

Farm Workers & Food Justice

Video: <https://vimeo.com/589647960>

Objectives:

1. To understand the issues surrounding farm workers and their level of food security.
2. To understand our role as consumers and advocates, and how we can affect change through our choices and actions at all levels.

Introduction:

The people who spend their days picking fruits and vegetables struggle to feed their own families. Numerous studies across the United States have documented the staggering rates¹ of hunger and food insecurity that plague farm worker communities. One study of farm workers in Georgia found that 63% of migrant and seasonal workers surveyed struggled to feed themselves and their families. Farm workers often face countless barriers when trying to get food, including low wages, poor or non-existent public transportation, and a lack of culturally-appropriate food.

The overwhelming irony of the US agricultural system is that the agricultural workers face environmental, political, economic, and structural barriers that prevent them from being able to sustainably feed their families in affordable, healthy, and culturally appropriate ways. In the U.S., farm workers uphold the agricultural industry while simultaneously being **400 times more likely to experience food insecurity** than the general public.² They work long, arduous hours under the most punishing of conditions, and are literally unable to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

To put it simply,

- **As people deserving of dignity and respect, farm workers should have accessible, safe, healthy, and culturally appropriate food.**
- **As workers, farm workers must be able to eat food that gives them adequate strength and health so they can pick and process food as an essential part of the agricultural supply chain.**
- **Many farm workers do not have access to the food they grow, pick, and process.**

While these challenges are not new, they have been exposed and exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. As farm workers have continued to work in the fields, dairies, nurseries, and meat packing plants despite high levels of Covid transmission, they also wait in growing food lines, strategically ration groceries, and receive little to no governmental support because of their immigration status.

¹ Kiehne E, Mendoza NS. Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Food Insecurity: Prevalence, Impact, Risk Factors, and Coping Strategies. *Soc Work Public Health*. 2015;30(5):397-409. doi: 10.1080/19371918.2015.1019173. Epub 2015 Apr 29. PMID: 25923396.

² Ip, E. H., Saldana, S., Arcury, T. A., Grzywacz, J. G., Trejo, G., & Quandt, S. A. (2015). Profiles of Food Security for US Farmworker Households and Factors Related to Dynamic of Change. *American journal of public health*, 105(10), e42–e47. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302752>

Food Security

Food security is defined in the most basic way by the USDA: “Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” Food insecurity is simply the opposite.

The 4 Pillars of Food Security: Availability, Access, Utilization, and Stability

Pillar 1: Availability: “Is there food?”

To put it simply, is there enough edible food for people to eat, and are there the economic mechanisms (like markets or stores) that allow people to get it?

This mostly applies to communities in the global south where we see food shortages, famine, and unstable economies. In the US, we generally have *enough* food, it’s just not the right food in the right places at the right times at prices people can afford. The availability of food is *not* a main factor of food security that currently affects farm workers in the U.S. today, but the issue of hunger or scarcity within their home countries may be part of why they’ve migrated to the U.S. in order to find work in our agricultural system.

Pillar 2: Access: “Can I get culturally appropriate food in a reasonable way?”

Access refers to the affordability and allocation of food, as well as the people’s preferences. This pillar is the most relevant for farm workers in the U.S.

Physical Access: Can you get to the food you need?

For farm workers, simply getting to the store is often a key obstacle. They often live in remote rural locations lacking paved roads. If available, transportation may be either provided for them or inaccessible, such as public transit. They also lack the space, kitchen equipment, and time in which to prepare and consume meals.

In a 2017 study³, researchers met with 200 migrant farm workers in North Carolina camps to better understand the transportation barriers and how it affects their access to food. Some of their findings:

- 91% obtain most of their food from superstores like Walmart and the remaining 9% said they shopped at supermarkets like Food Lion.
- 87% said that they relied on someone else to drive them to the store

Farm workers also reported turning to alternative food sources:

- 18.5% relied on a church or food pantry
- 18% ate food grown in a household or camp garden
- 17.5% relied on food given by their employer

Preparation and Consumption: Can you make and eat the food you need?

Many farm workers do not have access to even a simple kitchen. While some farm workers can afford their own housing, most must take the dorm-like housing provided by their employers, especially those who migrate. Many of these crowded buildings are irregular structures not originally intended as housing, and 17% lack either plumbing or food preparation facilities, or both.

³ Quandt, S. A., Groeschel-Johnson, A., Kinzer, H. T., Jensen, A., Miles, K., O'Hara, H. M., Chen, H., & Arcury, T. A. (2018). Migrant Farmworker Nutritional Strategies: Implications for Diabetes Management. *Journal of agromedicine*, 23(4), 347–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2018.1501453>

Migrant farm workers without access to a refrigerator and oven unsurprisingly experienced food insecurity at a rate more than 3 times higher than those with access. More than half of the participants in this study did not have access to both a refrigerator and stove. Kitchen space was often nonexistent.

