



Coronavirus and Farm Workers

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Long lines and empty grocery store shelves are a reminder that food is essential and finite. As Congress debates measures to help workers affected by the pandemic, we need to think about the workers who produce our food.

It takes millions of farm workers to produce the food we eat. There are as many as 2.6 million hired farm workers, including two million in crop agriculture and 600,000 in animal agriculture. These workers cannot work remotely and because agriculture is a critical infrastructure industry they are required to maintain their normal work schedule. However, the nature of the work and their backgrounds put them high risk for spreading COVID-19. We have three major concerns related to COVID-19 and the health and safety of U.S. farm workers and the agricultural industry.

First, workers who contract COVID-19 might not receive necessary care or testing due to fear of seeking medical services because of their immigration status, limited access to health insurance, or lack of access to health care facilities. The majority of hired workers employed in crop agriculture are foreign-born (75%) and among the foreign-born, most are undocumented (66%). Data suggest that more than half (53%) of all crop workers and three quarters (75%) of undocumented crop workers have no health insurance.

Second, many of these workers live in crowded housing and most work in teams, making them a vulnerable group for catching and spreading COVID-19. On average, hired crop workers live in households with 3.4 other people, with an average of 1.7 people per bedroom. Team size varies by crop and task. For example, harvesters for table grapes in California's San Joaquin Valley typically work in crews of 3-4 workers, while harvesters for strawberries in California's Central Coast work in crews of 25-35.

Finally, farm workers face all of the challenges common to low wage workers — hired farm work is among the lowest paid occupations in the U.S. and most farm workers have meager savings, making them likely to face high economic pressure to work even when sick. Farm workers are also juggling new child care obligations amid mandated school and day care closures. 42% of hired crop workers have a child under 18 living in their household and 22% have a child six or under. These workers might have to stay home from work to provide care for their children.

The FDA has stated that COVID-19 is not known to be transmitted through food or food packaging, and thus cannot be spread easily via fresh produce. However, illness among workers and increased child care obligations can reduce the availability of workers, decreasing the supply of fresh produce just as agriculture moves toward peak employment levels in summer. As the majority of our nation's farms have already planted their crops for the summer harvest, this will exacerbate ongoing labor shortages, threaten the long-run economic viability of domestic agriculture, and decrease the availability of fruits, vegetables, grains, and animal products. Proposals before Congress, such as those to improve financial coverage of testing and treatment and offer paid sick leave, must be offered to workers independent of legal immigration status in order to ensure the health and safety of our agricultural workforce and supply our nation with ample and affordable food.