



ISSUE BRIEF

Policies and Strategies to Address Food Insecurity in Agricultural Worker Communities

Introduction

Food security is one of the most pressing challenges faced by agricultural workers, who form the backbone of our food supply chain. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.¹ Some experts also state that such food must also be culturally acceptable.²

Very low wages and high rates of poverty have always been an unjust aspect of farm work that expose agricultural workers to food insecurity; the worsening climate crisis has added an element of uncertainty and drastic change that has worsened this problem.

This Issue Brief will examine rates and causes of food insecurity among agricultural workers, describe federal programs intended to address food insecurity, and present best practices and recommendations to improve food security for agricultural workers.

Food insecurity among agricultural workers

There is no comprehensive national data set regarding food insecurity among agricultural workers but various studies have found high rates of food insecurity among this population: 37% in the Salinas Valley of California;³ 45% in Mendota, California;⁴ 63% among migrant agricultural workers in Georgia;⁵ 87% along the U.S.-Mexico border;⁶ and 100% among indigenous agricultural workers on the Central Coast of California.⁷ By way of comparison, USDA data for 2021 show that 10.2% of all U.S. households—and 6.2% of households with children—were food insecure at some point during the year. Meanwhile, 16.2% of Hispanic households were food insecure at some point that year.⁸

Multiple causes contribute to food insecurity among agricultural workers. Primary among them is the prevalence of low wages. According to the 2019-2020 National Agricultural Workers Survey, the average wage for workers was \$13.59 per hour. Their average personal incomes were in the range of \$20,000 to \$24,999, while average family incomes were in the range of \$25,000 to

\$29,999.⁹ Furthermore, agricultural work tends to be seasonal, and this seasonality deprives many workers of income during the off-season. In all, 20% of agricultural workers have family incomes that place them below the poverty level.¹⁰ Moreover, severe weather events and natural disasters, which are increasing in frequency due to climate change, reduce the availability of work and reduce worker incomes. For example, the 2015 drought in California resulted in the loss of 10,100 seasonal farm jobs.¹¹

Lack of work benefits also impacts agricultural workers' food security. Many of them lack paid sick leave and lose income if they take time off due to illness. At least 50% report that they would not be covered by unemployment insurance if they lost their jobs; 8% say they would not receive workers' compensation if they were injured at work (an additional 13% did not know whether they'd be covered); 61% say their employer does not provide health insurance and 11% do not know whether insurance is provided.¹² Although 44% report that they or someone in their household use Medicaid,¹³ agricultural workers still experience a gap in health care coverage. As a result, many agricultural workers would be severely affected financially if they suffered a job loss, injury or illness, which would have significant impacts on their food security.

Substandard housing, which is common among agricultural workers, also affects their food security. In housing units lacking proper kitchen equipment, such as refrigerators and/or cooking appliances in good working order, residents may need to forgo perishable foods, or foods that need cooking or more than minimal preparation. Other factors such as lack of transportation and the need to travel long distances to purchase food—something common in rural areas—also limit agricultural workers' access to sufficient, culturally appropriate foods.¹⁴ Agricultural workers experiencing these conditions live in "food deserts". The USDA defines a food desert census tract as "a low-income tract where a substantial number or substantial share of residents does not have easy access to a supermarket or large grocery store."¹⁵

Overview of federal programs

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), an agency of the USDA, runs most of the federal programs that impact the food security of agricultural workers. The agency's mission is to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing access to food, a healthy diet, and nutrition education.¹⁶ A 2022 study showed that only 12.2% of agricultural workers reported participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([SNAP](#)) and 18% reported participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children ([WIC](#)).¹⁷ That same study found that among non-citizen agricultural workers, only 1.8% used SNAP and 3.5% used WIC.¹⁸ Earlier studies suggest that agricultural households have a 15% to 32% participation rate in SNAP.¹⁹ According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey, 13% of agricultural workers reported that they or a member of their household used SNAP during the past two years.²⁰ The SNAP program “provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.”²¹ The federal government pays for SNAP benefits but splits administrative costs with the states. All states, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Guam participate in SNAP.²² The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa do not have SNAP and instead receive capped block grants from a different program called the Nutrition Assistance Program ([NAP](#)).²³ To be eligible for SNAP, the gross monthly household income, the net income, and assets must fall below certain thresholds.²⁴