The same 2017 study found the following among 200 farm workers in North Carolina:

- Four in five workers prepared breakfast for themselves, while less than half prepared lunch and about two-thirds, dinner.
- About 7% reported taking turns with a coworker to prepare meals. A few reported for each meal that there was a camp cook or vendor paid by the camp who prepared the meal.
- Only a few (4.5%) reported purchasing breakfast from a restaurant, convenience store or vendor, but that percentage rose to almost half (46.5%) at lunch and over a quarter (26%) at dinner.

Additionally, finding time to cook is difficult to coordinate with long work days, with transit time to and from stores cutting into free time even more. As a result, many farm workers rely on their employer's food plan, which can sometimes cost an estimated \$80/week but serve as little as a slice of baloney with a side of beans per meal (report from volunteers at Triangle Friends of Farmworkers).

Economic: Can you afford the food you need?

According to the Fresno Farmworker Food Security Assessment (FFSA)⁴ "income was by far the strongest predictor of food insecurity and hunger." The average monthly incomes for farm workers are tied to food insecurity as follows:

- farm workers classified as *food secure* earned \$762/month
- farm workers classified as *food insecure* earned \$542/month
- farm workers classified as *food insecure with hunger* earned \$319/month

Additionally, not only do farm workers not have enough income to buy food, they also have harder times participating in programs that would usually help low-income Americans fill these income gaps. Due to the lack of legal status, undocumented adult farm workers are at further risk of hunger because they are ineligible for critical public safety net programs, including SNAP benefits, although their children are eligible.

Cultural Appropriateness: Does the food you have access to reflect your culture?

Culturally appropriate food is not simply access to rice, canned goods, or spices in the "international foods" aisle at the grocery store, but all the rituals and practices central to making and consuming it. About half of farm workers report they have lack of control over their own food or have to make compromises.⁵ Food is only culturally appropriate in context; the same food, eaten with different people, in a different place and a different time, may hold an entirely different cultural meaning and connotation. Having platters of empanadas at a dinner table with others is not the same cultural experience as scarfing one down during a lunch break. Culturally appropriate food is not speaking just about what people eat but about how and with whom they eat. What a person eats is "a way of showing the world many things about the eater" (Anderson 2005: 124). People use food as a visible marker to tie them to racial, religious, class-based, and ethnic groups.⁶

Pillar 3: Utilization: "Does this food contribute to my health?"

Utilization is the biological aspect of food— the ability of the human body to take food and convert it into energy. Utilization also includes food storage, processing, health, and sanitation as they relate to nutrition.

⁴ WIRTH, CATHY & Strohlic, Ron & Getz, Christy. (2007). Hunger in the fields: Food insecurity among farmworkers in Fresno county.

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6149220/>

⁶ <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=hcoltheses>

Oxfam estimates that a farm worker burns in one day the same amount of calories as a marathon runner.⁷ Farm workers work long, backbreaking hours in intense heat. Sufficient healthy food is essential for them to do their jobs.

Farm workers suffer from a variety of health-related conditions due to poor nutrition. Despite their work in the produce sector, 89% of farm workers consume fewer than 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day.⁸ Two studies in California and Michigan demonstrated high rates of chronic health conditions related to poor nutrition, including:

- High serum cholesterol and high blood pressure, particularly among men.⁹
- 79% of males and 74% of females were either overweight or obese.¹⁰
- 39% had diabetes.¹¹
- 23% had hypertension.¹²
- 18% had anemia.¹³
- 20% had hypercholesterolemia.¹⁴

Pillar 4: Stability: “Will food be available next week, next month, next year?”

Stability describes the long-term aspects of food security. Threats to stability include environmental events and climate change, market volatility, conflicts, pandemics/epidemics, and governmental policy. All of the other pillars have to be present on a continual basis in order to reach stability. Someone might experience food insecurity for a few months or a year, but farm workers endure this year after year due to multiple factors:

- An unstable industry: farming is unstable to begin with due to changes in the market and the weather. Immigrant workers are more likely to have difficulty finding work and fewer resources with which to mitigate the destabilizing cycles of seasonal employment.
- Migratory and seasonal work: these farm workers also deal with the issue of moving frequently, often finding themselves in new locations where they are unfamiliar with existing support networks and resources for accessing affordable food or emergency food assistance.
- Unstable immigration status: The second strongest predictor of food insecurity after income is documentation of legal status. Farm workers without documentation are 11% more likely to be food insecure compared with the general population.¹⁵ Federal and state immigration and food assistance policies play a significant role in food stability.

