

Rural Migration News

Blog 290

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NAWS 2019-20: Older and Settled Farm Workers

DOL's National Agricultural Workers Survey interviewed 2,172 non-H-2A crop workers in 2019-20 and found that 44 percent were unauthorized, up from 36 percent in 2017-18 but down from over 50 percent in 1998-2000. Over the past three decades, the share of foreign-born crop workers rose from 60 to 70 percent, the share of settled or non-migrant workers rose from 60 to 85 percent, and the share of unauthorized workers tripled from 15 to 45 percent.

Within these decades, 1998-2000 stands out as the period when the share of crop workers who were born abroad was highest at over 80 percent, the share of migrant workers was highest at over 50 percent, and the share of unauthorized workers was highest at over 50 percent. The number of newly arrived and unauthorized Mexican-born workers peaked around 2000, and the high migrant share in 2000 reflected the fact that many unauthorized workers had just arrived from Mexico.

There is no uniform federal definition of migrant farm worker. Migrants in the NAWS moved at least 75

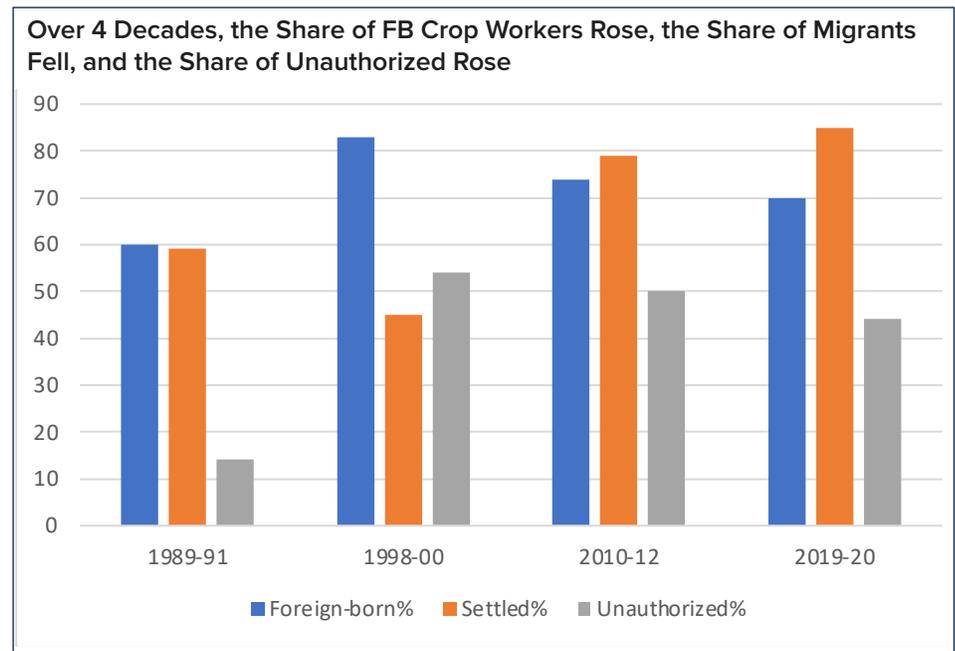
miles to obtain a farm job or had at least two farm jobs that were at least 75 miles apart during the previous year. In 2019-20, there were (1) domestic migrants who moved from e.g. south Texas to Michigan, and (2) international migrants who moved between homes in Mexico and farm jobs in the US, sometimes called green-card commuters. Some 15 percent of crop workers were migrants, including half who

migrated within the US.

Some 250,000 H-2A guest workers who were employed in US agriculture for an average six months in FY20 are excluded from the NAWS. If H-2A workers were included in the NAWS, the share of Mexican-born and legal workers would rise, the average age of workers would fall, and average hourly earnings would rise. H-2A workers are more likely to be employed by FLCs and more likely to fill harvesting jobs, and less likely to receive contributory or means-tested benefits. Employers are required to provide H-2A workers with housing at no charge. If H-2A workers were included in the NAWS, the share of crop workers who live in employer-provided housing would rise.

