

Rural Migration News

Blog 240

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3 Decades of NAWS Data

The National Agricultural Worker Survey has been interviewing 1,500 to 3,000 non-H-2A workers employed on US crop farms each year since 1989. Analysis of three decades NAWS data and reports find that crop workers are aging, settled in one place, and working 200 days a year for one farm employer.

Demographics

The 2017-18 NAWS found that 68 percent of crop workers were born abroad, including two thirds who were born in Mexico, so that 44 percent of all crop workers are Mexican-born. Almost half of the Mexican-born crop workers are from west-central Mexican states such as Jalisco and Michoacán, almost 30 percent were born in northern states such as Sinaloa, and a quarter were born in southern Mexican states such as Oaxaca. The major change is the declining share of Mexican-born workers from northern Mexican states and the rising share from southern Mexican states.

One of the most cited NAWS data points is the share of crop workers who are legally authorized to work in the US. Some 86 percent of crop

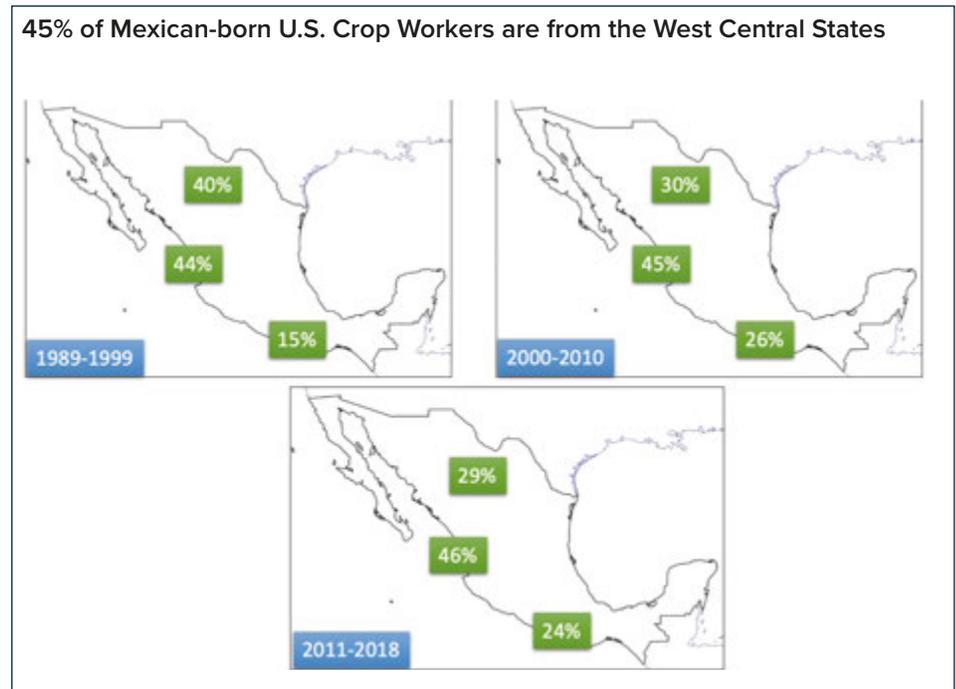
workers were authorized in 1991, just after 1.1 million unauthorized foreigners were legalized under IRCA's Special Agricultural Workers program in 1987-88.

During the 1990s, SAWS moved out of agriculture and were replaced by unauthorized newcomers from Mexico, so that over half of US crop workers were unauthorized by 2000. The share of unauthorized workers remained at a 50 percent

