



# in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF  
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA  
<http://www.ourownbackyard.org>

## Part I: The Hidden Problem

### **Youth Employment in Agriculture**

This is a chapter taken from the Department of Labor's 2000 Report on the Youth Labor Force. It provides a detailed demographic picture of youth who work in the fields and discusses differences in legal protections between child farmworkers and other working youth.

*Source: U.S. Department of Labor, November 2000,  
<http://www.bls.gov/pub/rylf/rylfhome.htm>*



## Chapter 5. Youth Employment in Agriculture

The Report on the Youth Labor Force was revised in November 2000.

### Introduction

As discussed in chapter 1, laws governing youth employment in agriculture are different from the laws governing youth employment in other sectors of our economy. Indeed, the disparate treatment of youths under the law stems from a time when most agricultural jobs were on small family-operated farms. While a significant proportion of agricultural work is still done by unpaid family workers, paid employment has become increasingly prevalent.

This chapter focuses on paid employment of youths in crop agriculture. Youths working in agriculture often face unusual challenges—poor living and working conditions, loss of educational opportunities, separation from parental supervision, and exposure to pesticides and other occupational hazards. Because the farmworker population is particularly difficult to find and survey, this chapter utilizes a unique data source—an employer-based survey that finds the workers at their place of employment, and administers a detailed questionnaire at a later time and location convenient to the worker.

### About the Data

#### The National Agricultural Workers' Survey

The National Agricultural Workers' Survey (NAWS) is a national survey of paid farmworkers in perishable crops. NAWS collects extensive data from farmworkers about basic demographics, legal status, education, family size and household composi-

tion, wages and working conditions in farm jobs, and participation in the U.S. labor force. Information for this report was obtained through 13,380 interviews of workers in the United States by NAWS during Federal fiscal years 1993 through 1998.

Initially, NAWS was commissioned by the Department of Labor (DOL) as part of its response to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The NAWS continues to monitor seasonal agricultural wages and working conditions. Since its inception, several other Federal agencies have participated in the development of the NAWS by contributing questions, answers to which would assist them in better serving their farmworker constituency.

NAWS interviews workers performing crop agriculture. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines crop work to include "field work" in the vast majority of nursery products, cash grains, and field crops, as well as in all fruits and vegetables. Crop agriculture also includes the production of silage and other animal fodder. The population sampled by NAWS consists of all farmworkers in crop agriculture, even if performing seasonal services within year-round employment. The definition of field work generally excludes secretaries and mechanics, but includes field packers, supervisors, and all other field workers.<sup>1</sup>

#### How NAWS samples child farmworkers

There are two ways in which NAWS can be used to look at children farmworkers. First, among the NAWS

interviewees is a subset of youths aged 14 to 17 who were sampled at their worksites along with the adults interviewed. These workers constitute a random sample of 14- to 17-year-old farmworkers. Between 1993 and 1998, NAWS interviewed 951 of these minor teenage farmworkers.

Second, NAWS asks farmworkers who are parents about their minor children. This provides a sample of dependents under the age of 18 who were living with their farmworker parents when the parents were interviewed for NAWS. The sample of farmworkers' children used in this report includes 6,422 U.S.-resident children listed by their parents on the NAWS family inventory between 1993 and 1998.<sup>2</sup> NAWS asks about each listed household member's gender, age, place of birth, and relationship to the interviewed farmworker, as well as a brief series of questions about schooling, work, and migration.

NAWS does not directly interview children younger than 14 years of age. Due to time constraints, NAWS can ask parents for only a limited amount of information about their children. Therefore, while we do know whether the children of farmworker parents are, themselves, farmworkers, we know very little about level or type of workforce participation of children under the age of 14.

Because there are two different methods by which data are obtained on children who work in America's fields, the two groups of minors (teenagers who are interviewed as part of the farmworker population, and dependents of farmworkers who also do

farmwork) are discussed separately in this chapter. First, the demographics and working conditions of teenage respondents to NAWS are explored. Information on the characteristics of dependent children of farmworkers who themselves participate in farmwork is presented at the end of the chapter.<sup>3</sup>

### Overview of Teenagers Employed in Agriculture

NAWS finds that, between FY1993 and FY1998, 7 percent of all farmworkers were between the ages of 14 and 17. If this percentage is multiplied by the estimated 1.8 million farmworkers per year who worked in U.S. fields, then there were approximately 126,000 children aged 14 to 17 working on America's farms each year. Overall, minors accounted for 4 percent of the total weeks worked in crop agriculture. The percent of work they performed is lower than their percentage of the labor force because children worked fewer weeks, on average, than did adults (14 versus 25).

