

Farmworkers in Michigan*

Barry Lewis, Rubén Martínez, Juan David Coronado

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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of the occupational lives of migrant and seasonal farmworkers to promote awareness of the many challenges they face on Michigan's farms and across the nation. In Michigan, which boasts a \$101 billion agricultural industry, the numbers of farmworkers and their household members are approximately 94,000, with nearly 6,500 guest workers brought to do labor-intensive work. In Michigan, and across the nation, these workers are in demand today even as there are widespread anti-immigrant sentiments. These sentiments have contributed to increased enforcement of immigration laws, producing labor shortages in agriculture and instability in the labor force, which has resulted in increased recruitment of H-2A workers. Agricultural work ranks among the most dangerous occupations in the nation. Yet, migrant and seasonal farmworkers seldom receive adequate safety training to protect themselves while in the fields. As a result, many fall victim to preventable health problems like skin rashes and musculoskeletal diseases. Poverty and the lack of livable wages are also major issues for these workers, many of whom are paid piece rates that make it difficult for some to earn the minimum wage rate. Some are required to pay for on-site housing provided by their employers. These houses are sometimes substandard and overcrowded, which contributes to physical and mental health strains. The children of migrant farmworkers often have their schooling disrupted, and some may work in the fields despite laws regulating child labor where they may be exposed to pesticides which, like poverty, diminishes their opportunities for healthy development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Lewis is a research assistant at Julian Samora Research Institute and working on completing the requirements for an MSW at the MSU School of Social Work.

Rubén Martínez is professor of sociology and director of the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University.

Juan David Coronado is a post-doctoral scholar at the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University.

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