

# Where is the Social Safety Net for California's Agricultural Workforce?

Alexandra E. Hill

Eligibility restrictions based on legal status, family composition, and county residency impose significant barriers to social welfare program participation for California's agricultural workers.

Agricultural laborers are one of the poorest populations of workers in the United States. While the proportion of workers below the poverty line has fallen substantially over the last decade, recent estimates still find that roughly 22% of U.S. crop workers live in poverty. Despite this, participation by agricultural workers in social assistance programs is well below national averages. In 2003 program participation rates of eligible non-farm households reached 50 percent—almost double the rates for eligible farm households, at about 20 percent.

Even compared to workers in other low-wage occupations, U.S. agricultural workers have substantially lower participation rates. For example, in 2012, public program enrollment for agricultural workers was around 15%; around 52% for restaurant and food service workers; and around 30% for construction workers. In California, the state with the largest population of agricultural laborers, the picture is no different. Program participation rates among California agricultural workers are higher than national averages, but these still fall below participation rates for other California low-wage industry workers.

Examining specific program eligibility criteria identifies three main barriers

to participation that are relevant for the agricultural workforce: (1) legal status, (2) family structure, and (3) seasonal employment. Figure 1 shows the participation rates for the families of California crop workers represented in the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) for several federal means-tested social welfare programs (programs that restrict eligibility based on income).

The most heavily utilized programs by these workers are Medi-Cal (the California name for Medicaid), CalFresh (the California name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Given the low average annual earnings of these households, these participation rates are much lower than expected.

## Program Eligibility

The eligibility criteria for federal means-tested welfare programs shed some light on these low participation rates. Almost all of these means-tested programs restrict eligibility based on legal status. Among the programs presented in figure 1, WIC is the only one that provides equal benefits for undocumented and citizen workers. Medi-Cal and CalFresh allow undocumented

workers to receive emergency medical services and emergency food assistance, respectively. The remaining programs— Low-Income Housing and CalWorks (the California name for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF)— strictly limit eligibility to lawfully present applicants, i.e., citizens and green card holders.

While these programs do not allow undocumented workers to receive full program benefits for themselves, they do allow them to receive benefits on behalf of their children. WIC is only accessible for women, infants, and children under the age of five, but places no restrictions on legal status.

Both Medi-Cal and CalFresh provide benefits for children under the age of 18, regardless of legal status. However, because these programs do not allow undocumented parents to receive full program benefits, mixed-status households (households with some citizens and some undocumented family members) are subject to different income eligibility thresholds and benefit amounts than all-citizen households. For both Medi-Cal and CalFresh, mixed-status families are treated as households with only the number of citizen members. For example, for a family of four, with two undocumented parents and two citizen children, they are treated as a household of two.

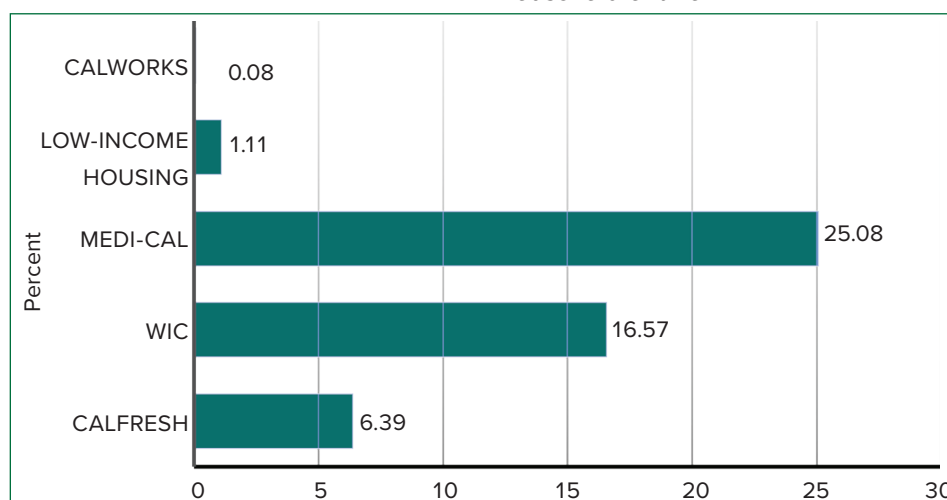


Figure 1. Program Participation Rates for California Crop Workers

Source: National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS).

