

QSS20S1 Final Project Memo 1

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1 What I learned

I read the Economic Policy Institute's report on Federal labor standards enforcement in agriculture. The report focused on investigated labor violations of H-2A and other unauthorized farm workers who are particularly vulnerable to wage theft and other abuses yet are less likely to file complaints out of fear of losing the right to remain in the U.S. The report used data aggregated from 31,000 investigations from the DOL WHD, so it is important to note that the results represent only WHD investigations and violations. Through the report's findings, I learned that agriculture accounts for a much higher share of investigations and violations than its share of total U.S. employment, with 70 percent of investigations resulting in violations. As we discussed in class, farm labor contractor, or staffing firms, are the worst violators. I found it interesting that despite the growth of violations in the agricultural sector, there was a downward trend in the number of WHD investigations at agricultural work sites as well as fewer investigators per worker. This could be explained by lack of WHD funding growth to match the corresponding growth of the labor force. I also learned that there is an upward trend in total back wages owed for all violations.

2 Gaps and questions

I think it would be interesting to investigate the relatively few so-called "bad apple" employers. How many are there and how do they make such a large impact? Are they changing their names or are their violations repeatedly missed? We could use fuzzy matching to track name changes or detect employers with similarities. I would also like to look into the relationship between back wages recovered, WHD funding, and WHD staffing. It seems counter-intuitive to me that an upward trend in total back wages owed for all violations would be accompanied by reduced WHD funding and staffing. I think further investigation into this relationship could potentially uncover efficiencies in investigations or DOL operations that could be improved even more in the future to help maximize use of funding.