Demographics

The average age of US crop workers fell during the 1990s and has been rising since, to 41 in 2019-20. Almost 20 percent of the workers interviewed in 2019-20 were 55 or older, over half were married, and almost all married crop workers had children. Most of the foreign-born workers



interviewed in 2019-20 arrived at least two decades earlier, before 2000, and 70 percent arrived before 2004-05. A third of crop workers have been in the US for 20 to 30 years.

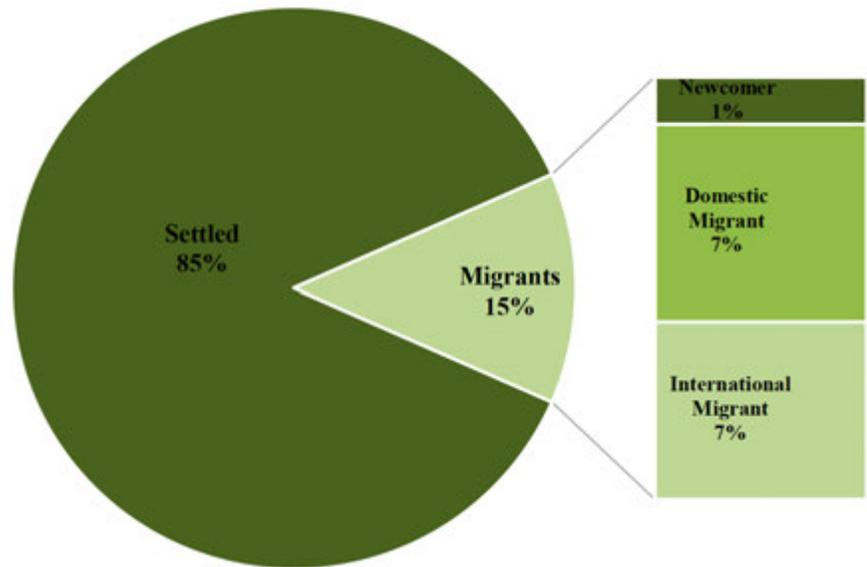
Like average age, the average years of schooling of workers dipped in the 1990s as young and unauthorized rural Mexicans arrived in large numbers, but began to rise after 2000 as education levels rose in both Mexico and the US, to an average nine years for US crop workers in 2019-20. A third of workers interviewed in 2019-20 had six or fewer years of schooling, while a seventh completed high school.

A third of crop workers reported speaking and reading English well in 2019-20, up from less than 20 percent in 1998-2000 when the workforce included many newly arrived rural Mexicans. About 30 percent of workers reported they could not speak English at all, and 40 percent reported they could not read English.

Over half of farm workers in 2019-20 rented housing, usually detached single family homes that were less than 25 miles from their current farm job; three-fourths of crop workers drove a car to work. Most crop workers rented a single family home from a landlord who was not their employer, and a third owned the home where they lived.

The share of crop worker families that receive benefits from programs to which employers and workers contribute, including unemployment insurance and social security, has been declining. By contrast, the share of crop worker families that receive benefits from means-tested programs such as SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, or WIC has been rising. In many cases, the US-born and thus US-citizen children in crop

15% of Crop Workers Were Migrants in 2019-20, and 7% Were Migrants Within the U.S.



worker families qualify for means-tested benefits.

Almost two-thirds of NAWS workers reported that someone in the household received a means-tested benefit during the previous two years, led by 44 percent who reported Medicaid benefits, 13 percent SNAP benefits, and nine percent WIC benefits.

Almost 90 percent of the minor children of crop workers had health insurance, usually provided by a government program.