In addition to food security, we also want to address food justice and ultimately, food sovereignty:

⁷ <https://firstperson.oxfamamerica.org/how-much-energy-does-it-take-to-farm-all-day-enough-to-run-a-marathon/>

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3743275/>

⁹ Villarejo D, McCurdy SA. The California Agricultural Workers Health Survey. *J Agric Saf Health*. 2008 Apr;14(2):135-46. doi: 10.13031/2013.24347. PMID: 18524281.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Matias, S. L., Stoecklin-Marois, M. T., Tancredi, D. J., & Schenker, M. B. (2013). Adherence to dietary recommendations is associated with acculturation among Latino farm workers. *The Journal of nutrition*, 143(9), 1451–1458. <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.113.177667>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ip, E. H., Saldana, S., Arcury, T. A., Grzywacz, J. G., Trejo, G., & Quandt, S. A. (2015). Profiles of Food Security for US Farmworker Households and Factors Related to Dynamic of Change. *American journal of public health*, 105(10), e42–e47. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302752>

Food justice is a holistic and structural view of the food system that sees healthy food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right. Food justice efforts (which are generally led by indigenous peoples and people of color) work not only for access to food, but for an end to the structural inequities that lead to unequal outcomes.¹⁶

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their rights to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Reflection Questions:

- Availability:
 - What are some reasons that more than 1 in 7 families face food insecurity despite the sufficient quantity of available food in the U.S.?
 - What are some reasons that so many farm worker families face food insecurity?
- Access:
 - Physical access: How far do you have to travel to have access to affordable food? How many times a week or a month do you shop for food? Do you have food delivered? How many refrigerators or freezers do you have in your home? Consider your options and those available to farm workers. How would your family's daily life be affected if you had similar physical barriers?
 - Economic access: Consider your average weekly or monthly food budget. What programs or resources would be available to you if you were not able to afford the food you normally purchase?
 - Cultural Appropriateness: What are some of your family traditions around food? For many of us, family and religious celebrations revolve around the table. What traditions would you want to be able to maintain if you were working abroad? What do they say about you and your culture?
 - Cultural Appropriateness: Imagine if you were only able to shop in the "ethnic" aisle of your local supermarket. What would you buy for your family? What meals would you prepare? How might your family respond?
- Utilization:
 - Try to remember a time when you felt physical hunger. How did you feel, physically, mentally, and emotionally? What symptoms do you have when you miss a meal?
 - Imagine what your caloric intake would look like if you ran a marathon every day. How much food would you have to buy and prepare? What would you need to eat?
- Stability:
 - Do you consider food costs in your family's *annual* budget? Your long-term financial plans?
 - During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the food supply chain in the US was severely affected. Were you worried about the availability of food in general? Were there specific foods you were unable to find in the store? Had you considered the stability of our food supply chain before? Were you worried about the long-term outlook?

Action Ideas:

- Host a meal for your friends and family to raise awareness about farm workers and food: consider what you're serving, discuss the roles farm workers have played in getting that food to your table, and/or say a special prayer of gratitude.
- Search for food certification labels in your local stores. Talk to the store manager to thank them for their support or to ask about the availability of certified products if you don't see them.
- Advocate for just immigration reform that includes farm workers.

¹⁶ <https://foodprint.org/issues/food-justice/>

- Find out if there are food pantries or other assistance programs in your congregation or community. Get involved as a volunteer or coordinate a food drive (consider the “access” and “utilization” pillars!) If there are farm workers in your community, see if the food pantries specifically try to provide food for them.

Learn more:

- Watch a webinar or documentary
 - Bittersweet Harvest: America's migrant farmworkers (2015, 24 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1lhHdfeHzw>
 - Farmworkers Face Food Insecurity Amid Pandemic (2020, 3 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icNJCv1G3aM>
 - Organizing for Food Worker Justice webinar (90 minutes) :
<https://foodfirst.org/organizing-for-farmworker-justice-watch-the-webinar/>
 - The Fields of Immokalee (2020, 30 minutes):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l47ah767g_c
 - Farmworker Housing and Working Conditions (2010, 5 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZKpLODGBOI>
- NFWM’s additional resources:
 - Learn more about farm worker wages,
http://nfwm.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/LowWages.Download.final_-1.pdf
 - Invite a farm worker speaker, <http://nfwm.org/take-action/get-involved/guest-speaker/>
 - Host a simple meal to raise awareness,
<http://nfwm.org/resource-center/harvest-of-justice/harvest-of-justice-activity-ideas/host-a-solidarity-meal-for-harvest-of-justice/>
 - Learn more about immigration and farm workers,
<http://nfwm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Immigration-Farm-Workers-101-download.pdf>
 - Get involved in current farm worker campaigns,
<http://nfwm.org/take-action/current-campaigns/>

Prayer:

God of Land and Earth and Field and Farm,

We thank you for the gracious gifts of fruits and vegetables and nuts and grain. These give us health and energy and a wholesome life. Help us to remember the hard work of farm workers who bring us these gifts. May we show our gratitude as consumers and advocates and citizens by standing in solidarity with farm workers as they campaign for fair wages, decent living and working conditions and a path to citizenship. Give us voice and presence so our faith will have an impact for them in the public square.

Because we all eat, because we are all human beings deserving of dignity, because we are created by You and loved by You and necessary to each other for health and well-being, we pray.

Amen.