



Poverty Amidst Plenty

Understanding Farm Worker Food (In)security in California

BY CHRISTY GETZ AND SANDY BROWN

Fresno County farm workers are one of the most food insecure and poorest in California with 20% of the population living at or below the federal poverty level.

Introduction

In this article, we explore one of the most profound contradictions of contemporary US agriculture: that those who produce our nation's food are among the most likely to be hungry or food insecure. For those familiar with farm worker communities, this irony comes as little surprise. Yet the lived realities of farm workers are, more often than not, rendered invisible to the vast majority of people who rely on their labor for sustenance. In an effort to address this seeming paradox, we explore the concept of food security with respect to California's agricultural workforce.

At the height of United Farm Workers' (UFW) organizing, the admonitions of union founder Cesar Chavez that "the food that overflows our market shelves and fills our tables is harvested by men, women, and children who often cannot satisfy their own hunger" called attention to the marginalized position of agricultural labor in California's farm fields. The union's struggles to improve agricultural wages and working conditions mobilized white, middle-class urban consumers to support a primarily immigrant workforce, in particular through union led boycotts (Frank 2003, Ganz 2000). Yet significant improvements in farm workers' material conditions have failed to materialize, and food insecurity and hunger remain widespread within farm worker communities.

Little research has been conducted that explicitly addresses the agricultural workforce with respect to hunger and nutrition, although several recent studies

suggest that farm workers experience particularly high rates of food insecurity (Harrison et al. 2007, Quandt et al. 2006, Villarejo et al. 2000, Weigel et al. 2007). To address this lack of attention to farm worker communities, the University of California at Berkeley conducted the Fresno Farm worker Food Security Assessment (FFFSA) in collaboration with the California Institute for Rural Studies in 2004-2005.

Background and Findings

California's hired agricultural labor force is by far the largest in the nation, due in large part to its preeminence in labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crop production. Farm workers are almost exclusively immigrants, the vast majority of whom are from Mexico. The US Census of Agriculture's official count (2007) is approximately 450,000. However, traditional census data has been found to undercount farm workers (CRLA 2001, Sherman 1997), meaning that actual numbers are likely much higher.

the entire San Joaquin Valley are home to some of the poorest Californians.

As might be expected, our FFFSA results show that farm workers in our convenience sample of 394 native Spanish-speaking agricultural workers were more likely to experience food insecurity and hunger than the overall low-income population of Fresno County (Harrison et al. 2007). Within our study sample, 34% of respondents were classified as food insecure and 11% as food insecure with hunger. This finding that approximately half of the farm worker households surveyed are, in USDA parlance, unable to access enough food for an active, healthy life, should be viewed as nothing short of astonishing, particularly given its occurrence in the most productive agricultural region in the US. In the words of one farm worker, "[s]omething is wrong in the system. We are farm workers, harvesting all day produce for others, and we get home and our family doesn't have enough food to eat" (Fresno Metro Ministry 2005).

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Our findings suggest that income, documentation and migratory status, and food stamp utilization are related to food security status. Not surprisingly, income was by far the strongest predictor of food insecurity and hunger.

The average monthly income for those classified as food secure was \$762. For respondents categorized as food insecure without hunger, incomes declined to \$542 and plummeted to an average of \$319 per month for those classified as food insecure with hunger.

Situated within California's San Joaquin Valley, Fresno County is home to the largest farm worker population in the nation. Even conservative estimates place the population at some 52,727 workers. It is also the most productive farm county in the US, with farm sales of over \$3.7 billion in 2007 (US Census of Agriculture 2007). Fresno is also one of the most food insecure and poorest counties in California, with 20% of the population living at or below the federal poverty level (Harrison et al. 2007, US Census Bureau 2008). Given that agricultural wages are among the lowest of any occupation (Bugarin and Lopez 1998, Martin and Mason 2003), it is not surprising that Fresno County and, indeed,

Our findings suggest that documentation of work authorization affects food security levels. When controlling for income and other variables, farm workers without documentation were more likely than those with legal residence or citizenship status to be food insecure, 55% compared to 34%. Undocumented workers represent an increasing share of the agricultural labor force. The National Agricultural Workers

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Survey estimates that 53% of US farm workers lack authorization to legally work in the US. However 99% of newcomers, a growing share of the agricultural workforce, lack such authorization (NAWS 2002).

