

February 1992

HIRED FARMWORKERS

Health and Well-Being at Risk



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Human Resources Division

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The Honorable Edward R. Roybal
Chairman, Select Committee on Aging
House of Representatives

The Honorable William D. Ford
Chairman, Committee on Education
and Labor
House of Representatives

The Honorable Patricia Schroeder
Chairwoman, Select Committee on Children,
Youth, and Families
House of Representatives

The Honorable Matthew G. Martinez
Chairman, Subcommittee on Human Resources
Committee on Education and Labor
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jim Jontz
House of Representatives

The Honorable George Miller
House of Representatives

This report responds to your request for information on the extent to which federal laws, regulations, and programs protect the health and well-being of the nation's hired farmworkers.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to other interested parties and make copies available to others who request them. If you have questions about this report, please call me at (202) 275-6193. Major contributors are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph F. Delfico
Director, Income Security Issues

Executive Summary

Purpose

Historically, many hired farmworkers in the United States have had poor living and working conditions. During the 1960s, their hardships, including exposure to harmful pesticides and limited health care, became a national concern. Thirty years later, these hardships continue to raise both public and congressional concern.

The Chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging and the former Chairman of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families the Chairmen of the House Committee on Education and Labor and its Sub committee on Human Resources; and Representative Jim Jontz asked us to provide information on the extent to which federal laws, regulations, and programs protect the health and well-being of hired farmworkers. GAO provided this information at hearings on July 17, 1991.¹ In this report, GAO expands on the information presented there.

Background

Hired farmworkers harvest crops and do other farm work for wages. Estimates of their number range from about 1.5 to 2.5 million. Migrant farmworkers are a subpopulation of hired farmworkers. These migrants travel to find seasonal farm work and take up temporary residence at their work sites.

Poor living and working conditions make life difficult for many hired farmworkers. Exposure to pesticides threatens their health—pesticide poisonings occur every year. Many hired farmworkers work in fields without drinking water, handwashing facilities, or toilets. Some families are homeless; others live in substandard housing. Many hired farmworkers do not get the medical services they need and the full Social Security benefits to which they are entitled. Their children—who may work in the fields because the families need the money or lack access to child care facilities—are subject to educational disadvantages and health risks from injuries and pesticides.

Hired farmworkers receive some protection and assistance under various federal laws, regulations, and programs; these cover workers in all occupations, the general population, or primarily hired farmworkers or migrant farmworkers. Laws and regulations that cover workers in all industries include those that protect workers from harmful pesticides, other toxic substances, and unsanitary work conditions, as well as those that safeguard children from abusive labor practices. Programs that serve the general population or all workers include the Medicaid program, which pays for

¹Farmworkers Face Gaps in Protection and Barriers to Benefits (GAO/T-HRD-91-40, July 17, 1991).

medical care for eligible low-income people, and Social Security insurance programs, which pay cash benefits to eligible retired and disabled workers and survivors on the basis of a worker's lifetime earnings. Programs that primarily serve hired farmworkers or migrant farmworkers and their families include hired farmworker housing programs and the Migrant Health Program, which provides health care to those hired farmworkers who are migrants.

Results in Brief

Hired farmworkers are not adequately protected by federal laws, regulations, and programs; therefore, their health and well-being are at risk. Hired farmworkers go into fields sprayed with pesticides, but many have no knowledge of the specific chemicals they are exposed to or the potential health effects. Field sanitation on many small farms may be inadequate, constituting a serious health hazard to hired farmworkers on those farms. Young children are permitted to operate tractors and do other hazardous farm work. In addition, they may be more susceptible than adults to the harmful effects of pesticides. Many hired farmworkers, particularly migrant farmworkers, may not get the health care they need because they do not receive medical assistance from Medicaid and the Migrant Health Program. In addition, hired farmworkers are at greater risk than other workers of getting fewer Social Security benefits than they should, which means less financial support when they retire or become disabled.

GAO's Analysis

Inadequate Protection From Pesticides

Federal laws and regulations give hired farmworkers exposed to pesticides inadequate protection, which increases the risk of pesticide poisonings among hired farmworkers. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which regulates pesticides and their uses, estimates that each year hired farmworkers suffer up to 300,000 acute illnesses and injuries from exposure to pesticides.