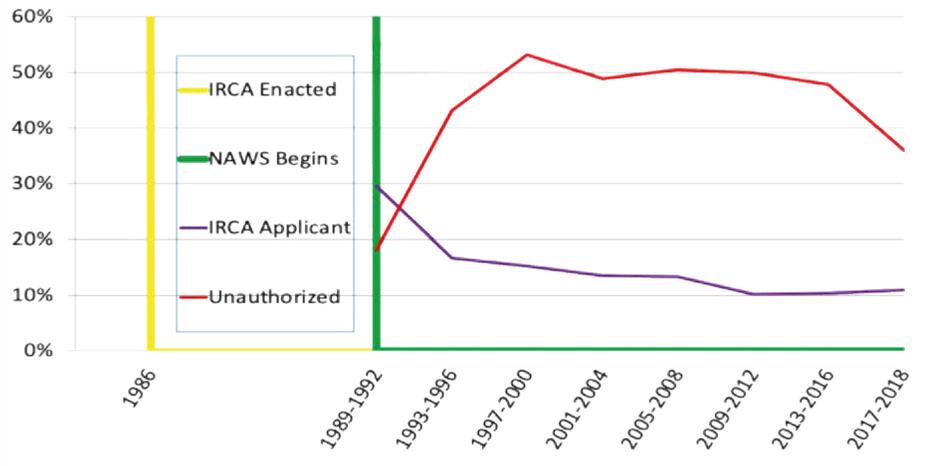
until 2015, when it began to decline to a third in 2017-18. If the 200,000 H-2A guest workers were included, the unauthorized share of crop workers would drop to a quarter.

The NAWS obtains demographic and migration data from crop workers that show an aging workforce that is settled in one US place. The average age of crop workers in 2017-18 was 40, and ranged from a low of 36 for US-born crop workers to a high of 57 for SAWS who were legalized in 1987-88. The SAWS who are still in the crop workforce have an average 35 years of US farm work experience, suggesting that they began to do US farm work when they were 22.

The fresh blood in the crop workforce until 2008-09 were young and unauthorized Mexican newcomers who were interviewed within a year of arriving in the US. At their peak in 2000, unauthorized newcomers were almost a quarter of all crop workers. Since 2010, newcomers have been less than two percent of crop workers, helping to explain the rising the average age of crop workers. There are now more crop workers over 60 than under 20.



The Share of Unauthorized Crop Workers (Red) Rose to Over Half in the 1990s and Declined to a Third Recently



Crop workers have little schooling, an average nine years. Some 40 percent of crop workers had less than seven years of schooling, a quarter had 7-9 years, and another quarter had 10-12 years. A seventh of crop workers had at least one year of post-secondary schooling. Half of crop workers are parents, a third are single, and 20 percent are married without children.

The NAWS defines migrants as workers who travel at least 75 miles from their usual homes to work on crop farms. Most farm workers are not migrants, and the migrant share of the crop workforce declined to 16 percent in 2017-18. Among the crop workers who migrate, half move at least 75 miles within the US to do farm work, while the other half arrive from Mexico or travel between Mexican homes and US jobs.

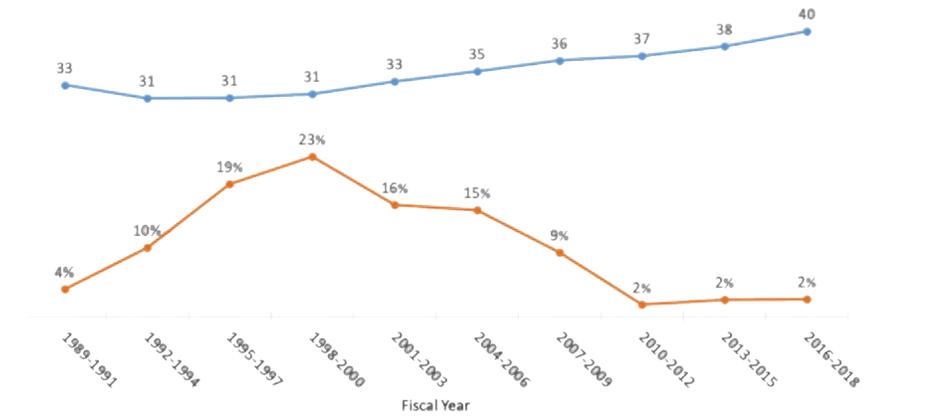
Farm work has often been associated with poverty, but this is no longer always the case. The NAWS collects income data in ranges, and finds that the median personal income of crop workers is \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year or about \$2,000 a month, double the \$12,140 poverty line for an individual in 2018. Median family income was \$25,000 to \$30,000, also above the poverty line of \$25,140 for a family of four in 2018.

Poverty is more common among farm workers than all US residents. About 20 percent of farm worker families have incomes below the poverty line, compared with 14 percent of all US families.

