Profile of Hired Farmworkers, 1998 Annual Averages

Jack L. Runyan

Introduction

Hired farmworkers, a small part of U.S. wage and salary workers (less than 1 percent in 1998), are an important part of agricultural production, accounting for about 30 percent of farmworkers. Farm operators and unpaid family workers comprise the other 70 percent (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Farm Labor*, 1998).[1] Although important to agriculture, hired farmworkers continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in the United States, experiencing low wages, seasonal employment, weak attachment to the labor force, and limited nonfarm employment opportunities.

The hired farmworker market has some characteristics that, when taken together, make it unique. Some of these characteristics are a high percentage of migrant laborers, undocumented workers, and labor turnover. These characteristics also often impact farming communities by causing an influx of large numbers of transient workers who do not fit neatly into the ethnic, cultural, education, language, and wealth makeup of the community (Denton, 1999; Martin, 1998; and Mines and Alarcon, 1999).

Some agricultural industries, such as fruit and vegetable production, depend on sizeable numbers of migrant farmworkers to harvest crops and perform various tasks during the growing season (Emerson and Roka, 1999; and Thilmany, 1999). Migrant farmworkers average about 12 percent of all U.S. hired farmworkers, but may reach up to 75 percent in some areas (citrus and vegetable harvesting in Florida) (Emerson and Roka, 1999; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Farm Labor*, 1999). The availability of an adequate number of seasonal workers who migrate has become an issue of increasing concern. Some members of the U.S. Congress have introduced legislation in the past 3 years to create new or to improve the existing guest workers programs (H2-A) that allow U.S. farm employers who qualify to hire alien workers for temporary employment.

Undocumented workers are non-U.S. residents who do not have official permission to work in the United States. It is nearly impossible to say how many undocumented workers are employed as hired farmworkers in the United States; estimates run from 30 to 70 percent of the hired farmworkers in some areas and in some crops (Mason, 1998; and Thilmany, 1999). On the surface, a work force with a high percentage of undocumented workers would appear to be unstable, but a constant stream of these workers may give a false sense of stability. There are many reports of these workers not being offered the same legal protections as documented workers and U.S. citizens.

Many hired farmworkers do not speak English (one-third are noncitizens, of which about 95 percent are Hispanic) and have less than a high school education (Martin, 1998). Lack of language skills and education limits these workers in their ability to obtain alternative employment to supplement their income or to move out of hired farm labor. When a large percentage of a work force has limited employment alternatives and there appears to be a ready supply of undocumented workers to fill vacancies, labor shortages (at least nationwide) appear remote and employers have little incentive to increase wages or adopt labor-saving technologies. According to Mines and Alarcon (1999) and Thilmany (1999), many employers have refrained from altering production enterprises or practices due to a lack of concern about labor shortages.

U.S. labor-intensive farming is becoming vulnerable to international competition (Mines and Alarcon, 1999).

[1] In times of peak labor use (July), hired workers account for about 33 percent of farmworkers, and in off-peak times, they account for about 28 percent (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Farm Labor*).

Many competing countries pay substantially lower wages and have less stringent health and safety standards for both workers and products. That being the case, operators of labor-intensive farm enterprises will need to adjust their practices to remain competitive.

This report presents information on the patterns of farm labor use and the demographic and employment characteristics of hired farmworkers to help inform the policy debate about the effects of proposed and changing legislation on the Nation's farmworkers.

The Data

Currently, no single source of data provides details necessary to 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).

This report uses data from both the Census of Agriculture and the Current Population Survey (CPS) earnings microdata file (see "About the Data") to examine changing patterns of hired farm labor use, and demographic, earnings, and geographic characteristics of hired farmworkers.

The Census of Agriculture is conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, every 5 years, for years ending in 2 and 7. It offers the most complete geographic coverage of hired and contract farm labor use as measured by labor expenditures. Expenditure data can be used to show the magnitude of labor use and to estimate the share of production expenses attributed to labor by type and size of farm. The CPS earnings file is based on 12 months of data, on the number of people who did hired farmwork during a 1-week period each month. Annual averages were computed by summing the estimates across all months and dividing by 12. The annual average represents the average number of people employed at hired farmwork per week, not the total number of persons 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" used in earlier years (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993, p. 2). A detailed description of the reasons for redesigning the CPS and the potential changes and benefits are presented in Bregger and Dippo, 1993; Polivka and Rothgeb, 1993; and Bowie, Cahoon, and Martin, 1993. The changes in the CPS did not significantly change the estimated number of hired farmworkers, but did increase the estimated percentage of Hispanics in the hired farm workforce.

[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 one.

About the Data

Data from two sources were used for this analysis. One was the *Census of Agriculture*, an establishment survey, and the other is the Current Population Survey, a household survey.

Census of Agriculture

The *Census of Agriculture*, conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, is the leading source of statistics about the Nation's agricultural production and is the most comprehensive source of agricultural data available at the county level. It offers the most complete geographic coverage of hired and contract farm labor use as measured by labor expenditures. Expenditure data can be used to show the magnitude of labor use and to estimate the share of production expenses attributed to labor by size of farm.

The *Census of Agriculture* is a mail survey of U.S. farms and ranches. The mailing for the 1997 Census generated 1.7 million useable questionnaires. After adjusting for nonrespondents, survey data were expanded to the estimated 1.9 million farms in the United Sates. To reduce respondent burden, some questions were asked of a sample of farms. Data on hired labor and contract labor expenditures were collected from a sample of about 501,000 farm operators in 1997.

Limitations: The Census data on hired workers refer to all hired persons on the farm, including bookkeepers, secretaries, and mechanics who are generally considered not to be hired farmworkers. Expenditure data do not include payment-in-kind, such as meals and lodging. All expenditures for labor involved in custom work are combined with expenses for machine hire. The Census does not collect information on the demographic and job characteristics of hired and contract workers. Since the Census data are collected once every 5 years, they may not reflect the most recent changes in the farm labor situation.

Current Population Survey

The Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the Bureau of the Census, collects information on the 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 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 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 1998 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 1998. The data file contained information on almost 404,250 people, including more than 1,235 who were employed as hired farmworkers. Data comparisons in the analysis are based on differences that are significant at the 95-percent or higher level of confidence.

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 1998 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 workers may, because of their illegal status, avoid enumerators.

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