

Injustice in the Fields

Farm Worker Conditions Throughout the U.S.



Did you know?

- Most fruits and vegetables are handpicked - meaning we depend on farm workers for the food we eat everyday.
- There are approximately 2-3 million farm workers in the U.S.
- Many of the farm workers are young adults.
- Labor and living conditions are inhumane.



U.S. farm workers face...

- Undocumented immigration status
- Exclusion from worker protections enjoyed by other workers
- Sub-poverty wages
- Hazardous working conditions
- Substandard housing
- Children and women's issues
- Lack of access to education
- Modern day slavery



(Image source: irjci.blogspot.com)

Immigration

- Farm workers can be:
 - U.S. citizens
 - Legal permanent residents
 - Seasonal laborers on special guest worker visas
 - Undocumented workers
- Undocumented farm workers are the key to the U.S. food system.

At least 6 out of 10 farm workers in the U.S. are undocumented.



Immigration

- At work, undocumented status makes workers especially vulnerable to abuse, as some employers and supervisors threaten to play the “deportation card”.
- We need comprehensive immigration reform with a path first to permanent resident status, and then to citizenship, for the million farm workers who are currently working in the fields, including their spouses and children.



Exclusion from worker protections

Much of the injustice farm workers face stems from their specific exclusion from laws that insured basic protections for workers in other sectors of society, such as:

- **The National Labor Relations Act** (1935): it forbids employers from firing a worker for joining, organizing, or supporting a labor union. It also establishes a structure for unions and employers to engage in collective bargaining.



Image source: vagabondjourney.com

Exclusion from worker protections

- **The Fair Labor Standards Act** (1938): guarantees a minimum wage for each hour worked and requires overtime pay to most employees. FLSA fully excluded farm workers until 1966.
- The major federal employment law for farm workers is the **Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act of 1983** (AWPA), which requires employers to disclose and comply with the terms of the jobs they offer. APWA also upholds some safety standards.



Exclusion from worker protections

- While exclusion of farm workers from legal protections has affected their ability to organize for better conditions, it certainly hasn't stopped them. Against all of these odds, farm workers are organizing.



Image source: <http://lupergv.wordpress.com/2010/06/25/immigrant-farmworkers-say-go-ahead-take-our-jobs/>

Sub-poverty wages

- Farm workers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers.
- Annually, the average income of crop workers is between \$10,000 to \$12,499 for individuals and \$15,000 to \$17,499 for a family.
- Many workers have total family incomes below the poverty line.



Sub-poverty wages

- Most farm workers are paid based on how many buckets or bags they pick of whatever crop they harvest. This is known as the “piece rate.”
- When workers are being paid by how much they pick, this acts as a disincentive to take breaks for water or shade: taking breaks would cut into their productivity and thus cut into their pay.



Sub-poverty wages

There are other factors besides low wages that contribute to farm worker poverty.

- Farm worker unemployment rates are very high
- Farmworkers have virtually no job security.
- Migrant farm workers must chase crops to make a living.
- Farm workers are constantly at the mercy of variable conditions like natural disasters and bad weather.



Sub-poverty wages

- Farm workers lack benefits guaranteed to other workers. For instance, farm workers do not receive overtime pay, nor do they get sick time or maternity leave.
- Rather than increasing over the years, farm worker wages have actually declined by more than 20% in the past twenty years after accounting for inflation.



Hazardous working conditions

- Agriculture is one of the top three most dangerous occupations in the U.S.
- In addition to physically demanding labor and utilization of dangerous machinery, heat and sun exposure make agricultural work especially dangerous.
- Among farm workers, heat stroke is the leading cause of work-related death.



Pesticide exposure

A rampant problem among the majority of farm workers is exposure to toxic chemicals from pesticides.



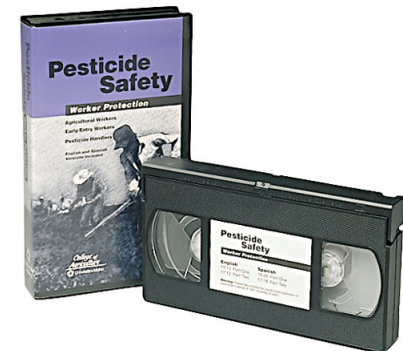
Image source: David H. Wells
<http://thewellspoint.com/2009/03/25/the-early-photo-essays/>

Pesticide trainings

Training regarding protection against pesticide exposure is only required every five years during the first week of employment.

- This law is inadequate because workers should be educated about the dangers of pesticides BEFORE they have a chance to be exposed, and because this training is not enough considering the severe health effects that can be caused by pesticide exposure.

- Enforcement of this law is almost impossible with an unstable workforce and many day laborers.
- Training is sometimes done in English, not in the workers' primary language.
- Training neglects to teach workers how to file a grievance.



