

Facts About North Carolina Farmworkers

Farmworkers play a vital role in cultivating the food we eat every day, and North Carolina has one of the largest farmworker populations in the nation. Even though 85% of our fresh fruits and vegetables are harvested by hand, farmworkers remain largely invisible.

Overview of Farm Work

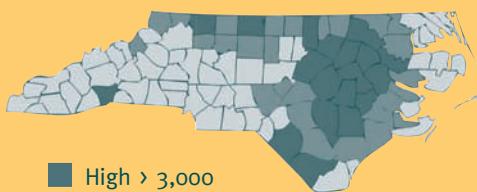
Agricultural labor includes planting, cultivating, harvesting, and preparing crops for market or storage.

Migrant farmworkers travel from place to place to work in agriculture and move into temporary housing while working; seasonal farmworkers work primarily in agriculture, but live in one community year-round.

Farmworkers are usually employed by farm owners or by “crew leaders,” who serve as intermediaries between growers and workers.

The H2A program allows foreign “guestworkers” to perform seasonal farm work under a temporary work visa designed for agricultural workers in the United States.

NC Farmworker Density



- High > 3,000
- Medium 1,000–2,999
- Low < 1,000

Demographics of North Carolina Farmworkers

North Carolina ranks sixth in the nation in the number of migrant farmworkers.

There are approximately 150,000 farmworkers and their dependents in North Carolina each growing season, but this estimate is considered low. In the United States there are two to three million farmworkers.

Even though the overall number of farmworkers in North Carolina has decreased over the last 20 years, the number that migrate has nearly doubled.

Ninety-four percent of migrant farmworkers in North Carolina are native Spanish speakers.

Nationally, most farmworkers are unaccompanied males whose families still live in their home countries.

The US Department of Labor reports that 53% of farmworkers nationally are undocumented (working without legal authorization), 25% are US citizens, and 21% are legal permanent residents (green card holders).

Farmworkers' Impact on North Carolina

Agriculture, including food, fiber, and forestry, contributes over \$69.6 billion annually to North Carolina's economy and represents almost one-fifth of the state's income.

Each farmworker's labor contributes over \$12,000 in profits to North Carolina's economy annually.

Major North Carolina crops requiring hand labor include: tobacco, Christmas trees, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, apples, bell peppers, and other fruits and vegetables. Many farmworkers also work in greenhouses and nurseries.

“It’s just ridiculous that we, the ones that are feeding the whole world, are the ones that [live in such poor conditions].”

—Wayne County Farmworker, North Carolina



SAMPLE WORKDAY FOR A NC TOBACCO WORKER

5:00 AM: Get dressed in the dark. Eat a quick cold breakfast in your trailer.

5:45 AM: Board the van that will take you to the fields. You're not sure where you're going, and you don't know the way.

6:00 AM: Put on a garbage bag with holes for your head and arms to shield you from the nicotine on the tobacco leaves. You've heard that workers at other farms get a yellow raincoat, but not here. Begin picking as fast as you can. If you don't pick fast enough, you may not get a break.

9:00 AM: You get a break for 5–10 minutes to take off your plastic bag and drink some water from the cooler in the van. The sun is already blazing, and there is no shade.

12:00 PM: Because you're far away from the trailer, you're told to eat lunch in the fields. There's no soap to wash the pesticides and nicotine off your hands, only water. You only have a half hour.

4:00 PM: You finally get your second and last water break, only for five minutes. Depending on the stage of the harvest, you might continue to work for three or four more hours in the sun.

7:00 PM: You're driven back to your trailer where you take off your pesticide-covered clothing and shoes. Exhausted, you and your roommates take turns showering, cooking dinner, and preparing lunch for the next day. You wait for your turn to use the cell phone you share with your roommates to call your family back home.

Economic Profile

Poverty: Nationally, farmworkers' average annual income is \$11,000; for a family it is approximately \$16,000. Farmworkers on the East Coast earn about 35% less than the national average.

Hard work, low pay: Farmworkers are paid nearly 50% less per week than other wage and salary workers. The percent of farmworker families living in poverty is nearly double that of other working families in the US.

Few wage protections: Most farmworkers are exempt from minimum wage laws, and all are exempt from overtime provisions, despite long work days during peak harvest.

Few benefits: Despite pervasive poverty, less than one percent of farmworkers collect general assistance welfare nationwide. Only 10% of farmworkers report having health insurance through an employer health plan. Fewer than four out of 10 workers interviewed said that they would receive unemployment benefits if out of work.

Hunger: Nearly five out of 10 farmworker households in North Carolina reported not being able to afford enough food to feed their families.

Health Profile

Poor and crowded housing: Research suggests that the health of North Carolina farmworker families is at risk due to substandard housing. State regulations require only one wash tub for every 30 workers, one shower for every 10 workers, one toilet for every 15 workers, and do not require telephone access in case of emergency. Seven out of 10 farmworkers on the East Coast live in crowded conditions. Such housing conditions put people at risk of the spread of infectious disease such as tuberculosis, as well as parasitic infections and gastrointestinal illness.

Pesticide exposure: Up to 44% of farmworker families live in housing directly adjacent to agricultural fields, increasing likelihood of pesticide exposure. A 2006 study in Eastern North Carolina showed that most farmworker children are routinely exposed to pesticides.

Illness and injury: Farmworkers experience high incidences of heat illness, green tobacco sickness (nicotine poisoning), musculoskeletal pain, eye and limb injuries from hazardous equipment, and chronic disease.

Limited Workers' Compensation: In North Carolina, very few farmworkers are covered by workers' compensation. Only farmers employing 10 or

more year-round workers or any H2A worker are required to carry workers' compensation insurance.

Limited access to care: Barriers to receiving health care include lack of transportation, limited hours of clinic operation, cost of health care, limited interpreter services, and frequent relocation in order to seek farm work.

Farmworkers Organize

In 2004, a historic labor agreement was signed between the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the North Carolina Growers Association, and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, unionizing H2A guestworkers for the first time in the nation. The contract includes sick pay, hiring security, and a grievance procedure.

Get Involved & Learn More!

Farmworker Advocacy Network (FAN): www.ncfan.org

NC Farmworker Health Program: www.ncfhp.org

NC Farmworker Institute: www.ncfarmworkers.org

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF): www.saf-unite.org

Witness for Justice: www.farmworkerlanc.org/get-involved/witness-for-justice

SOURCES: 1 Olivieri, VJ. US Dept. of Ag., 1993; 2 Public Law 104-299, 1996; 3 Larson, A. Farmworker Enumeration Study, 2000; 4 Report of the Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1992; 5 NC Employment Security Commission, 2005; 6 National Agricultural Workers Survey, US Dept. of Labor, 2005; 7 www.ag-econ.ncsu.edu/faculty/walden/ncagsz2011.pdf; 8 Sutter, S. NC State University, 1988; 9 Ward, L. East Coast Analysis of NAWS, 1998; 10 www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err60/err60.pdf; 11 US Dept. of Labor, Prevailing Wage Surveys, 2002; 12 Early, J. Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 2006; 13 NC Migrant Housing Act, 1989; 14 Housing Assistance Council, 2001; 15 Arcury, T. American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 2006; 16 National Center for Farmworker Health; 17 NC General Statute 97-13b; 18 WRAL, 2005. Full citations available at www.ncfarmworkers.org.

Published by the Farmworker Ministry Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches, with generous support by The Duke Endowment, 2012. Special assistance provided by Legal Aid of NC—Farmworker Unit, the NC Farmworker Health Program, and Student Action with Farmworkers.