#### Who are the youths who work in agriculture?

A demographic portrait of teen farmworkers can be drawn from the NAWS sample of 14- to 17-year-old respondents. (See chart 5.1.) Most teens who worked in agriculture were older—three-fourths of those between the ages of 14 and 17 who worked in the fields were aged 16 and 17. Like their adult counterparts, most (84 percent) teenage agricultural workers were young men.

Unlike the adult farmworker population, which was predominately (77 percent) foreign-born, most (52 percent) teen farmworkers were born in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Most of the foreign-born minors working in agriculture did not come to this country as young children, but were recent arrivals. Of these foreign-born minor farmworkers, 3 in 4 (75 percent) came to the United States between the ages of 14 and 17, and 58 percent came at ages 16 or 17.

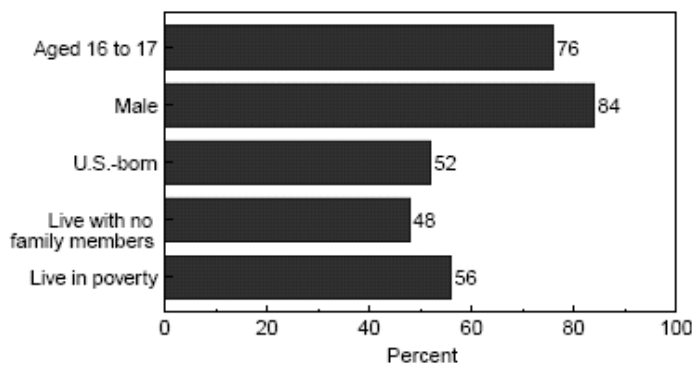
Many of the teens doing farmwork are *de facto* emancipated minors. More than one-half (54 percent) of the minor farmworkers do not live with a parent. Very few live without a parent but with some other member of their family. Overall, nearly half (48 percent) of the minor farmworker teenagers live in households without any member of their family.

The farmworker population is very poor—56 percent live in households below the Federal poverty threshold. Examination of the family income of teenage farmworkers reveals a bifurcated population, with half (50 percent) living in households with annual incomes below \$10,000 and more than one-third (35 percent) in households with incomes over \$25,000 annually.

(See chart 5.2.) The probable explanation for the relatively high proportion of minors in households with family incomes over \$25,000 annually is that these teens are not from households reliant on farmworker incomes but rather from more middle-class rural families in which the teens participate in seasonal (likely summer) employment in agriculture.

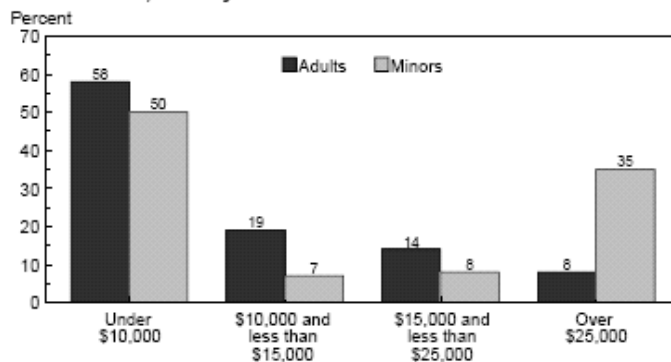
Given the high poverty rates among farmworkers, surprisingly few participate in Federal public assistance programs. Very few farmworkers (2 percent) live in households receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and only 13 percent receive Food Stamps. Farmworker teens are ap-

Chart 5.1. Snapshot of farmworkers aged 14 to 17, fiscal years 1993-98



SOURCE: National Agricultural Workers' Survey.

Chart 5.2. Family income distribution of adult and minor farmworkers, fiscal years 1993-98



SOURCE: National Agricultural Workers' Survey.

proximately half as likely to be in households receiving Food Stamps—only 7 percent of the farmworkers aged 14 to 17 are in households receiving this benefit.

