The U.S. Department of Labor’s National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) finds that farm workers are mostly Mexican-born men (NAWS, 2016). The NAWS, launched in 1989 to detect farm labor shortages due to immigration reforms, found that the foreign-born share of U.S. crop workers was 55% in 1989-90, peaked at 83% in 1999-00, and is now 70%. About 30% of today’s crop workers were born in the U.S.
Many crop worker characteristics have V- or inverted V-shapes with peaks or troughs around the year 2000. In 1990, the share of unauthorized farm workers was less than 10%, it peaked at almost 60% in 2000, and is now less than 50%.

This inverted V-shape of unauthorized farm workers reflects changing patterns of Mexico-U.S. migration. Newcomers are persons in the U.S. less than a year before being interviewed, and they are almost always unauthorized. The newcomer share of crop workers was less than five percent in 1990, peaked at 25% in 2000, and is less than five percent today (Figure 1).

Most crop workers are not migrants, persons who cross borders to work for wages. There is no single federal definition of a migrant farm worker. The NAWS, which considers a worker to be a migrant if he moved at least 75 miles from his usual home for a farm job, finds a declining share of migrants, about 15% in both the U.S. and California.

Of those who migrate to do crop work, a quarter follow the crops by having at least two farm jobs 70 miles apart, while three-fourths shuttle between homes in Mexico and jobs in the U.S. This means that fewer than five percent of U.S. crop workers are follow-the-crop migrants who move with the ripening crops from Florida up the eastern seaboard or who move from Texas to Michigan (Figure 2).

The average age of the nation’s crop workers is 39, compared with a median age of 42 for all U.S. workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). In 1990 and 2000, over half of U.S. crop workers were in the 20 to 34 age group. Today, the share of workers in this age group is below 40%.

Almost 60% of U.S. and California crop workers are married parents; only a quarter are single with no children. Over the past two decades, median family income has risen to the $20,000 to $25,000 range for U.S. and California crop workers and many of these families have two income earners. A rising share of U.S. and California crop worker families, about half, receive some type of means-tested assistance such as Medicaid or SNAP (Food Stamps), a sharp jump from less than a quarter in 1990 and 2000, reflecting the fact that there are many “mixed-status”
farm worker families with unauthorized parents and US-citizen children eligible for health and other benefits. (In 2016, California made all unauthorized poor children eligible for Medicaid, called Medi-Cal in California. Since a third of NAWS workers are interviewed in California, the share of farm worker families receiving some type of assistance is likely to rise.)

EMPLOYERS AND EARNINGS
Hiring of Farm Workers
Farm workers can be hired directly by farm operators or be brought to farms by nonfarm entities such as custom harvesters and farm labor contractors. About 86% of U.S. crop workers were hired directly by farmers in 1990, and that number dropped to 73% in 2000 and today is at 85%. Compare that to the share of California direct-hires that were 73% in 1990, 55% in 2000, and 66% today. The California direct-hire share of farm workers has not yet returned to 1990 levels. (The UI data find that 55% of average employment on California farms is workers brought to farms by crop support services, suggesting that the NAWS sample in California includes a higher share of directly hired workers.)

Farm Worker Years of Experience
When newcomers were pouring into the U.S. in the 1990s, the average years of U.S. farm work experience fell from 10 years in 1990 to eight years in 2000, but the slowdown in Mexico-U.S. migration after the 2008-09 recession contributed to rising farm work experience. In California, the average U.S. farm work experience fell from 11 to nine years, and is now 16 years. U.S. and California crop workers have been employed an average of seven years for their current farm employer.

Average Farm Worker Wages
Workers reported that they earned an average $5.25 an hour in the early 1990s, when the federal minimum wage was $4.25. They earned $6.50 an hour in 2000, when the federal minimum wage was $5.15, and $10 an hour today, when the federal minimum wage is $7.25. In California, workers reported average earnings of $5.55 in the early 1990s when the state’s minimum wage was $4.25; $6.55 in 2000 when the state’s minimum wage was $5.75; and $10 recently, when the state’s minimum wage was $9 an hour. The NAWS finds that the California wage premium of earlier years has disappeared.

Nonfarm Worker Wages Compared to Farm Worker Wages
Farm employers also report the average hourly earnings of their non-supervisory employees and farm workers earned an average $11.74 an hour in 2015, more than double the $5.00 an hour rate of 1989. The earnings of nonfarm workers, which were $21.00 an hour in 2015, rose from almost $10.00 an hour in 1989. The ratio of average farm to nonfarm earnings rose from 50% in 1990 to 55% in 2002 and stayed at this level since, so farm workers have not

“Fewer than five percent of U.S. crop workers are follow-the-crop migrants who move with the ripening crops from Florida up the eastern seaboard or who move from Texas to Michigan.”
closed the wage gap with nonfarm workers (Figure 3). Farm employers report higher earnings to USDA than workers report to the NAWS. (NAWS question D12 asks the hourly wage of workers paid hourly, and D13-D18 ask about piece rate wages, including how many hours per day piece rate workers were employed.)

Working Days
U.S. crop workers averaged over 190 days in 35 weeks of farm work recently, suggesting 5.4 days of work a week. California crop workers had even more days of farm work, an average 205 days in 36 weeks in recent years, or an average 5.7 days a week. The share of U.S. crop workers with at least one nonfarm job was over 30% in 1990, 15% in 2000, and 25% today. The California shares of U.S. crop workers with at least one nonfarm job were 16% in 1990, six percent in 2000, and 17% today. As this data indicates, California crop workers are less likely to have nonfarm jobs.

FROM VEGETABLES TO FRUITS
About 80% of U.S. crop workers interviewed in the NAWS are employed in fruit, vegetable, and horticulture (FVH) commodities, as are 90% of California crop workers. However, the interviewed U.S. workers have switched from mostly vegetable workers in 1990 to mostly fruit workers today; California has always had a much higher share of fruit workers.

SHIFTS FROM HARVESTING TO SEMI-SKILLED
The share of U.S. crop workers in harvesting jobs has been falling from 40% in 1990 to 30% in 2000 to less than 25% today. For California, the harvesting share fell from almost 50% in 1990 to 30% in 2000 and to 25% today. The most common job today is semi-skilled, such as equipment operator: a third of U.S. workers, and 37% of California workers, had such jobs when interviewed.

CONTINUING THEIR FARM WORK EMPLOYMENT
Most crop workers plan to continue to do farm work for at least five more years. In 1990, two-thirds of U.S. workers said they would continue to do farm work as long as they could. In 2000, this dipped to 56% and today over 75% of workers plan to continue to do farm work indefinitely. In California, the percentage of crop workers planning to do farm work for more than five years were 75% in 1990, 65% in 2000, and 80% today. A declining share, about a third of U.S. workers and a quarter of California workers, say they could find a nonfarm job within a month.

CONCLUSIONS
The U.S. Department of Labor’s National Agricultural Worker Survey portrays a Mexican-born crop workforce that has settled in the US, formed or united families, and finds employment with one fruit and vegetable farmer during the year. By working about 200 days or 1,600 hours a year at $10 an hour, long-season and full-year farm workers can earn $15,000 to $20,000 a year.

Working on farms is much like working in any other job. Most workers live away from the farm where they work, drive or car pool to work, and return to nonfarm homes when their work is finished. Many would like to keep working in agriculture, and their capacity to do so may depend on the pace at which back-saving mechanical aids are introduced.*