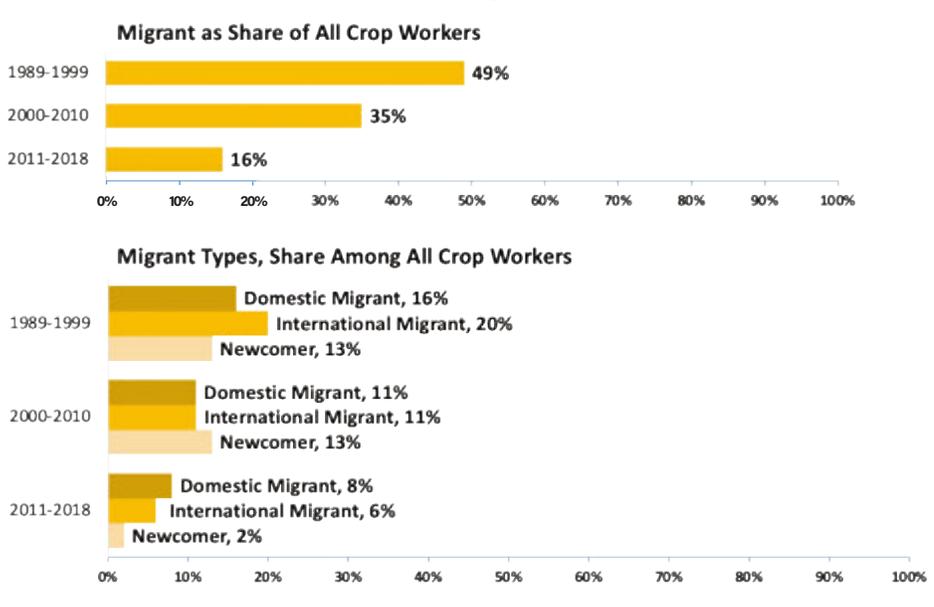
There was more continuity than change in many demographic characteristics over the past three decades:

- The share of men was 77 percent between 1989 and 1999, 78 percent in the 2000-10 decade, and 69 percent since 2010, sig-

The Average Age of Crop Workers (Blue) has Been Increasing as Fewer Unauthorized Newcomers (Orange) Enter the Crop Workforce



1/6 of U.S. Crop Workers are Migrants, and Half of These Migrants Move at Least 75 Miles from a U.S. Home to a Crop Farm Job



nifying a slightly rising share of female farm workers

- The share of crop workers born in Mexico was 65 percent between 1989 and 1999, 71 percent in the 2000-10 decade, and 66 percent since 2010
- The mean years of schooling were seven, eight, and nine, up a year each decade. Among workers born in Mexico, mean years of schooling were six, six, and seven, while among US-born workers mean years of schooling were 10, 11, and 12.
- The share of parents with children was 47, 51, and 53 percent in the 1990s, 2000s, and since 2010, respectively

Employment

The NAWS portrays a settled and experienced crop workforce. Since 2000, over 80 percent of workers reported only one farm employer in the past year, while one percent reported four or more employers.

Farm work for most workers is like nonfarm work, which means that

over 90 percent of workers live off the farm where they work and commute by car or car pool; less than 10 percent walk to work, suggesting that they live on the farm where they work. Workers averaged 198 days of crop work a year since 2000, when the average was 150 days a year, which likely reflected the large share of newcomers who had just entered the US and thus did not accumulate many days of farm work.

Crop workers had an average 16 years of farm work experience in 2017-18, suggesting that most began to do farm work before they were 25. Almost 90 percent of crop workers were employed directly, and over 90 percent were paid hourly wages or received salaries; seven percent received only piece rate wages. Workers were employed by their current employer an average of eight years.

Almost a quarter of crop workers had at least one non-crop job. Over 80 percent of crop workers plan to continue to do farm work for at least five more years.