Aside from financial eligibility, each state and territory has its own additional eligibility criteria. SNAP eligibility is limited to U.S. citizens and other “lawfully present non-citizens.”²⁶ This means that some mixed-status families may qualify for SNAP benefits. Households who utilize SNAP received additional pandemic-related SNAP benefits beginning in March 2020.²⁷ These emergency allotments ended for all states in March 2023, when SNAP benefits returned to the normal amount.²⁸

The Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([D-SNAP](#)) provides food assistance to low-income households who have experienced food loss or damage as a result of natural disasters.²⁹ The President must issue an Individual Assistance declaration to a state, after which the state must request and be approved by FNS to operate D-SNAP.³⁰ D-SNAP is available to all applicants who have a qualifying disaster-related expense, regardless of immigration status.³¹

WIC is a federal program that provides funds to the states “for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.”³² WIC is specifically exempted from immigration status restrictions from the federal government.³³ States have the option to restrict participation in WIC to citizens and other qualifying immigrants.³⁴ Indiana is the only state that restricts access to WIC for adults who are not “qualified” immigrants.³⁵ Approximately 9% of agricultural workers report that they or someone in their households used WIC in the previous two years.³⁶ To be eligible for WIC, applicants must meet the categorical, residential, income, and nutrition risk requirements.³⁷

The National School Lunch Program ([NSLP](#)) is a federally funded meal program that provides low cost or free lunches to children—regardless of immigration status—in schools. The School Breakfast Program ([SBP](#)) is similar to the NSLP but instead provides breakfast to school children.³⁸ Children do not need to be citizens to qualify for these programs, eligibility is dependent on the income eligibility guidelines published by the FNS every year.³⁹

The Summer Food Service Program ([SFSP](#)) is a federally funded program that is administered by the states. The program provides free, healthy meals and snacks to children in low-income communities throughout the summer.⁴⁰ All children, regardless of immigration status, are eligible for this program so long as they meet the income eligibility guidelines.⁴¹

The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program ([GusNIP](#)) and Produce Prescription Program ([GusNIP-PPR](#)) are run by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), an agency within the USDA.⁴² These programs prioritize nutrition security. NIFA requests applications for the programs and then awards grants based on applications. The Nutrition Incentive Program develops and evaluates projects aimed at increasing fruits and vegetables purchased by SNAP and NAP recipients.⁴³ The Produce Prescription Program seeks projects that “demonstrate and evaluate the impact of fresh fruit and vegetable prescriptions to increase procurement and consumption of fruits and vegetables, reduce individual and household food insecurity, and reduce healthcare usage and associated costs.”⁴⁴ To be eligible to apply for these grants, applicants must be non-profits or government agencies.⁴⁵

The 118th Congress has introduced several legislative initiatives that impact food security and the federal programs discussed above. For example, the Helping Schools Feed Kids Act of 2023 (H.R. 1424) seeks to extend additional reimbursement rates for some child nutrition programs.⁴⁶ The Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act (H.R.1269) seeks to increase reimbursement rates for school lunch and breakfast programs.⁴⁷ The Farm Bill, a piece of legislation introduced about every five years and due to be reintroduced in 2023, governs USDA farm and food programs, including SNAP. Legislation amending food security programs are frequently introduced in Congress.

Overview of state programs

Unemployment insurance is a joint federal and state system that temporarily provides funds to people who have lost their jobs while they look for other employment.⁴⁸ Unemployment insurance benefits are an important source of income—and therefore, food access—for qualifying workers who lose their jobs. Until 1978, the Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) excluded farm work from federal unemployment insurance protections.⁴⁹ FUTA applies if either (1) an employer employs at least ten workers on each of 20 days in 20 different weeks during the current or preceding calendar year or (2) the employer pays \$20,000 in farm wages in a single calendar quarter.⁵⁰ If FUTA applies, then farm employers are required to enroll their workers in their state's unemployment insurance system.⁵¹ However, employers do not have to pay unemployment insurance for agricultural workers if they use a crew leader⁵² as an intermediary.⁵³ Each state sets its own eligibility standards for unemployment insurance. This poses a problem for agricultural workers if they are working in a state that does not cover their work. Approximately 45% of agricultural workers reported that they expected to be covered by unemployment insurance if they lost their current job.⁵⁴

