knowledge sharing in relation to food. Markets position food as an important and worthy topic of conversation and as a way to connect with other individuals in a community.

Community Focus on the Farmer

While markets vary in form and size, the social atmosphere of many markets is similar. On Saturday mornings in markets across North America, families and individuals come together to engage in ritualized practice; bags and baskets in hand, they buy food and support their respective community farmers. Often, markets contain public seating where patrons can sit, eat, and chat among themselves. Here, individuals are given the opportunity to better get to know their neighbors. Regular customers become familiar faces and sometimes even friends. Markets bring together members of a community or neighborhood and stimulate a sense of social connection; significantly, this ritual of community fellowship occurs in the farmer's domain. The farmer becomes the reason why people are brought together, and local agriculture is consequently celebrated and honored by the community. Many farmers’ markets even host public talks and lectures about local food and agriculture in which farmers are asked to speak about their work.

The way in which farmers’ markets encourage the population of a particular community to engage with both the farmer and the agriculture of that community helps cultivate individual engagement with place. In an increasingly technological world, many people spend their days online, plugged in, and out of touch with the local environment. Farmers’ markets, by promoting local products, showcasing local culture, and fostering connections between neighbors, work to reintroduce individuals to the places they inhabit. In this way, farmers act as ambassadors of local place. As the individuals who work with and on the local land, farmers bring and offer the land to the community in the form of food products sold at farmers markets.

Deborah Hemming

See also Family Farms and Rural Depopulation; Farmers’ Markets; Farmers’ Markets, Cooking With Seasonal Produce; Locavorism; Organic/Biodynamic Farming; Roadside Stands; Sustainable Agrifood Systems

Further Readings


Farmworkers

As food production in the United States has grown increasingly industrialized, the consolidation of small family farms into larger, and often vertically integrated, farming operations has become more commonplace. Since the end of World War II, these consolidation and industrialization processes have been spurred by a growing presence of large-scale agricultural corporations that now dominate the majority of food production in the United States and abroad. Alongside this consolidation, hiring laborers from off the farm has become the primary strategy of meeting
he production needs of farming operations where labor needs exceed labor availability. Farmworkers labor in nearly all sectors and scales of the food system, from the smallest family farms to the largest corporate food operations, from diversified farms to enormous dairy operations. In a nation where the food industry accounts for 13% of the total gross domestic product, the contribution of farmworkers is clearly significant to the nation's overall economic well-being (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012). This entry offers a brief history and context of farmworkers in the United States, outlining both the central challenges that these workers face and the efforts to organize and stand in solidarity with farmworkers. Given the present demographic constitution of farmworkers in the United States, this entry focuses specifically on farmworkers from Latin America and their unique struggles. However, many of these same conditions and experiences apply to all immigrant farmworkers regardless of their nation of origin.

**Historical Background and Current Context**

While workers from Mexico have worked on U.S. farms since the drawing of the U.S.–Mexico border in 1848, the reliance of hiring farmworkers outside of the United States intensified much later with the institution of the bracero program in 1942. This program, officially named the Mexican Farm Labor Program, was the earliest attempt on the part of the United States to institute a guest worker program. Largely in response to labor shortages brought about by U.S. involvement in wars overseas, the bracero program brought an estimated 4 million hired laborers from Mexico into the fields and farms north of the border. At its peak in 1959, more than 440,000 bracero workers were laboring in the United States, a number that gradually declined until the program's end. While the program was designed to sponsor Mexican workers for a defined period of time, many workers brought as braceros eventually ended up permanently settling in the United States, with or without permanent residency status.

In response to concerns over labor abuses associated with the program, an increased presence of undocumented labor, and the growing significance of labor organizing by the National Farm Laborers Union and the National Workers Organizing Committee, who highlighted the ways in which the program stagnated worker's wages, the program was officially ended in 1964. Since the end of the bracero program, the United States has sought to manage the needs for guest workers in the agricultural sector through the H2A Temporary Guest Worker visa program, although this too has been an inadequate and unsustainable solution to labor needs.