Employment

The NAWS interviews mostly crop workers who are hired directly by farm operators, 88 percent in 2019-20, and who perform non-harvest tasks in FVH commodities, 82 percent, including:

- 38 percent who were employed in fruits and nuts
- 20 percent who were employed in vegetables and
- 24 percent who were employed in horticulture and nurseries

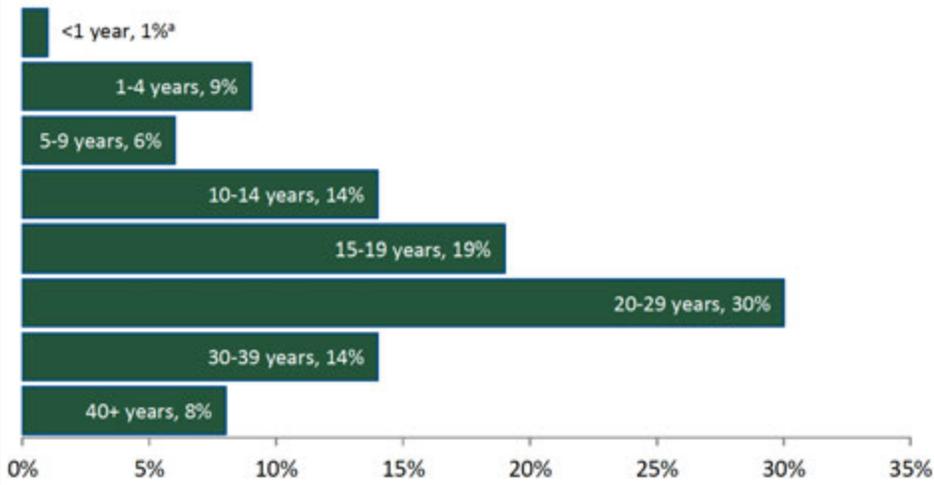
Only 20 percent of workers were harvesting when interviewed in 2019-20, while 31 percent were in technical production tasks such as equipment operation, 28 percent were in pre-harvest tasks including pruning and thinning, and 21 percent were in post-harvest activities such as packing.

The 12 percent of workers employed by FLCs were mostly employed in fruits and nuts or vegetables. FLC employees were more likely to fill harvesting jobs than non-FLC employees, but 70 percent of FLC employees, and 80 percent of non-FLC employees, were not harvesting when interviewed.

Workers reported an average 227 days and 39 weeks of farm work during the previous 12 months. Unauthorized, settled, and older workers reported more days and weeks of farm work, while younger, authorized, and migrant workers reported fewer days and weeks of farm work.

Much crop work is seasonal, and many crop workers also have non-crop jobs, often in maintenance or animal agriculture. Half of the crop

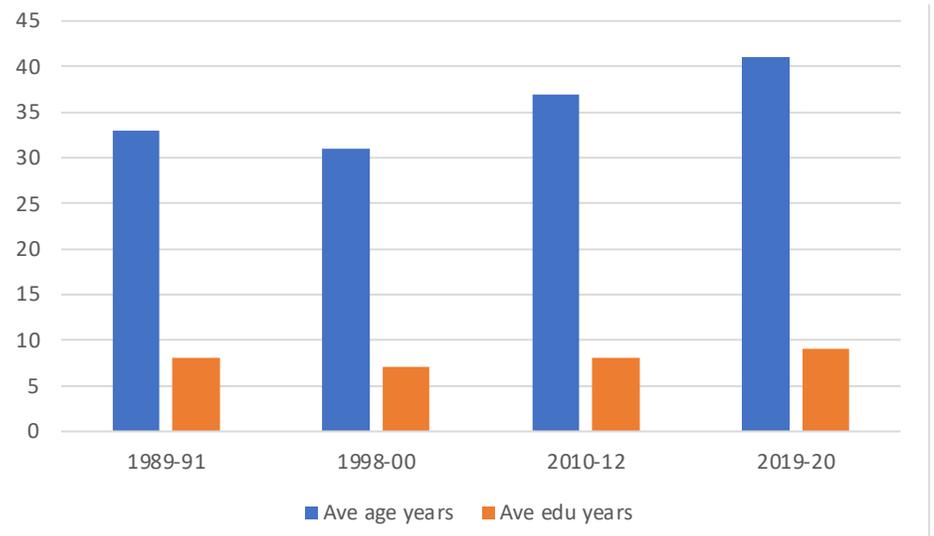
70% of FB Crop Workers Interviewed in 2019-20 Arrived in the U.S. Before 2004-05



workers interviewed in 2019-20 reported at least 15 days of non-crop work during the year, and 70 percent left these non-crop jobs voluntarily. Most crop workers were born in Mexico, and over half said that their parents never worked for wages on US farms.