**Table 1. Mean Characteristics of California Crop Workers by Program Participation**

	-----Participants-----				Non-Participants
	CalFresh	Medi-Cal	WIC	CalWorks or LI Housing	
N	1,259	4,110	2,715	230	8,778
<b>Household Composition</b>					
Family Size	4.43	4.05	4.26	4.58	2.76
# Kids <18 in Household	2.24	1.94	2.15	2.13	0.39
# Kids <18 Non-residents	0.08	0.07	0.06	0.11	0.51
Spouse in Household	81.12%	88.39%	92.52%	81.74%	54.61%
Non-resident Spouse	5.39%	1.68%	0.68%	5.32%	43.91%
<b>Worker Characteristics</b>					
Female (%)	29.39	28.13	28.55	36.52	14.09
Citizen (%)	9.29	10	7.07	10.87	9.14
Green Card Holder (%)	43.45	46.96	39.59	55.22	28.15
Undocumented (%)	34.55	40.56	50.46	15.65	61.38
Migrant (%)	15.17	9.84	9.46	19.63	35.45
<b>Income</b>					
Hours Worked per Week	41.16	44.73	44.73	41.02	44.39
Hourly Wage Rate	6.82	7.8	7.73	6.71	7.87
Per Person Annual Income	4,145.51	5,020.84	5,583.38	4,813.66	7,029.88

Source: National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS).

This has three implications for mixed-status families compared with families with all lawfully present members. First, mixed-status families are eligible for lower benefit amounts. Second, mixed-status households face different income thresholds. And third, these incredibly complicated programs are made exponentially more difficult to understand. For many agricultural workers, these program criteria inhibit households from applying for and receiving program benefits.

In addition to restricting eligibility based on legal status and family composition, the programs also impose state and county residency requirements that restrict access for many workers. Because benefits for all these programs are administered by county

enrollment offices, program participants either have to reapply or submit proof of address changes after moving to a different county.

Particularly for migrant crop workers who relocate with the crop seasons, often changing counties, states and countries, these residency restrictions pose significant barriers to participation. To overcome this, both CalFresh and Low-Income Housing offer some expedited services for migrant workers; but despite simplifying the application process, this still requires workers to reapply after moving.

### Characteristics of Program Participants

Using the NAWS data, Table 1 provides comparative summary statistics for

California crop workers based on program participation. Relevant to family composition, compared with non-participants, program participants tend to have larger household sizes with more children under 18 living with them and fewer non-resident children living abroad. Participants are also substantially more likely to be living with a spouse in the United States, and much less likely to have a spouse living abroad.

Relevant to worker characteristics, compared with non-participants, a higher proportion of program participants are female or green card holders, while a lower proportion are undocumented or migrant. The dispersion of citizens varies across the programs, with CalWorks/Low-Income Housing participants having the highest proportion of citizen workers.

Finally, relevant to worker incomes, program participants tend to have lower wages and much lower per-person annual household incomes compared with non-participants. In general, average incomes for agricultural households are incredibly low. The lower incomes among program participants likely reflect both the income thresholds for program eligibility and the increased need for benefits for families with very low incomes.

The average hours worked varies across the programs. Medi-Cal and WIC participants work similar hours to program non-participants, while CalFresh and CalWorks/Low-Income Housing participants work fewer hours at substantially lower wages.

In light of the previously discussed eligibility criteria, these worker differences make sense. Undocumented workers are not eligible for full benefits for these programs, so they are less likely to participate. Additionally, undocumented workers tend to have fewer children living in their household, which likely contributes to their lower participation. Finally, the lower

prevalence of migrant workers among participants compared with non-participants could be due to program residency requirements.