The H2A visa program is operated by the U.S. Department of Labor and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Division. Through this program, agricultural employers can hire temporary workers born outside of the United States for up to 1 year, with a possible extension for 3 years. Employers who apply for H2A workers must prove that they do not have access to an adequate number of local workers and that bringing in workers through this program would not negatively affect the working conditions or wages of U.S. workers in similar sectors. There is no cap on the number of H2A visas that may be issued, and in 2011, roughly 55,000 visas were made available. According to a 2011 report by Bon Appétit Management Company and United Farm Workers (UFW), approximately 94% of all H2A workers come from Mexico, and the vast majority of them are young men. This same report outlines the vulnerabilities that many of these workers face, highlighting cases of forced labor on the part of unscrupulous farmers, threats of physical violence, and unsafe working and living conditions. These matters are addressed in more detail in a later section of this entry that discusses the broader contexts of worker struggles.

The growing reliance on nonfamily farm labor since the end of World War II has been significant, with the ratio of hired farmworkers to total farmworkers growing from one in four in 1950 to one in three in 2006, according to William Kandel. Drawing on the 2007 Agricultural Census and the
National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) data, the Bon Appétit Management Company and UFW report noted that the most reliable estimate for the total number of farmworkers employed in the United States is 1.4 million. The majority of these workers are male, but most estimates agree that roughly 20% to 23% of all hired farmworkers are female. While many representations of farmworkers often characterize their lives as revolving around seasonal migrations in response to harvest cycles, Kandel notes that in reality, only about 12% of farmworkers work in this fashion. In general, the geographic distribution of farmworkers has not changed significantly in recent decades, and more than half of all farmworkers labor in just six states—California, Florida, Texas, Washington, Oregon, and North Carolina—according to Kandel. Of these states, California employs the greatest number of farmworkers.

**Estimates of the Number of Farmworkers in the United States**

Given the high mobility and unauthorized status of many of these workers, it is not surprising that estimates of the number of foreign-born farmworkers are not consistent across sources. While the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) estimates that roughly 62% of farmworkers in the United States are undocumented immigrants, NAWS data estimate that roughly half of all hired crop farmworkers lack official authorization to work in the United States. However, as noted earlier, for workers entering the United States through the H2A visa program, numbers are more precise. According to the SPLC, the top four sending nations of undocumented farmworkers are Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Many of these farmworkers are pushed from their home countries by poverty, food insecurity, and a lack of viable employment. Given the cultural diversity of farmworkers from Latin America, it is difficult to generalize about demographic factors and premigration experiences, but farmworkers tend to be less likely to speak English than other migrant laborers, and according to the National Center for Farmworker Health, the average level of completed education among farmworkers is the eighth grade.

**Economic Inequalities Confronting Farmworkers**

Despite the significance of farmworkers for the well-being of the agricultural economy, the economic conditions of farmworkers remain substandard. Cases of wage theft and violations of minimum wage regulations run rampant throughout agricultural sectors, and migrant farmworkers and women are often even more disadvantaged in the labor market than those farmworkers who remain settled (Kandel, 2008; SPLC, 2010). In some cases, these wage inequalities are caused by workers being paid through piecework arrangements, where they are paid by the bin, bushel, or pound rather than by the hour. According to 2007–2009 NAWS data, as reported by the National Center for Farmworker Health, 83% of farmworkers said that they were paid by the hour, 11% were paid by the piece, and 6% were salaried or had other payment methods. In a 2012 report by the Food Chain Workers Alliance, only 13.5% of workers earn a livable wage across food sectors from production through retail, while for agriculture and nursery workers surveyed, this rate was 0%. The poverty rate among farmworkers is more than double the rate for all salary and wage workers, and according to 2007–2009 NAWS data, 23% of farmworkers’ families fall below national poverty guidelines. According to this same survey, the median household income for farmworkers was between $17,500 and $19,999 compared with $52,000 for all U.S. households. Based on a 2012 survey conducted by the Food Chain Workers Alliance, 92.9% of all workers experiencing wage theft were Latino workers in farm and agriculture.