Despite an average age of 41, over three-fourths of crop workers plan to continue to do farm work as long as they can. Unauthorized, older, and foreign-born workers are more likely than US-born workers to say they want to continue to do farm work.

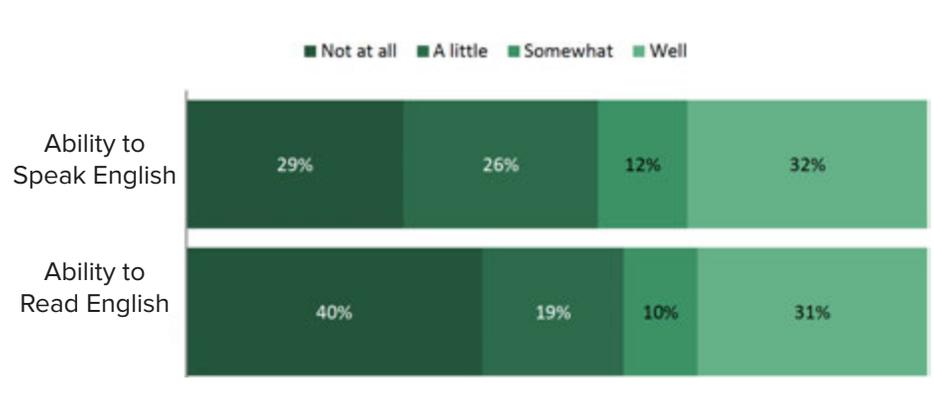
The Average Age of Crop Workers was 41 in 2019-20, When Average Years of Schooling Was 9



Over 80 percent of workers were paid hourly wages that averaged \$13.59 in 2019-20, lower than the average hourly earnings of field workers reported by employers to USDA's FLS survey of \$14.11 in 2019 and \$14.76 in 2020, that is, the FLS reports hourly earnings that are \$0.50 to \$1 an hour more.

Workers reported working an average 46 hours in the week before being interviewed. Hours were longer for the fewer workers in field crops and shorter for the majority of workers employed in fruits and vegetables. Workers who were harvesting had the fewest hours worked during the previous week, and piece rate workers worked fewer hours than workers who were paid an hourly wage.

A Third of Crop Workers Spoke and Read English Well



BLS estimates that 80 percent of the average 1.5 million jobs in US agriculture are covered by unemployment insurance, but only 45 percent of workers in the NAWS interviews said they were covered by UI. This may reflect legal status. Three-fourths of authorized workers reported being covered by UI, versus less than 10 percent of unauthorized workers.

About 80 percent of workers interviewed by NAWS had workers compensation insurance for injuries at work, and 30 percent reported that their employer offered health insurance for non-work injuries and illnesses. A higher share of crop workers, almost half, reported that they had health insurance, which was more often provided by government than employers.

When interviewed in 2019-20, workers had been employed by their current employer for an average eight years. Over 80 percent of crop workers had only one farm employer during the past year; less than 10 percent had three or more farm employers. A third of workers had been with their current employer for two to four years, and a quarter for more than 10 years.