### Earnings and working conditions encountered by children who work

The people working in America's fields have some of the lowest-paying jobs in the country. Minors working in agriculture are paid even less than their adult counterparts. According to the NAWS data for 1993-98, teens were more prevalent in the lowest wage jobs. While 23 percent of adults earned minimum wage or less, 30 percent of teen farmworkers did so. Forty percent of adults and fifty percent of teens were paid between minimum wage and \$1 over minimum wage. Adults were almost twice as likely to have the higher paying jobs. About 2 in 5 adults (37 percent) made more than \$1 over the minimum wage, compared with only 1 in 5 minors.

In general, minors worked fewer weeks per year than did adults. Median weeks worked were 10 for minors and 24 for adults. Among minors, the average number of weeks worked was 14; however, there was considerable variation. One-third engaged in farmwork for 6 weeks or less during the year they were interviewed. However, 2 in 5 (40 percent) worked in agriculture for more than 13 weeks, indicating that they probably did some work during the school year.

Given their low pay and short time in the labor force, it is not surprising that teens have median annual earnings from agriculture that are substantially lower than those for adults. Nearly 3 in 5 teens (59 percent) earned less than \$1,000 a year doing agricultural work, whereas half of the adults earned less than \$5,000 in agriculture.

While teens earn less, there is no clear pattern in terms of working conditions. Similar proportions of adults and teens are paid by the piece (21 percent) and by the hour (77 percent). And, 21 percent of adults and 19 per-

cent of minors work for farm labor contractors. Teens are less likely to pay for rides to work from a "raitero" (22 percent versus 38 percent). However, fewer teens report being covered by workers' compensation (63 percent versus 52 percent).<sup>5</sup>

Minor teen farmworkers differed from adults in the methods they used to find employment in agriculture. Teens were more likely than adults to find their jobs through friends, relatives, or workmates (82 percent versus 65 percent). Correspondingly fewer teens found their jobs on their own (11 percent versus 26 percent).

### Well-being of child agricultural workers

The NAWS data show minor teens working in agriculture to be at high risk of never completing high school. Fewer than half (47 percent) were attending school at a grade level corresponding to their age, 15 percent were in school but behind in grade and 37 percent were drop-outs who did not have a high school diploma and had not attended school within the last year.

It is unlikely that many of these minor teenage farmworkers have employer-provided health insurance, because a very small proportion of the entire farmworker population (8 percent) reported having health insurance provided by their employers. More than one-fourth (26 percent) of minor teenage farmworkers reported difficulty in obtaining health care.

Migrant farmworkers have an even harder time surviving than do settled farmworkers.<sup>6</sup> NAWS defines a migrant as a person who travels 75 miles or more to do or seek farmwork. By this definition, teens were less likely to be migrants than were adults (36 percent versus 51 percent). However, those teens who are migrants live in very difficult conditions, usually without family supervision. According to NAWS, 4 in 5 migrant teens (80 percent) were *de facto* emancipated minors—not living with any other family member. The vast majority (91

percent) of minor migrant teens were foreign-born.

## The Children of Farmworkers

### Parents taking children to the fields

Very few children of farmworkers worked in the fields alongside their parents. During the period studied, only 6 percent of the U.S. resident children of farmworkers did farmwork. The other 94 percent of farmworker children did not go to the fields to work. NAWS did not ask parents detailed questions about the amount of work done by dependent children. If these children had worked amounts similar to the children sampled directly by NAWS, less than 1 percent of farmwork would have been done by children accompanying their parents to the fields.

Few children work in the fields with their parents because most children of farmworkers are very young—more than 4 out of 5 (83 percent) are under the age of 14 and 2 in 5 (40 percent) are under the age of 6. (See chart 5.3.) Farmworkers tend to have young children because most farmworkers themselves are fairly young. According to NAWS data, the median age of farmworkers was 28 years, and two-thirds of all farmworkers were less than 34 years old. This age composition of the farm labor force is likely to continue, as the workforce is continually replenished by young, new-immigrant workers.<sup>7</sup>

Younger children are less likely than teens to work alongside their parents. According to NAWS, approximately 3 in 10 (31 percent) 16- and 17-year-olds were working in the fields as were 2 in 10 (18 percent) 14- and 15-year-olds. Farmwork is much rarer among children under the age of 14. Only 3 percent of 6- to 13-year-olds and virtually none of the children under 6 were reported by their parents to have worked in the fields. However, the fact that parents report that their small children (aged 0 to 5 years) do not do farmwork does not mean that

these children do not go to the fields. The parents of 7 percent of children aged 0 to 5 said that, sometime in the last 12 months, these children had accompanied them to the fields while they were working.

