Farmworkers play a vital role in cultivating the food we eat everyday, and North Carolina has one of the largest farmworker populations in the nation. Even though 85% of our fruits and vegetables are harvested by hand, farmworkers remain largely invisible.

“It’s just ridiculous that we, the ones that are feeding the whole world, are the ones that [live in such poor conditions].”

—Wayne County Farmworker, North Carolina
Economic Profile

Poverty: Nationally, farmworkers’ average annual income is $11,000; for a family it is approximately $16,000. Farmworkers on the East Coast earn about 35% less than the national average.

Hard work, low pay: At 40¢ per bucket (5/8 bushel), a farmworker must pick and haul two tons of sweet potatoes to earn $50.

Few wage protections: Most farmworkers are exempt from minimum wage laws, and all are exempt from overtime provisions, despite long work days during peak harvest.

Few benefits: Despite pervasive poverty, less than one percent of farmworkers collect general assistance welfare nationwide. Only ten percent of farmworkers report having health insurance through an employer health plan. Fewer than four out of ten workers interviewed said that they would receive unemployment benefits if out of work.

Hunger: Nearly five out of ten North Carolina farmworkers cannot afford enough food for themselves and their families.

Get Involved!

Visit www.ncfarmworkers.org to learn more and to take action in support of farmworkers.

Health Profile

Poor housing: Research suggests that the health of North Carolina farmworker families is at risk due to substandard housing. State regulations require only one wash tub for every 30 workers, one shower for every 10 workers, one toilet for every 15 workers, and do not require mattresses or telephone access in case of emergency.

Overcrowding: Seven out of ten farmworkers on the East Coast live in crowded conditions.

Pesticide exposure: Up to 44% of farmworker families live in housing directly adjacent to agricultural fields, increasing likelihood of pesticide exposure. A 2006 study in Eastern North Carolina showed that most farmworker children are routinely exposed to pesticides.

High rates of illness: Farmworkers face higher incidences than other wage-earners of heat stress, dermatitis, urinary tract infections, parasitic infections, pesticide-related illnesses and tuberculosis. Eight out of ten North Carolina farmworkers surveyed had skin disease.

Limited Workers’ Compensation: In North Carolina, very few farmworkers are covered by workers’ compensation. Only farmers employing ten or more year-round workers or any H2A worker are required to carry workers’ compensation insurance.

Limited access to care: Barriers to receiving health care include lack of transportation, limited hours of clinic operation, cost of health care, limited interpreter services, and frequent relocation in order to seek farm work.

North Carolina Farmworkers are Organizing for Change

In 2004, a historic labor agreement was signed between the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the North Carolina Growers Association, and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, unionizing H2A guestworkers for the first time in the nation. The contract includes sick pay, bereavement leave, hiring security, protection from unjustified firing and a grievance procedure allowing workers to report problems on the job without fear of retaliation.

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The Farmworker Institute is a project of the NC Council of Churches’ Farmworker Ministry Committee, whose members include the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Farmworker Unit of Legal Aid of North Carolina, National Farm Worker Ministry, North Carolina Farmworker Health Program, Student Action with Farmworkers, and Triangle Friends of the United Farm Workers.


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