Income

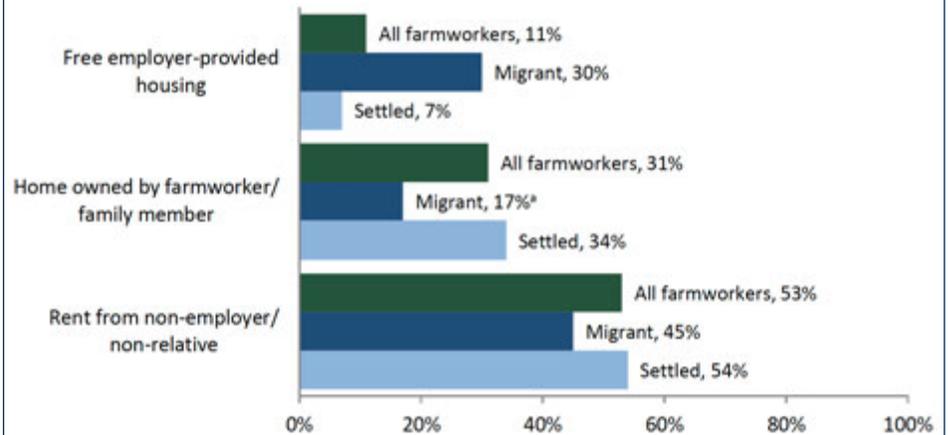
The crop workers interviewed in 2019-20 had average and median annual incomes of \$20,000 to \$25,000 or about \$2,000 a month. A third reported incomes above \$30,000 a year or \$2,500 a month; fewer than 10 percent earned less than \$10,000.

Family incomes were about \$5,000 more, suggesting that another member of the household worked part time. Half of NAWS workers reported family incomes above \$30,000, while 20 percent reported family incomes below the poverty line, almost double the 11 percent average poverty rate for all US families.

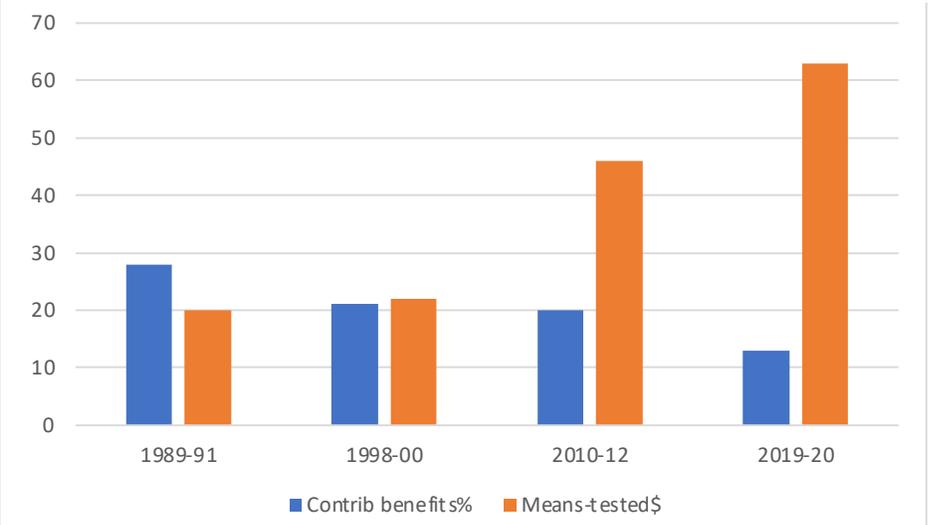
Perspective

The NAWS is the best source of reliable data on the characteristics of the non-H2A crop workers, profiling 1.8 million to 1.9 million of the 2.5 million workers employed for wages in US agriculture each year. The NAWS is widely cited as the source for:

Most Crop Workers Rent Housing From Landlords Who Are Not Their Employers



The Share of Crop Worker Families Receiving Benefits from Means-Tested Programs is Rising



- The aging and settling of US crop workers
- 70 percent of crop workers being foreign-born and 70 percent of the foreign born being unauthorized, so that half of crop workers are unauthorized
- Most workers have one employer for 200 of the normal 250 workdays a year and earn about \$2,000 a month or \$24,000 a year.

The NAWS does not include H-2A or livestock workers. If the H-2A workers who fill almost a sixth of jobs in US crop agriculture were included, the crop workforce would be younger, more migrant, and

more legal, especially in Florida and the southeastern states where the share of H-2A workers is highest. If livestock workers were included, the NAWS would likely find a higher share of older and settled workers employed by one employer for more days a year.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act approved by the House in March 2021 would legalize unauthorized farm workers and make it easier for farmers to employ H-2A workers, including in year-round jobs in animal agriculture. If the FWMA were enacted, the result could be an exit of older and now legal Mexican-born workers and

their replacement by younger and legal Mexican-born guest workers. Including H-2A and animal agriculture workers in the NAWS would help to monitor changes in the farm workforce before and after immigration reforms.

