

Profile of Hired Farmworkers, 1996 Annual Averages

Jack Runyan

Introduction

Hired farmworkers, a small part of U.S. wage and salary workers (less than 1 percent in 1996), make an important contribution to agricultural production, accounting for about 30 percent of all farmworkers.¹ Hired farmworkers help provide labor during critical production periods. Some hired farmworkers migrate from production area to production area during several months of the year, others work locally only during harvesting season, and some work full time for a single employer. Although important to agriculture, hired farmworkers continue to be one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States, experiencing low wages, seasonal employment, weak attachment to the labor force, and limited participation in the nonfarm labor market (Oliveira, 1992, and U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

During the 1990's, the U.S. House of Representatives has held several hearings on a broad range of concerns related to the living and working conditions of hired farmworkers. Testimony at the hearings presented the need for accurate, comprehensive data on farmworkers to assess their socioeconomic status and to determine how best to improve their situation (Delfico, 1991). Congress has considered major legislation to improve farmworker living and working conditions, including proposals related to immigration, temporary foreign worker programs in agriculture, and an increase in the minimum wage (legislation was enacted to raise the minimum wage to \$5.15 on September 1, 1997). Basic information on the patterns of farm labor use and the demographic and employment characteristics of hired farmworkers help inform the policy debate about the effects of changing legislation. Currently, no one source of data provides the necessary details to help us understand issues

related to changes in the supply, demand, wages, earnings, employee benefits, and characteristics of farmworkers on both local and national levels (Oliveira and Whitener, 1995).

The Data

This report uses data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) earnings microdata file (see box) to examine demographic, earning, and geographic characteristics of hired farmworkers. Comparisons in the text are based on statistical tests with a confidence level of 95 percent or higher.

The CPS information is based on 12 months of data, with each month's data representing the number of individuals hired for farmwork during a 1-week period during that month. Annual averages were computed by summing the estimates across all months and dividing by 12. The annual average represents the average number of individuals employed at hired farmwork per week, not the total number of individuals employed.²

The CPS was redesigned in 1994, affecting "virtually every aspect of the survey, including the questionnaire, data collection methods, and the processing system" (*Monthly Labor Review*, 1993). As a result, data for 1994 and later years are not directly comparable with data for 1993 and earlier. A detailed description of the reasons for redesigning the CPS and the potential changes and benefits are presented in Bregger and Diplo, 1993, Polivka and Rothgeb, 1993, and Bowie, Cahoon, and Martin, 1993.

¹ In times of peak labor use (July), hired workers account for about 33 percent of farm workers, and in off-peak times they account for about 28 percent. Farm operators and unpaid workers account for the other 70 percent (*Farm Labor*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1996).

² For example, if each month a different worker works on a farm, the total number of workers who worked on that farm during the year is 12, while the average number of workers employed during the year is 1.

About the Data

Current Population Survey: The Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the Bureau of the Census, collects information on demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the employed, unemployed, and persons not in the labor force. It is the primary source of monthly estimates of total employment and unemployment in the United States. The CPS is based on a probability sample of households, designed to represent the U.S. civilian, noninstitutional population. (Participation in the survey is voluntary, and there are no penalties for not answering questions.)

Each month, about 50,000 households are sampled in all 50 States and the District of Columbia. Once a household is selected, it is interviewed for 4 consecutive months, dropped from the survey for 8 months, then interviewed for a final 4 months.

Approximately one quarter of the sample is changed monthly. This survey design provides for about three-quarters of the selected households to be interviewed the following month, and about one-half to be interviewed the next year. In this way, the Census Bureau can obtain month-to-month and year-to-year comparisons with minimal inconvenience to any one household. During monthly visits, trained enumerators complete a questionnaire for each household member age 15 and older. Questions focus on each household member's labor force activity during the survey week, the calendar week containing the 12th day of the month. Information from this sample of households is expanded to provide national-level estimates.

CPS earnings microdata file: Each month, workers in about one-quarter of the CPS households (those in either their fourth or eighth month in the sample) are asked additional questions about weekly hours worked and earnings. The 1996 CPS earnings microdata file used in this report consists of all records from the monthly quarter-samples of CPS households that were asked the additional questions during 1996. The data file contained information on almost 430,000 people, including over 1,290 who were employed as hired farmworkers. Data comparisons in the analysis are based on differences that are significant at the 95-percent or higher confidence level.

Limitations: The CPS classifies employed persons according to the job at which they worked the greatest number of hours during the survey week. As a result, hired farmworkers who spent more time during the survey week at their nonfarm job than at their farm job would not be included in the primary employment count as hired farmworkers. These workers would be counted in 1996 as having hired farmwork as their secondary employment.

The CPS may undercount Hispanics in the hired farm workforce. Because the CPS is based on a survey of households, it may undercount farmworkers living in nontraditional living quarters, many of whom are likely to be Hispanic. In addition, undocumented foreign farmworkers may, because of their illegal status, avoid survey enumerators.

For more information on the survey and its data see the U.S. Department of Labor's *Employment and Earnings*.