

## FARM WORKER ISSUES: EDUCATION

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Farm workers and their families face a unique set of challenges in getting an education. Many farm workers have completed relatively few years of formal schooling; according to the most recent [National Agricultural Workers Survey](#). The average level of formal education completed by farm workers is eighth grade. Additionally, only ten percent of migrant farm workers finish high school. This is partially due to the lack of educational opportunities in their countries of origin.

### Obstacles to Education

Once they come to the U.S., the primary obstacle standing between adult farm workers and formal education is work. Farm workers are paid sub-poverty wages to perform long hours of backbreaking labor. Their priority may be survival rather than going to school. However, even if they did have the time, energy, and financial resources to go to school, educational institutions are usually located far away from farm worker communities, and transportation is limited (not to mention undocumented workers are prohibited from holding a driver's license in most states).

Another significant obstacle to education is cultural barriers, including language barriers. Literacy programs in farm workers' primary language may be difficult to come by. According to the [National Agricultural Workers Survey](#), 24 percent of farm workers speak English, 74 percent speak Spanish, and two percent speak other languages such as Creole, Mixteco and Kanjobal.

### Children of Farm Worker Families

Children from farm worker families face their own educational obstacles. Like adults, they too are affected by economic strain. Farm workers have some of the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers. This struggle to make ends meet can leave children with no other option but to work in the fields alongside their parents in order to contribute to the family.

Under U.S. law, [children as young as the age of twelve are permitted to work](#). A report from the [Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs](#) (AFOP) found that farmworker children work in the fields for thirty hours per week on average, often during the school year; while children in other sectors can work no more than three hours per day during the school year. In agriculture there are no limits to how many hours children can work.

In addition to economic pressure, belonging to a farm worker family can often mean moving around often, and this takes an emotional toll on children, which impacts their education. Children of farm worker families also struggle with the separation of their families and lack of job security for both their parents and themselves.

## Barriers to Higher Education

In terms of higher education, again, for students living in rural areas, the nearest educational institution can be far away, with no easily accessible transportation.

Furthermore, undocumented students who want to go to college may have to pay out of state or even international student tuition instead of in-state tuition. In the past decade, only 21 states have passed laws allowing in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants.

Beyond all of these challenges, laws that criminalize undocumented immigrants exacerbate the difficulty children face in obtaining an education.

Overall, lack of education for farm worker adults and barriers to accessing education for farm worker children leaves families with no hope for a better life. Farm workers who work hard to feed the country deserve a dignified life, whether they want to continue working in the fields, going to school, or both.

### For sources and to learn more:

- The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP)
- “Addressing Migrant Children’s Education in the United States,” Arriana Nastoff, 2016
- “Itinerant Life Weighs on Farmworkers’ Children”, New York Times
- Farmworker Justice
- Human Rights Watch
- National Agricultural Workers’ Survey (NAWS)

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