**The next generation: farm-worker children of farmworkers**

Most (73 percent) of the children of farmworkers who themselves work in the fields are over the age of 13. Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds make up 28 percent of farmworkers' children who do farmwork and sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds make up 45 percent. One factor that keeps more teens from going to the fields is that teenagers are often put in charge of their younger siblings. According to NAWS, 7 percent of teenagers (aged 13 to 17) were sometimes charged with the care of younger siblings while the parents were in the fields. Only 1 in 4 children working alongside parents in the fields is under the age of 14. In contrast, 86 percent of the children of farmworkers who do not work in the fields are under the age of 14, and 14 percent are 14 to 17 years old.

While three-quarters of the farmworker parents are foreign-born (73 percent), three-quarters of their children are U.S.-born (73 percent). Thus, most U.S.-resident children of foreign-born parents were born subsequent to

the parent's migration to the United States. Children who work in the fields along with their parents are more likely to be foreign-born than are those who do not (40 percent versus 24 percent).

Male children are more likely to work in the fields than are female children. While 52 percent of farmworker children are boys, they comprise 61 percent of the farmworker children of farmworkers.

**Wages and family income**

Children whose parents are paid a piece rate are more likely to work in the fields than are children whose parents are paid by the hour. While most children have parents who are paid by the hour (77 percent), 39 percent of children who work in the field have parents who are paid by the piece as compared to 18 percent of the children who do not work.

Almost two-thirds of farmworker families with U.S.-resident dependent children are poor (64 percent). While only 6 percent of U.S.-resident children of farmworkers are themselves farmworkers, families in which children work are more often poor than are other families (70 percent versus 64 percent).<sup>8</sup> This is an indication that children's earnings may be important to family incomes. Despite the difference in poverty rates, family incomes

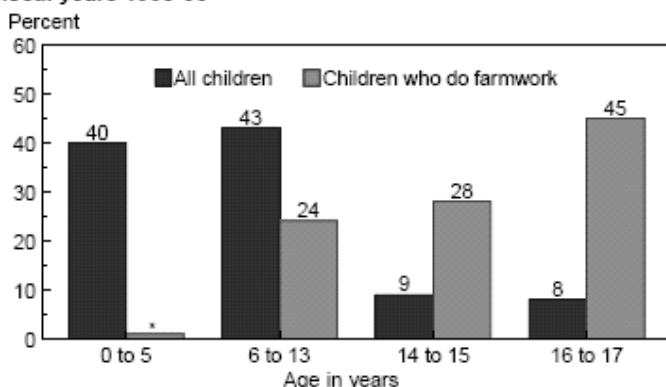
are similar between families in which children work and those in which they do not. Families whose children work have more dependents at similar income levels, which results in higher poverty rates. Only 13 percent of U.S.-resident dependent children of farmworkers live in families with incomes of \$25,000 or more; 27 percent live in families with incomes of \$15,000 to \$25,000 and 60 percent live in families with incomes under \$15,000.

Despite the low levels of income and the high number of U.S.-born children, the use rate of needs-based assistance is much lower for the paid farmworker population than the corresponding poverty rate. While 70 percent of children who work lived in families with incomes below the Federal poverty guidelines, in the 2 years before the NAWS interview, only 46 percent of the children's families received Food Stamps, 16 percent received assistance from the Women, Infants, and Children program, and 11 percent participated in TANF (or its predecessor, AFDC). Families in which children do not work generally had even lower rates of participation in Federal needs-based assistance programs. While 64 percent of these families are in poverty, only 33 percent received Food Stamps, 32 percent received assistance from WIC, and 7 percent participated in TANF. (The higher WIC rates for children who do not do farmwork results from the higher share of children under age 6 in this group.)