Due to a lack of legal status, undocumented farm workers are at further risk of hunger because they are ineligible for critical public safety net programs, including the food stamp program¹. Within our sample, even those who were eligible (due to legal status and income) often declined to enroll and only 48% of eligible respondents utilized the program. Some respondents suggested they declined to enroll due to fears about jeopardizing their immigration status, while others cited a lack of information about program requirements. Such anxieties extend well beyond eligibility for public assistance programs and resonate with the broader climate of fear in which farm workers operate.

Situating Farm Worker Food Insecurity

While the reasons for the marginalization of agricultural labor are complex and contingent upon specific socio-historical contexts of particular moments in California history, the central dynamic shaping labor relations and workers' livelihood struggles has been the development of a regime of agrarian accumulation based on capital intensive production and the persistent devaluation of agricultural labor (Mitchell 2007, Walker 2004). While the often-violent marginalization of farm labor was not inevitable, the productive forces and social relations of agricultural production evolved together to make California the nation's breadbasket, where farm workers often struggle to feed themselves and their families.

Food (in)security is but one of many measures that can be used to assess and evaluate the effects of this devaluation, from poor physical and mental health (Cason et al. 2003, Villarejo et al. 2000) and lack of access

to health care and affordable housing (Bradman 2005, Housing Assistance Council 2005), to unsafe and debilitating working conditions, pesticide exposure (Harrison 2008, Reeves et al. 2002) and low annual earnings, long hours, and unstable employment (Bugarin and Lopez 1998). Perhaps the most striking evidence of farm workers' devalued position is the decline in real wages over the past several decades. Between 1975 and 1995 real wages fell at least 20-25% (Rothenberg, 1998; Villarejo & Runsten, 1993).

The lived realities of farm workers stand in stark contrast to a consistent expansion of California's productive and profitable agricultural landscape. While farm worker incomes have declined, the value of agricultural products has continued along a trajectory of expansion begun in the 19th century. Between 2002 and 2007 alone, California's agricultural sales increased 32%, from \$25.7 billion to \$33.9 billion (US Census of Agriculture 2007). In Fresno C o u n t y ,

agricultural sales increased by 32%, from \$2.8 billion to \$3.7 billion over the same period. Given these statistics, workers' loss appears to be capital's gain.

Today, California farm workers hail primarily from Mexico, where the imposition of neoliberal policies has exacerbated livelihood challenges for small farmers, or campesinos, and led to increased northward migration (Barry 1996). Understanding the dynamics of agricultural production and the social reproduction of farm labor in California today (of which food and nutrition are clearly an essential component), thus requires connecting geographies of poverty and inequality across international boundaries (cf Mitchell 2007), from Fresno, California to the southern Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca.

Conclusion

In this paper we have reviewed data on farm worker food insecurity and offered a brief contextualization of how and why farm workers face a daily paradox of "poverty amidst plenty." In summary, we emphasize that our findings must be understood in a larger sociopolitical context of structural inequalities that farm workers face on both sides of the US-Mexico border.

Since Cesar Chavez's call for "a revolution of the poor seeking bread and justice," both bread and justice have continued to be denied to millions worldwide, largely as a result of the contradictions of food provisioning based on capitalist social relations. We view attempts to measure the food security status of particular groups, such as farm workers, as critical to the process of illuminating these contradictions. By connecting questions of food security to the underlying dynamics that produce hunger and hunger-induced migration, we hope to contribute to the opening up of more productive discussions about food security in farm worker communities. ●



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Authors' Picks for Further Reading

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ⁱ The Food Stamp program is the largest of the federal food assistance programs, designed to mitigate food insecurity through subsidies for private food purchases to legal permanent residents and citizens in low-income households below 130% of the federal poverty level (Harrison et al. 2007). While undocumented immigrants are not eligible for food stamps, their US born children are eligible.

By connecting questions of food security to the underlying dynamics that produce hunger and hunger-induced migration, we hope to contribute to the opening up of more productive discussions about food security in farm worker communities.