What happened to farm employment and farm workers during the Covid pandemic of 2020? California has comprehensive data on farm employment, but two major data sources present different pictures.

The demand for farm workers was similar in 2019 and 2020. Shipments of selected US-produced fresh fruits and vegetables were down slightly in 2020 compared with 2019, reflecting less demand from food service and restaurants as well as fewer shopping trips and some consumers preferring processed to perishable foods.

There were fears of farm labor shortages in 2020 due to workers with few savings going to work while sick and spreading Covid to fellow workers and bringing it home to families in often-crowded housing. A number of state laws and programs were enacted to ensure the safety of farm workers, including requirements that employers provide paid sick leave to sick employees and those who cannot work because of the need to care for children due to closed schools or to care for sick family members.

There were Covid outbreaks in some meat and food processing plants, and among H-2A workers housed in motels, but fewer than some predictions of widespread Covid outbreaks that would leave employers scrambling for workers. Housing for the Harvest, a state program that relied on FEMA money to provide hotel rooms to agricultural workers who test positive or were exposed to the virus, attracted few farm workers.

Some workers reported that they obtained fewer hours of farm work in 2020, leaving them with less savings to live during the winter months when there is less farm work available, because crews were larger. Advocates urged state and local governments to ensure that both legal and unauthorized workers have access to safety net programs.

California requires almost all agricultural employers to report their employment for the payroll period that includes the 12th of the month when paying unemployment insurance taxes. These monthly employment numbers are summed and divided by 12 to determine average agricultural employment that is reported in the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. The QCEW reported that average agricultural employment fell 15 percent from 424,000 in 2019 to 360,200 in 2020.

It is not clear how much of this decline reflected lower farm employment in 2020 and what share was due to employers not reporting employment data in a timely way. The gaps between 2019 and 2020 employment levels were greatest in November and December, when remote working arrangements were presumably stabilized.
The gap between average agricultural employment in 2019 and 2020 was largest in Monterey county and smallest in Fresno county. It is not clear why average agricultural employment fell 23 percent in Kern county but only three percent in Fresno county.

California’s Employment Development Department also collects agricultural employment and earnings data from a sample of farm employers in conjunction with USDA’s NASS Farm Labor Survey. EDD reports the data by NAICS and area, while the FLS reports only statewide data. These data tell a different story about farm employment in 2019 and 2020.

The EDD data show no change in agricultural employment between 2019 and 2020 for the first half of 2020, after which EDD data report higher agricultural employment in 2020 than in 2019. Employment data for directly hired crop workers (NAICS 111) and crop support workers (NAICS 1151) show a similar pattern, that is, the same level of employment in the first six months of 2019 and 2020, and higher employment during the summer and fall of 2020 than of 2019.

The QCEW data should be a census of agricultural employment, and thus more reliable than the EDD-FLS sample data. Farm employment data are revised as late employment reports are received, but the QCEW suggest the first significant decline in agricultural employment in decades.

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