Housing

Substandard housing conditions are a common issue faced by farm workers. Some of the problems they face are...

- crowded housing.
- unsanitary conditions.
- lack of basic utilities.
- isolation from important services like health clinics, grocery stores, and public transportation
- Very high rent rates.



Housing

There are different types of farm-worker housing that vary widely based on geographic location, immigration status, etc.

The most common types of farm worker housing are...

- Privately Rented Housing (85%)
- Grower-owned Housing (13%)
- Government Housing (2%)



Housing

- For farm workers, it is a necessity to have access to washing machines and showers in order to minimize pesticide exposure.
- Lack of governmental oversight on housing standards and regulations enables growers and private renters to get away with providing substandard housing.



Sanitation in the fields

Farm workers often work in unsanitary conditions if the grower does not provide...

- clean and fresh drinking water.
- disposable cups (one per worker).
- water and a place to wash their hands.
- soap.
- disposable towels.
- a clean bathroom.



Children in the fields

- It is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 farm workers under the age of 18.
- Many of these children are undocumented.
- The majority of working children in the U.S. work in agriculture—approximately 70%.



Image source: <http://mediavoicesforchildren.org/?p=1853>

Children in the fields

- Children in agriculture are the least protected by the law compared to other sectors.
- Since 1938, federal labor laws have excluded children farm workers from labor protections provided to other working children.
- For instance, children over the age of 12 can legally work in agriculture with their parents' permission or with their parents on the same farm.



Image Source: <http://orchidsoflight.org/the-persistence-of-hope/>

Children in the fields

- Exposure to toxic pesticides at an early age can affect farm worker children for the rest of their lives.
- Like general labor laws, laws surrounding pesticides are not adequate to protect youth from great harm.
- Pesticides are grouped into different categories based on their toxicity; laws based on toxicity ratings are made to protect the bodies of adults, not the developing bodies of children.



Image source: Farmworker Association of Florida

Children in the fields

- In addition to the physical strains of farm labor, it's important to also recognize the psychological and emotional strain that agricultural work can have on children.
- Some children migrate with their families, but others are increasingly migrating alone.



Image source: Unknown

Women's issues

- Women make up 22% of the agricultural workforce in the U.S.
- While they play a vital role in harvesting the food on our plates, farm worker women are arguably the most exploited workers in this country, and are even more vulnerable than male farm workers.



Image Source: www.floridafarmworkers.org

Women's issues

- One of the most significant issues that women farm workers face is sexual harassment.
- In one survey of farm worker women in California, 90% of the women identified sexual harassment as a major problem.
- These incidents of sexual harassment are exacerbated by immigration status.



Image Source: <http://www.humanflowerproject.com/index.php/weblog/2005/12>

Women's issues

- Perhaps even more troubling is the violation of reproductive rights of farm worker women.
- Women in the fields are exposed to toxic pesticides. This exposure has been linked to infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects in babies.



Carlitos (Photo by Taylor Jones/Palm Beach Post)

Education

The main obstacles to accessing education are:

- Work:** Farm workers are paid sub-poverty wages and their priority may be survival rather than going to school.
- Transportation:** Educational institutions are usually located far away from farm worker communities, and transportation is limited (especially for those who are undocumented).
- Language barriers:** Literacy programs in farm workers' primary language may be difficult to come by.

Modern day slavery

Slavery: working against your will with little or no pay under the threat of violence or other punishment, exists today in America.

In 1865 the U.S. passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, formally abolishing slavery.

However, well over a century later, workers are held as slaves while experiencing threats, violence, coercion, and manipulation.



Image source: <http://www.dipity.com/Shaily/American-Line-of-Time/>

Modern day slavery

- In Florida there have been several cases of modern day slavery in the fields among immigrants and citizens.
- The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, helped to uncover and to start the federal prosecution of many of these cases.
- Since 1997 more than 1000 slaves have gained freedom in Florida



Image source: <http://cjaye57.wordpress.com/2010/04/06/coalition-exposes-modern-day-slavery-in-the-u-s/>

Farm workers are organizing

Farm worker unions and organizations are addressing these issues by organizing for justice!

- Unions sign contracts with growers and corporations so that farm workers have rights like **collective bargaining** and **freedom of association**.
- Organizations are lobbying for better and more humane immigration and labor laws.



Join Us!



You can support these and other farm worker organizations by joining the National Farm Worker Ministry (**NFWM**) and its Youth and Young Adult Network (**YAYA**)!

NFWM and YAYA organize their communities in support of farm workers; educating people and institutions about farm worker issues and mobilizing them to support farm worker campaigns for justice.

www.nfwm.org

www.nfwm-yaya.org