Changes in employment over the past three decades reflect less Mexico-US migration:

- The average years of farm work experience for workers with at least a year of US farm work rose from 12 in the 1990s to 14 in the 2000s and to 17 since 2010
- The years with the current employer rose from four to five to seven over the past three decades
- The share of workers hired directly has been rising: 80 percent in the 1990s, 83 percent in the 2000s, and 86 percent since 2010
- The share of workers paid only piece rate wages has been falling, 20 percent in the 1990s, 13 percent in the 2000s, and eight percent since 2010
- The share of workers who walk to work, suggesting that they live on the farm where they work, was seven percent in the 1990s, eight percent in the 2000s, and seven percent recently. The share of workers who drive to work rose steadily, from 40 to 45 to 63 percent.

40% of Crop Workers were Employed in Fruits and Nuts in 2017-18, and a Quarter of All Crop Workers had Harvesting Jobs

Figure 5.1: Primary Crop at Time of Interview, 2017–2018

Crop at Time of Interview	Employed by		Employed by Farm		Migrant Farm-	
	All Farmworkers	Grower	Labor Contractor	workers	Settled Farmworkers	
Fruits and Nuts	41%	38%	67%	54%	39%	
Horticulture	22%	25%	^a	11% ^b	24%	
Vegetables	20%	21%	16% ^b	19%	21%	
Field Crops	13%	15%	^a	7%	14%	
Miscellaneous/Multiple	4% ^b	2%	^a	9%	2%	

Figure 5.2: Primary Task at Time of Interview, 2017–2018

Primary Task at Time of Interview	Employed by		Employed by Farm		Migrant Farm-	
	All Farmworkers	Grower	Labor Contractor	workers	Settled Farmworkers	
Pre-harvest	23%	24%	18% ^a	17%	24%	
Harvest	24%	21%	45%	42%	21%	
Post-harvest	19%	20%	11% ^a	12%	20%	
Technical Production	34%	35%	27%	29%	35%	

- The average days of farm work rose significantly, from 144 to 182 to 198 in the 1990s, 2000s, and since 2010, respectively
- The share of workers with one farm employer during the year was 59, 77, and 81 percent, while the share with at least one crop job in the previous year was 25, 17, and 26 percent.
- The share of workers who plan to continue doing farm work for five or more years rose from half to 80 percent.

The NAWS interviews crop workers employed on fruit (41 percent of workers interviewed in 2017-18 were employed on fruit farms), horticultural specialties such as nurseries (22 percent), and vegetables (20) percent. The most frequent task when interviewed was semi-skilled such as equipment operator, 34 percent in 2017-18, followed by harvesting, 24 percent, pre-harvest activities, 23 percent, and post-harvest, 19 percent.

The fact that almost 90 percent of workers are hired directly, and that three-fourths are not harvesting when interviewed, may reflect year-round interviewing. The harvesting of many commodities occurs over shorter time periods, so that a smaller share of harvest than non-harvest workers may be interviewed.

A survey conducted during peak harvest periods would likely find more workers hired by farm labor contractors and more workers paid piece rates; most harvesting jobs in commodities ranging from apples and cherries to strawberries and tomatoes pay piece rate wages. These piece rate harvesting jobs are where the H-2A program is expanding fastest.

H-2As

H-2A workers fill about 10 percent of the 1.1 million year-round equivalent jobs on US crop farms. The H-2A crop workforce is a decade

younger, more Mexican (over 90 percent), and likely better educated than the older Mexican-born workers who currently dominate the crop workforce.

Including H-2A workers in the NAWS would add to knowledge about crop workers in several ways:

- What skills do H-2A workers possess, and what skills do they acquire in the US?
- How do H-2A workers perceive their US jobs? Do they plan to return to the US as long as they can? What would encourage H-2A workers to acquire new skills (English) and return to the US in future years?
- How were H-2A workers recruited, and what lessons does their experience hold for plans to expand H-2A recruitment in Central America to discourage asylum-seeking migration?