According to the National Immigration Law Center, there are six states—California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Minnesota, Washington—that offer state-funded food assistance programs to immigrants who are not eligible for SNAP.⁵⁵ In 2022, California expanded the California Food Assistance Program making the state the first in the country to provide food assistance to all California

residents, regardless of immigration status.⁵⁶ Some local food banks partner with farmworker organizations to improve access to food assistance programs to fill the gaps.⁵⁷

Best practices to address food insecurity among agricultural workers

Community-based organizations that help address food insecurity among agricultural workers include farmworker organizations, health centers, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, religious institutions, and other organizations that provide health and social services. These groups have developed a range of best practices to expand their reach within agricultural worker communities to improve food security for individuals and families.

These best practices include:

Involvement of community health workers (CHWs) - CHWs, or *promotores de salud*, are lay health workers who typically come from the communities that they serve. They have a profound understanding of the culture and needs of these communities, speak their language, and are trusted by community members. Health centers and farmworker organizations often use the CHW model to conduct outreach, connect people to services and build closer relationships with the surrounding communities.

CHWs can screen community members for food insecurity and other social determinants of health,* provide nutrition education, and help community members access governmental and other services. These services may include food pantries, SNAP, WIC, and services offered by local community health centers and nonprofit organizations. They do this by disseminating information to the community and providing referrals. Because they enjoy the trust of the community, CHWs are well positioned to conduct follow-up calls and visits to ensure that agricultural workers are able to access services.

Culturally-sensitive food pantries - Food security is about more than having access to sufficient food; it also means having access to food that is culturally appropriate. For this reason, various farmworker or-

* Some useful screening tools that can be used to screen farmworkers for social determinants of health, such as food insecurity, include the PRAPARE Screening Tool developed by the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) and the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO); the Accountable Health Communities Health-Related Social Needs (AHC HRSN) Screening Tool by the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS); and the Patient Social Determinants of Health Screening Tool developed by the National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH).

ganizations, health centers and other organizations have established culturally-sensitive food pantries. One such organization is Food Lifeline, a nonprofit organization that provides food services in western Washington to various communities, including agricultural workers. Their food pantries strive to “get the right foods to the right communities”, and gather input from clients and agency partners regarding which culturally-appropriate foods are needed by the communities in their service area.⁵⁸ Food pantries such as these allow members of agricultural worker communities to have access to traditional foods that they are familiar with and know how to prepare, reducing families’ reliance on pre-packaged, highly processed foods that are often lower in nutrients and higher in fat and sugar.

Mobile food pantries - Since transportation is a significant factor that affects agricultural workers’ food security, some farmworker-serving organizations have addressed this problem by creating mobile food pantries. These bring food to easily accessible locations within communities, ensuring that even agricultural workers who lack their own transportation or live in more remote locations have an opportunity to access this service. One example is the Farmworkers Mobile Produce Pantry, run by The Food Bank for Monterey County (California), which brings parcels of produce and other perishable foods to agricultural workers in the fields at the end of their work shifts.⁵⁹ This mobile food pantry ensures these workers have access to nutritious foods that might be inaccessible to them otherwise due to cost and/or transportation barriers.

Community food drives - Farmworker-serving organizations involve the wider community in addressing agricultural workers’ food insecurity by holding community food drives. These not only help supply food pantries with necessary food items, but also raise awareness among local communities about issues affecting agricultural workers, helping drive additional community support.

Food prescription programs - A novel approach used by some health services providers to help patients who are experiencing food insecurity is to write prescriptions for healthy foods, which patients can then purchase at local farmers’ markets or grocery stores using their WIC or SNAP benefits. Some clinics also partner with farmers’ markets or other food outlets and, using government or private grant funding, provide vouchers that patients can use to pay for their food prescriptions. These prescriptions can be

tailored to a patients’ specific nutritional needs and health conditions.

The work of farmworker-serving organizations is critical to improve food security among agricultural workers and their families and fill gaps not addressed by government programs. By implementing these practices and other innovative programs that overcome the barriers to food access within these communities they are improving the health and nutrition of the workers who harvest the nation’s food.

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