Latino farmworkers are also disproportionately affected by irregular and inconsistent work, experiencing unemployment rates that are double those of all wage and salary workers, with crop workers facing twice the rate of unemployment of livestock workers, according to Kandel. On the flip side, farmworkers are also more likely to have schedules
that exceed 50 hours per week, especially during peak agricultural seasons. As noted by the SPLC, undocumented workers are unable to access federal programs for the poor, including SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, housing assistance, disability and unemployment, Medicaid, or SSI (Supplemental Security Income), despite paying billions to federal programs annually. However, Kandel reports that for those who are authorized to work in the United States, hired farmworkers use these programs at higher rates than employees in other sectors because of poverty-level wages.

Despite these inconsistencies and economic realities, farmworkers do not typically have access to unemployment insurance, worker’s compensation, or disability benefits. This lack of protection is significant, given the hazardous working conditions that many farmworkers experience.

**Working Conditions and Labor Abuses**

With the high number of undocumented workers on U.S. farms comes a preponderance of unsafe working conditions and labor abuses. Women farmworkers encounter these struggles in addition to even greater wage inequalities and, in many cases, sexual harassment and abuse. According to the SPLC—a recent study—as many as 80% of female farmworkers experience sexual violence, and these women often fear reporting these crimes because of a generalized fear of police. This is one illustration of how farmworkers often work in a “shadow economy” where they are subject to the whims of unscrupulous employers, unable to assert their rights, and, for all practical purposes, beyond the protection of labor laws that protect the rest of us from abuse, discrimination, and wage cheating in the workplace.

Agricultural work is widely considered to be one of the most hazardous sectors of the economy, and safety and health concerns in the workplace are often exacerbated by unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. The housing conditions of farmworkers have long been plagued by overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, proximity to fields with heavy pesticide application, and substandard inspection and enforcement. Housing conditions are even more precarious for migratory workers who follow crop harvests. Not only are farmworkers disparately exposed to pesticides, high risk of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, greater incidence of food insecurity, and a general lack of sanitary facilities on the job, but they are also less likely to have health insurance and paid sick days.

It is also crucial to acknowledge how these working conditions affect children, given that children and youth receive fewer legal protections in agricultural work than in other sectors. For example, while workers in nonagricultural sectors must be 18 years of age to perform hazardous tasks in the workplace, the minimum age for workers in the agricultural sector is 16 years. As outlined in a 2011 report by Bon Appétit Management Company and UFW,

A 16-year-old farmworker may legally be employed in such hazardous activities as: operating heavy farm equipment (e.g., tractors, harvesters, combines, and forklifts), pruning or picking fruit at a height of 20 feet, applying toxic agricultural chemicals (including anhydrous ammonia), and working inside “a fruit, forage, or grain storage designed to retain an oxygen-deficient or toxic atmosphere. (p. 16)

The lack of adequate sanitation facilities, coupled with heavy pesticide exposure, is a pressing and often deadly challenge confronting farmworkers. The SPLC reports that a 2003 study based in California found that the most common illnesses among farmworkers were linked to the use of organophosphates, a group of insecticides used for their neurotoxic characteristics. The SPLC also reports that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that there are 10,000 to 20,000 cases of diagnosed pesticide poisonings among farmworkers. However, these are the diagnosed cases, and given the barriers that farmworkers face in seeking health care, the number is likely much higher. For instance, both the SPLC and Kandel note that only one tenth of farmworkers
are estimated to have health insurance. Prolonged pesticide exposure has been linked to a wide range of illnesses and health conditions, including infertility and reproductive health problems, cancer, birth defects, skin problems, Parkinson's disease, and neurological damage. For children living and sometimes working on or near farms, these health conditions can become even more pronounced given their developmental needs.

While farm owners must follow the procedures and standards outlined by the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration does not inspect farms with fewer than 11 employees unless there are different rules at the state level. This, according to the 2011 Bon Appétit Management Company and UFW report, results in approximately 88% of all farms that have hired laborers not being inspected. This lack of inspections creates a situation where the levels of pesticide exposure remains largely misunderstood and underreported, and where states must take it on themselves to create and carry out more stringent regulations. The legal loopholes and the lack of regulations for safety and health concerns are especially problematic given that most farmworkers are not covered by their employer's workers compensation insurance. The occupational fatality rate for farmworkers was five times higher than the rate of any other worker in 2009. However, this too is likely to be an underestimate, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps certain fatality information confidential, and because the eventual cause of death is not always linked back to pesticide exposure.