By collecting and reporting data on all major categories of crop workers,

Table 1: Hired Crop Worker Demographics, National Estimates, Seven Time Periods*

Characteristic	Fiscal Years 1989-1991	Fiscal Years 1998-2000	Fiscal Years 2007-2009	Fiscal Years 2010-2012	Fiscal Years 2013-2014	Fiscal Years 2015-2016	Fiscal Years 2017-2018
U.S.-born	40%	17%	29%	26%	27%	25%	32%
Foreign-born	60%	83%	71%	74%	73%	75%	68%
Authorized	86%	46%	52%	50%	53%	51%	64%
Unauthorized	14%	54%	48%	50%	47%	49%	36%
Place of birth: United States/Puerto Rico	40%	17%	29%	26%	27%	25%	32%
Place of birth: Mexico	54%	79%	68%	67%	68%	69%	64%
Place of birth: Central America	2%	2%	3%	6%	4%	6%	3%
Place of birth: Other	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%(a)
Current work authorization: U.S. citizen (by birth or naturalization)	43% ^d	20%	33%	29%	31%	29%	38%
Current work authorization: Legal permanent resident (green card)	13%	25%	18%	19%	21%	21%	24%
Current work authorization: Other work authorized	29%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%
Current work authorization: Unauthorized	14%	54%	48%	50%	47%	49%	36%
Migrant type: Settled (did not migrate) ¹	59%	45%	74%	79%	84%	81%	87%
Migrant type: Shuttle migrant ²	23%	22%	12%	14%	10%	10%	8%
Migrant type: Follow-the-crop migrant ³	14%	10%	5%	6%	4%	6%	4%
Migrant type: Foreign-born newcomer ⁴	4%	22%	9%	2%	2%	4%	2%
Male	73%	80%	78%	73%	72%	68%	69%
Average age	33	31	36	37	38	38	41

Table 2: Hired Crop Worker Employment Characteristics, National Estimates, Seven Time Periods*

Characteristic	Fiscal Years 1989-1991	Fiscal Years 1998-2000	Fiscal Years 2007-2009	Fiscal Years 2010-2012	Fiscal Years 2013-2014	Fiscal Years 2015-2016	Fiscal Years 2017-2018
Employment type at current farm job: Directly-hired	84%	73%	88%	88%	85%	80%	89%
Employment type at current farm job: Labor-contracted	16%	27%	12%	12%	15%	20%	11%
Average number of years of U.S. farm work experience	10	8	13	12	14	14	16
Years of U.S. farm work experience: 0-1	10%	26%	14%	10%	7%	11%	8%
Years of U.S. farm work experience: 2-4	25%	24%	18%	17%	14%	17%	15%
Years of U.S. farm work experience: 5-10	30%	22%	23%	29%	25%	22%	18%
Years of U.S. farm work experience: 11-20	22%	18%	23%	25%	28%	24%	27%
Years of U.S. farm work experience: 21 or more	13%	10%	22%	20%	25%	25%	33%
Average number of years with current farm employer	5	3	6	6	7	7	8
Years with current farm employer: 0-1	37%	44%	27%	25%	23%	26%	22%
Years with current farm employer: 2-4	32%	36%	33%	33%	32%	32%	28%
Years with current farm employer: 5-10	19%	14%	23%	25%	24%	22%	24%
Years with current farm employer: 11-20	9%	5%	12%	13%	15%	14%	16%
Years with current farm employer: 21 or more	3%	1%	5%	4%	6%	6%	10%
Average hourly earnings at current farm job	\$5.15	\$6.52	\$9.14	\$9.38	\$10.20	\$10.60	\$12.32
Paid below the minimum wage at current farm job	8%	6%	2%	4%	2%	3% ^(a)	(b)

including US-born workers, legal immigrant workers, unauthorized workers, and H-2A workers, farm employers and farm worker service providers would have a fuller picture of the demographics, earnings, and desires of US farm workers.

Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2017-2018: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers. Research Report No. 14. March 2021 www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey

Appendix D of NAWS report 14 includes tables that show changes over time in key demographic and employment characteristics. Many variables have a hump or U-shaped

pattern. For example, the share of unauthorized crop workers peaked at 54 percent in 1998-00, was under 50 percent in 2013-14, and dropped to 36 percent in 2017-18. The share of US-born workers was lowest in 1998-00 and rose to 32 percent in 2017-18.

The share of workers hired directly was lowest at 73 percent in 1998-00, and was highest at 89 percent in 2017-18. The average years of farm work experience reached a low of eight years in 1998-00 and a high of 16 years in 2017-18, when a third of crop workers had 21 or more years farm work experience. Average hourly earnings rose by 16 percent between 2015-16 and 2017-18 to \$12.32 an hour.