The Most Common Means-Tested Benefit in the 2 Years Before 2019–20 was Medicaid

Contribution- and Need-Based Programs Utilized	Percent of Farmworkers
Any contribution-based program	13%
UI	8%
Social Security	4%
Disability	1%
Any need-based program	63%
Medicaid	44%
Public health clinic	33%
SNAP	13%
WIC	9%

90% of Crop Worker Children had Health Insurance, Usually From a Government Program

Source of Children’s Health Insurance ^{a,b}	Percent of Farmworkers
Government program	84%
Farmworker’s/Spouse’s employer	12%
Farmworker’s/Spouse’s self-purchased plan	4% ⁶⁴
Other	2%

20% of Crop Workers Were Harvesting When Interviewed in 2019-20

Primary Task at Time of Interview	All Farmworkers	Employed by Grower	Employed by Farm		
			Labor Contractor	Migrant Farmworkers	Settled Farmworkers
Pre-harvest	28%	29%	17% ^a	26%	28%
Harvest	20%	19%	28%	19%	20%
Post-harvest	21%	22%	^b	31%	19%
Technical Production	31%	31%	38%	24%	33%

Older Settled Farm Workers Reported 40+ Weeks of Farm Work Per Year

Farmworker Characteristic	Average Weeks of Farm Work in Previous 12 Months
All farmworkers	39
Migrant	28
Settled	41
Authorized	35
Unauthorized	44
U.S.-born	33
Foreign-born	42
14-17 years old	18
18-24 years old	28
25-50 years old	41
Over 50 years old	41

Shuttle Migrants or Green-Card Commuters Spent 20% of the Year Outside the United States

Farmworker Characteristic	Weeks in United States and Not Working	Weeks Abroad
All farmworkers	8	2
Migrant	10	11
Settled	7	^b
Authorized	9	3
Unauthorized	6	1
U.S.-born	11	^b
Foreign-born	6	2
14-17 years old	35	^b
18-24 years old	14	3
25-50 years old	5	2 ^a
Over 50 years old	8	2

Three-fourths of Crop Workers Want to Continue To Do Farm Work

Number of Years	All Farmworkers	U.S. Born	Foreign Born	Authorized	Unauthorized
Less than one year	4%	8%	2% ^a	6%	1% ^a
1-3 years	11%	19%	7%	14%	7%
4-5 years	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Over 5 years	3%	6% ^a	2%	4% ^a	2%
Over 5 years/as long as I am able	76%	61%	82%	70%	84%

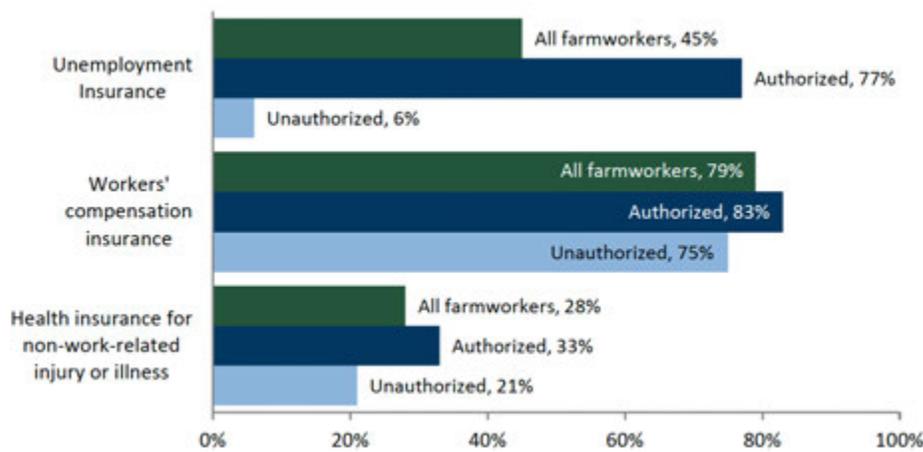
Hourly Earnings Rose with Piece Rates, Experience, and Harvesting

