

Health and Safety Issues among Non-migrant Adult Farm Workers

Lorann Stallones, M.P.H. Ph.D.
Colorado Injury Control Research Center
Department of Environmental Health
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80535

The purpose of this paper is to discuss health and safety issues for adult farm workers in the United States who are not migrant workers. The agricultural work force is diverse, with farm operators representing approximately 35% of the total population in 1987. Some farm operators also hire themselves out for wages to other farmers. In 1987, unpaid agricultural workers included 2.9 million people, comprising the largest percentage of the agricultural work force (37%). Hired workers, not including migrant and undocumented foreign workers, comprised 28% of the agricultural workforce (2.2 million people). More recent reports (1992) suggest an increase in the number of hired farm workers from 2.2 million to 2.5 million. While a large proportion of the hired workers migrate, six out of ten crop farm workers do not (Villarejo and Baron, 1999). With the shift toward larger farms, hired labor use has become concentrated on larger farms in California, Texas, Florida, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania accounting for almost half of hired labor expenditures. Unpaid and domestic hired farm workers have been predominantly young males. Unpaid workers had relatively high educational attainment, while paid workers had lower educational status. Farm work for hired workers is sporadic, frequently unstable, and of short duration, with only one-fifth of the workers being year-round employees. Hired workers are involved in a wide range of activities including sugarcane, strip and baling tobacco, herding sheep, combine operation, milking, shearing Christmas trees, stocking catfish ponds, and farm management. Although this population contributes significantly to agricultural production, they have rarely been considered in research related to agricultural safety and health.

First, it must be acknowledged that the term "farmworker" has been used to denote a variety of classes of workers. Agricultural worker is similarly ambiguously defined when reviewing published reports. In the newly developed coding system proposed for use by all federal agencies where occupational coding systems are used, the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System, the inability to differentiate migrant from part time and other farmworkers persists. Table 1 contains the descriptive terms used for workers in agriculture. According to Meister (1991), definitions used to classify migrant and seasonal workers differ between agencies. While this confusion may, at first glance, appear to constitute a minor problem for researchers, when trying to determine the health status of paid farm workers who do not migrate, this lack of specificity becomes an insurmountable problem.

Most studies provide information on farmers and some work has specifically addressed migrant workers, but there are few studies that provide data separately for this portion of the agricultural workforce. To further compound the difficulty of determining health risks among this population, most authors do not differentiate the hired, non-migrating seasonal and full-time workers from migrant workers. The term "hired farm worker" has been used interchangeably with migrant farm worker and thus confounds our ability to determine whether there are unique

health problems resulting from exposures encountered as a non-migrating farm worker.

On a national basis, insurance industry sources estimate that 40% of regular, year-round farm employees lack health insurance. This is the highest proportion of uninsured workers for any occupational category (Villarejo and Baron, 1999). The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that only 11% of workers hired directly by farm operators received benefits such as life insurance, health insurance or transportation from their employer (USDA, 1992). Among hired farm workers, it has been estimated that only 20% use Medicaid (USDOL, 1997). Universal coverage of all workers under workers' compensation insurance is required by law in only fourteen states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington). Complete coverage includes medical care and indemnity for lost wages or disabilities caused by job-related illnesses and injuries. Employers pay premiums for annual coverage for hired workers. Eighteen states provide no such coverage for hired farm workers (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Nebraska, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming). Workers' compensation claims must be filed by an injured employee and may be challenged by the employer through a claims board.

Agricultural workers are exempted from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) that requires overtime pay for all hours over 40 worked each week. Farm operators who employ fewer than 11 full time employees in a given year are exempt from provisions of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) unless they operate a temporary labor camp or an on the job fatality occurs. In general, hired workers on farms are therefore not covered by programs that were designed to protect health, safety and fairness that protect employees in other work settings.

Epidemiological analysis of health problems requires accurate counting of the number of individuals exposed to serve as an appropriate denominator for the computation of rates. In 1987, the USDA Hired Farm Work Force report was discontinued (Villarejo and Baron, 1999). This survey was replaced by the Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS). Since its inception, information has been gathered annually on a sample of 2500 hired farmworker households, but the population represents migrant and seasonal workers, not households of hired farm workers who do not fall into the temporary workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) compiles data on occupational illnesses and injuries, but excludes agricultural employers of fewer than 11 full time employees, therefore injury and illness statistics for hired workers on smaller operations are not available from this source. Myers (1997) reported results of a survey of injuries among farm workers where the hired workers are represented, however data was grouped with all hired workers presented, therefore no clear distinction was made between full-time hired farm workers and part-time farm workers, nor was it clear from the wording of the questionnaire whether farm operators would include in those counts seasonal and migrant workers or not. The question was: "Estimated total hours of farm work performed by full and part-time hired farm workers and other unpaid farm workers during 1993". Later, when counting injuries, the question was asked: "Relationship of victim to the farm" and the following were separate categories: "Hired farm labor" and "non-family unpaid labor". Therefore, while the numerator for computing injuries differentiated between paid and unpaid, the denominator for the total hours of work contributed by these two categories of worker did not. Further, there was

no distinction made in the questionnaire presented as to seasonal or migrant status of employees. In conclusion, because of the absence of clarity in most published papers, it is impossible to separate statistics related to health of safety. Clearly, hired workers may be migrant, seasonal or not. Perhaps many of the full time workers are included in studies of farm owner/operators or perhaps they are included with statistics on "farm workers" and falsely being considered migrant workers. The new classification system (SOC) does not provide any way to differentiate this group of workers and will not be useful for researchers interested in compiling information on the health and safety of this group. In light of many authors' assertion that this group may make up as much as 60% of the estimated 2.5 million hired workers on farms, developing health statistics for this group is imperative. There is clear need to develop definitions of terms to be used and apply them without the current ambiguities in order to accomplish the task of developing health statistics about the agricultural workers who are not migrant who contribute to agricultural production in this country.

Numeric code	Occupational Classification
45-100045-101045-101145-1012	-- First-line supervisors/managers of farming, fishing and forestry workers -- Farm labor contractors
45-200045-201045-201145-202045-202145-204045-204145-209045-209145-209245-209345-2099	-- Agricultural Workers -- Agricultural Inspectors -- Animal breeders -- Graders and sorters, agricultural products -- Miscellaneous agricultural workers -- Agricultural equipment operators -- Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery and greenhouse -- Farmworkers, farm and ranch animals -- Agricultural workers, all other

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