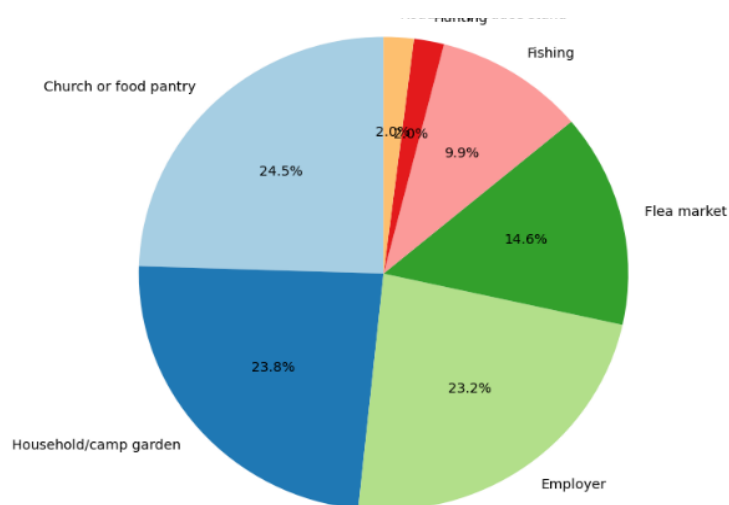


Figure 5 Pie chart showing Food sources among Migrant farmworkers

Source: Quandt SA, Groeschel-Johnson A, Kinzer HT, et al. Migrant Farmworker Nutritional Strategies: Implications for Diabetes Management. *J Agromedicine*. 2018;23(4):347-354. doi:10.1080/1059924X.2018.1501453



Food Insecurity Among Preschool-aged Children

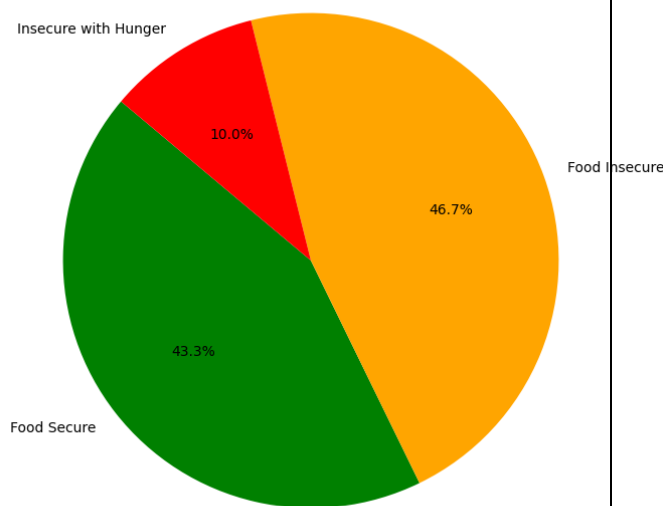


Figure 3 Pie chat showing Food insecurity percentage

Source: Borre K, Ertle L, Graff M. Working to eat: Vulnerability, food insecurity, and obesity among migrant and seasonal farmworker families. *Am J Ind Med*. 2010;53(4):443-462. doi:10.1002/ajim.20836