Farmworker Characteristic	Average Hourly Wage
All farmworkers	\$13.59
Paid by the hour	\$13.05
Paid by the piece	\$14.63
Paid combination hourly wage and piece rate	\$21.73 ^a
Salary or Other	\$17.43
With current employer 1 to 2 years	\$12.97
With current employer 3 to 5 years	\$13.44
With current employer 6 to 10 years	\$13.93
With current employer 11 or more years	\$14.26
Performed pre-harvest tasks at time of interview	\$12.87
Performed harvest tasks at time of interview	\$15.37
Performed post-harvest tasks at time of interview	\$12.57
Performed technical production tasks at time of interview	\$13.80

Harvesting Workers had the Fewest Hours Per Week

Crop	Pre-Harvest Tasks	Harvest Tasks	Post-Harvest Tasks	Technical Production Tasks
Field Crops	56	51	52	51
Fruit and Nut Crops	44	41	46	45
Horticulture	46	39	55	43
Vegetable Crops	45	43	45	55
Miscellaneous/ Multiple	58	33	47	45

Most Workers Reported WC Coverage, But Few Unauthorized Workers had UI Coverage



Over 80 Percent of Crop Workers Had a U.S. Asset, Typically at Vehicle; a Quarter Owned or Were Buying U.S. Homes

Type of Asset in the United States	Percent of Farmworkers
Any asset	81%
A car or truck	80%
A type of housing (house, mobile home, condominium, apartment)	22%

References

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Rural Migration News. 2021. The Farm Workforce Modernization Act. <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2576>

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NAWS Appendix D

The 2019–20 report includes eight columns of data that chart changes in major demographic and employment variables over time. For example, the share unauthorized fell in the 1990s as newly legalized SAWs were replaced by unauthorized workers, and then stabilized at about 50 percent between 2000 and 2017–18, when there was a drop to 36 percent unauthorized followed by a rebound to 44 percent in 2019–20. With about 2,000 interviews in each cycle, this suggests that 700 to 900 unauthorized workers are interviewed.

Table 1: Farmworker Demographics, National Estimates, Eight 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	Fiscal Years 2019-2020
U.S.-born	40%	17%	29%	26%	27%	25%	32%	30%
Foreign-born	60%	83%	71%	74%	73%	75%	68%	70%
Authorized	86%	46%	52%	50%	53%	51%	64%	56%
Unauthorized	14%	54%	48%	50%	47%	49%	36%	44%
Place of birth: United States/Puerto Rico	40%	17%	29%	26%	27%	25%	32%	30%
Place of birth: Mexico	54%	79%	68%	67%	68%	69%	64%	63%
Place of birth: Central America	2%	2%	3%	6%	4%	6%	3%	5%
Place of birth: Other	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1% ^(a)	^(b)
Current work authorization: U.S. citizen (by birth or naturalization)	43%	20%	33%	29%	31%	29%	38%	36%
Current work authorization: Lawful permanent resident (green card)	13%	25%	18%	19%	21%	21%	24%	19%
Current work authorization: Other work authorized	29%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%
Current work authorization: Unauthorized	14%	54%	48%	50%	47%	49%	36%	44%
Migrant type: Settled (did not migrate) ¹	59%	45%	74%	79%	84%	81%	87%	85%
Migrant type: Shuttle migrant ²	23%	22%	12%	14%	10%	10%	8%	11%
Migrant type: Follow-the-crop migrant ³	14%	10%	5%	6%	4%	6%	4%	4%
Migrant type: Foreign-born newcomer ⁴	4%	22%	9%	2%	2%	4%	2%	1%
Male	73%	80%	78%	73%	72%	68%	69%	66%
Average age	33	31	36	37	38	38	41	41