The variation in these worker attributes among participants in the different programs also aligns with the differences in eligibility criteria. For example, WIC has no restrictions on legal status for applicants, while CalWorks and Low-Income Housing have the most stringent restrictions. Among NAWS respondents, WIC participants have the highest proportion of undocumented workers, while CalWorks/Low-Income Housing have the lowest.

Similarly, CalFresh and Low-Income Housing participants have the highest prevalence of migrant workers. This is most likely because both programs have expedited services, specifically for migrant workers. Contrarily, for Medi-Cal and WIC, migrant workers must reapply for benefits after moving.

Finally, participants in these five programs, on average, have around two children living in their households, while non-participants have less than one. This family composition aligns with the increased eligibility for all of these programs for applicants with children. This could additionally reflect the higher benefit amounts for which workers with children are eligible.

## Implications for the Workforce

In recent years, the agricultural labor market has been seeing a lower supply of workers, and, as an effect, producers have been increasingly competing with each other to attract the necessary labor. Employers have been increasing wages and offering their workers non-monetary benefits such as: facilitating enrollment in welfare programs; offering food donations at the farm; and providing child care and health care services. Limited by the prices they receive for agricultural products, employers are unable to raise wages substantially, so they rely heavily on

these non-monetary benefits.

The combination of low wages and strenuous working conditions has made agricultural labor an undesirable industry for many workers. California agricultural employers have had growing difficulties competing for labor with employers in other low-wage industries. Many other low-wage jobs require far less effort and do not expose workers to the same grueling conditions.

Because of this, and many other reasons, the California agricultural workforce has long been dominated by immigrants who either have limited alternatives for work or who have experience in agriculture. Over the span of NAWS, this has been contributing to a growing proportion of undocumented immigrants working in California agriculture.

Many low-wage workers depend on program benefits to support themselves and their families. Unfortunately, the increase in undocumented workers means that California's agricultural workforce is increasingly ineligible for many social assistance programs.

There have been some legislative changes to these programs that have improved accessibility for some workers. For example, the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009 extended Medicaid benefits to many children of undocumented workers. Like Medicaid, some programs have improved access for the children of undocumented applicants. Others, like SNAP, have increased spending for emergency services provided to undocumented workers.

Despite some legislative updates, none of these programs have removed the legal status restrictions. These eligibility restrictions and benefit reductions based on immigration status, family composition, and county residency continue to reduce program accessibility for workers.

For many low-wage workers, benefits from the social safety net are vital for ensuring the families are able to access food, housing, health care, and other necessities. For agricultural workers who are paid low wages, work long hours and face strenuous work conditions, the lack of accessibility to program benefits remains a dominating concern for both the workers and California agricultural producers.

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## AUTHOR'S BIO

Alexandra Hill is a PhD student in the ARE department at UC Davis. She can be reached by email at [alihill@ucdavis.edu](mailto:alihill@ucdavis.edu).

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### For additional information, the author recommends:

Allegretto, S., et al. (2015). "Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry." <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/fast-food-poverty-wages-the-public-cost-of-low-wage-jobs-in-the-fast-food-industry/>

Irving, S. and T.A. Loveless (2015). "Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Participation in Government Programs, 2009-2012: Who Gets Assistance?" [www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p70-141.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p70-141.pdf).

CalFresh: [www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Non-Citizen\\_Guidance\\_063011.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Non-Citizen_Guidance_063011.pdf)

Medi-Cal: [www.coveredca.com/individuals-and-families/getting-covered/immigrants/](http://www.coveredca.com/individuals-and-families/getting-covered/immigrants/)

CalWorks: [www.sfhsa.org/asset/BenefitsSFLITE/CalWORKs\\_and\\_Immigration.pdf](http://www.sfhsa.org/asset/BenefitsSFLITE/CalWORKs_and_Immigration.pdf)

Low Income Housing: [www.ilw.com/immigrationdaily/news/2011,0113-crs.pdf](http://www.ilw.com/immigrationdaily/news/2011,0113-crs.pdf)