Environmental exposure is also a leading cause of farmworker illness and disease, and recently, the UFW has worked particularly hard to draw attention to the deaths caused by extreme heat in California and the lack of farmer protections, including access to shade, regular breaks, and a source of potable water. Between 2003 and 2008, there were 38 reported deaths caused by heat exposure, with the greatest number of these occurring in California, Florida, and North Carolina. Even when it does not lead to death, heat stress is a significant cause of workplace injury and illness, and it often goes undiagnosed and unreported.

Forced labor is also a persistent and troubling problem within the agricultural sector, and farmworkers are often vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse and threats of deportation if they do not follow strict orders from their employers. Since the late 1990s, cases of forced, indentured, and enslaved agricultural workers have made national headlines. The most public of these cases includes seven cases of slavery prosecutions in Florida and the labor coercion of 400 Thai farmers who were brought into the United States by Global Horizons Manpower, Inc., through the H2A program to work in orchards and farms in Washington state and Hawaii. Through the ongoing Anti-Slavery Campaign led by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW; described in more detail in a later section on solidarity), the enslavement and abuse of more than 1,000 workers in Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas have been investigated and prosecuted since 1997.

Legal Protections and Regulations

While there are state regulations designed to protect farmworkers, nearly all major federal labor laws that were passed during the New Deal under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945) specifically exclude farmworkers. Those laws that would be particularly helpful to farmworkers, including workers compensation, mandatory breaks, and overtime pay regulations, do not apply to workers in this sector of the economy. Moreover, "under federal law, a farmworker may be fired for joining a labor union, and farm labor unions have no legal recourse to compel a company or agricultural employer to negotiate employment terms" (Bon Appétit, 2011, p. iv).

Although agricultural employers and farm labor contractors must abide by the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, this act does not cover some of the most pressing challenges that have been discussed here. It does, however, state that workers must be paid what and when they are due and that the terms and conditions of
the employment must be disclosed. For undocumented workers, however, there is little recourse to ensure that these standards are met. Finally, as previously noted, there are particular and persistent ways by which children are not protected within the agricultural sector, and children as young as 14 years of age may work on farms legally. Children as young as 12 years of age may work with their parents’ permission on the same farm where their parents are employed outside of school hours. Little is known about employer compliance with these laws, and enforcement seems to be lacking.

**Solidarity and Organizing Efforts**

The obstacles and challenges of farmworkers have long inspired organizing and solidarity efforts through various unions, coalitions, and other civil society–based groups. The UFW, organized in the early 1960s, has become the most recognizable group organizing for and by farmworkers. Founded by César Chavez and led by individuals like Dolores Huerta, the UFW has been successful in improving the lives of farmworkers through staging boycotts, strikes, and campaigns across the United States. The union was founded through a merging of Chavez’s organization, the National Farm Workers Association, and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, led by the Filipino organizer Larry Itliong. The Delano grape strike, targeting growers in California, is perhaps the UFW’s most pronounced effort, and through these efforts, the UFW gained national visibility about the inequalities and horrific conditions that farmworkers often encountered. This strike, lasting from 1965 to the early 1970s, resulted in the first ever labor contract with growers.

Founded nearly 30 years later, the CIW is a nonprofit organization that has worked since 1993 to protect the rights of immigrant workers in the agricultural sector. Focusing primarily on workers in the tomato industry, the CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food has worked to pressure 10 large food corporations, including fast food giants like McDonald’s and Taco Bell, food retailers like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, and food service companies like Sodexo and Bon Appétit, to sign on to Fair Food Agreements. These agreements stipulate that these buyers enact a zero-tolerance policy for forced labor and that they pay a premium price of one more penny per pound, and that this money directly benefits farmworkers. Additionally, through supporting ongoing prosecutions of coerced labor through the Anti-Slavery Campaign, the CIW has raised awareness about the ongoing problem of enslaved labor in the agricultural sector. Other key organizations include the Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), the Agricultural Justice Project, El Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (the Farmworkers Support Committee), and the Farmworker Justice Fund, though there are hundreds more solidarity organizations working for farmworker justice.

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*See also* Employment: U.S. Food Sector; Food Justice; Migrant Labor; Pesticides; Worker Safety

**Further Readings**