**Migration**

Children with a migrant parent were more likely to work than were children whose parents are settled. Twenty-seven percent of all farmworkers' children live in a house with a migrant parent. However, 44 percent of children who work in the fields have a migrant parent, compared with just 27 percent of the children who do not work. (Again, because only 6 percent of the children are farmworkers, the average for all children tends toward the average of the 94 percent of children who do not work, despite sig-

**Chart 5.3. Age distribution of the children of farmworkers, fiscal years 1993-98**



NOTE: Data relate only to children who reside in the United States.  
 \*Virtually none of the children who work are less than 6 years of age.  
 SOURCE: National Agricultural Workers Survey.

nificant differences between the two groups.) Children who work in the fields are more likely to migrate than are children who do not do farmwork. In almost all cases (99 percent), children who work in the fields accompany their migrant parent. However, children who do not work accompany their migrant parent only 55 percent of the time. The remainder of the time (45 percent), children who do not work are left behind when the parent migrates.

### Health and education

While NAWS does not ask whether farmworkers have health insurance that covers their dependents, we know from interviewing the working parents that only 10 percent of the children of farmworkers had a parent covered by employer-provided health insurance. This rate was similar for children who worked in the fields and for those who did not. Unless parents participate in needs-based health insurance programs for their children to a greater extent than they participate in other needs-based programs, it is very likely that many of the children of farmworkers have no health insurance.

Most children of farmworkers had parents who said they found it easy to obtain medical assistance (71 percent).<sup>9</sup> However, more children who worked in the fields had parents who reported difficulty obtaining medical assistance (31 percent, versus 24 percent for children who did not work).

Almost one-fourth of school-age children of farmworkers are behind in grade or have dropped out of school. Of the children of farmworkers, those who worked in the fields were more likely to be behind in school. Only 62 percent of children who did farmwork were learning at grade level compared with 78 percent of those who did not do farmwork. Twenty-two percent of the children doing farmwork were behind in grade and 16 percent had dropped out.<sup>10</sup> While working in the

fields may have affected their progress in school, children doing farmwork also had higher levels of other factors associated with being behind in school—they were more likely to be foreign-born and to be migrants.

### Conclusion

An estimated 126,000 teens performed farmwork for wages each year from 1993 to 1998. While these teen farmworkers made up a small proportion of the farm labor force, and accounted for an even smaller amount of the total farmwork done, their situation merits serious attention. On average, teens who do farmwork earn less than \$1,000 per year doing agricultural work; however, this income can be very important.

Three images of teen farmworkers come to mind. A small portion of teen farmworkers continue to be local rural youths whose parents are not farmworkers. These youths fit the traditional American image of students who work in the fields during school holidays. One example would be middle-class teens detassling corn in Midwestern farm communities.

However, while most teen farmworkers were born in the United States, the majority of them have characteristics that are very different from those of the aforementioned group. Overall, teen farmworkers are very poor—during the years covered by this chapter, more than half lived in households below the Federal poverty threshold. Most were from poor, often migrant households, with incomes under \$25,000. Despite the high poverty levels in these households, very few were recipients of needs-based public assistance.

These less-advantaged teen farmworkers consisted of two groups. One group fit the traditional image—teens working along with their parents in the fields. In addition, this chapter identifies a new and growing group of

teens who are “de facto” emancipated minors. These teens live and work on their own away from their families. These farmworker teens are falling behind academically. Nearly two-fifths worked in agriculture for more than 13 weeks in a year, indicating that they probably did some farmwork during the school year. Fewer than half of all teen farmworkers attended school at grade level and fully two-fifths were dropouts.

Whether or not they themselves do farmwork, many children living in farm-worker families were in difficult circumstances. The low wages and migratory nature of farmwork take their toll even on the farmworker children who do not work in the fields.

Most farmworkers are very young and, thus, their children also tend to be very young. Therefore, few children of farmworkers work in the fields alongside their parents. Six percent of the U.S.-resident children of farmworkers were themselves farmworkers. Of those, one-fourth were under the age of 14.

However, because farmworker families tend to be poor, having young children accompany their parents to the field may, in some cases, be the only childcare option. Unfortunately, having young children in the fields potentially exposes them to pesticides and other dangers inherent in farmwork. Parents of 7 percent of children aged 0 to 5 reported that their children had sometimes accompanied them to work in the fields.

Nearly two-thirds of farmworker families with U.S.-resident dependent children were poor. Among farmworker households in which children also were farmworkers, 70 percent were below the poverty threshold. Farmworker children of farmworkers were having difficulties getting an education. Twenty-two percent of the children doing farmwork were behind in grade, and 16 percent dropped out before graduating from high school.