Federal laws and regulations do not ensure that hired farmworkers are given sufficient information about pesticide hazards. EPA's standards for labeling pesticides require that a label include a pesticide's active ingredients and warnings, as well as precautionary statements concerning a pesticide's toxicity; however, hired farmworkers generally do not have access to the pesticide product label. EPA's standards for protecting hired farmworkers exposed to pesticides do not require that they be informed of

the identities and specific hazards of the pesticides to which they are exposed.

In addition, workplace protection provided by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which establishes mandatory safety and health standards for employers, does not ensure that hired farmworkers receive sufficient information about pesticide hazards. One OSHA standard requires that employers in agriculture and other industries provide their employees with information and training on chemical hazards, including pesticides, in their workplaces.² However, because of pending modified EPA standards, OSHA has agreed to defer to EPA and not enforce its standard with regard to hired farmworkers exposed to pesticides.

In 1983, EPA recognized that its standards provided inadequate protection from pesticides for hired farmworkers. EPA based its conclusion, in part, on continuing reports of pesticide poisonings among hired farmworkers. EPA's modified standards, some of which will be effective in 1992, should increase protection to these farmworkers. However, many pesticides have not been fully tested to determine their harmful effects. (See pp.12-18.)

Inadequate Field Sanitation

Federal regulations on field sanitation do not protect hired farmworkers on small farms. These regulations require farms that employ more than 10 workers to provide drinking water, handwashing facilities, and toilets. Workers on farms with 10 or fewer employees, however, may not have access to these basic sanitation facilities. Smaller farms are excluded from field sanitation standards to avoid placing an undue financial burden on these farms and to comply with an annual amendment to the House appropriations bill, which prohibits Labor from regulating farms with 10 or fewer workers. The Department of Labor's 1990 national survey of migrant farmworkers shows that 31 percent of those surveyed worked in fields without drinking water, handwashing facilities, or toilets. (See pp.18-20.)

Less Protection for Children on Farms

Federal labor law and child labor regulations permit children to work in agriculture at a younger age than in other industries. The minimum age at which children can work in hazardous occupations—such as mining and logging—is 18. However, 16-year-olds are allowed to do hazardous farm work, such as operating tractors, hay bailers, or grain combines. Furthermore, the minimum age at which children can work in

²Occupational Safety & Health: OSHA Action Needed to Improve Compliance With Hazard Communication Standard (GAO/HRD-92-8, Nov. 26, 1991), p. 3, states that both OSHA and GAO found a substantial number of employers out of compliance with the OSHA standard.

nondangerous occupations is either 14 or 16, but children younger than 14 are allowed to do nonhazardous farm work with parental consent or on farms owned or operated by their parents. Minimum age standards differ, in part, to exclude family farms from federal regulation. (See pp.20-23.)

Medical Needs Not Met by Federal Health Care Programs

Hired farmworkers have limited access to Medicaid assistance. Many are ineligible for the program because they are undocumented aliens or unqualified for cash assistance programs. In addition, state enrollment procedures and other administrative requirements pose a barrier to eligible migrant farmworkers. This is because some of these farmworkers leave the state before their Medicaid applications are processed. Furthermore, those migrant farmworkers approved for Medicaid are often unable to find a health provider who will treat a patient with an out-of-state Medicaid card.

Most migrant farmworkers do not receive medical services provided by the Migrant Health Program's rural health clinics. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that because of budget constraints, the program serves less than 15 percent of the nation's migrant farmworkers. (See pp.24-25.)

Fewer Social Security Benefits

Many hired farmworkers who have retired or become disabled, as well as survivors of deceased hired farmworkers, do not receive full Social Security retirement, disability, and survivors insurance benefits. Hired farmworkers are more likely than workers in other occupations to receive fewer benefits than they should because their employers do not report all their earnings to the Social Security Administration (SSA). SSA data for 1989 show that agricultural employers were at least three times as likely as other employers to not report or underreport their employees' earnings. (See p.26.)

Recommendations

This report provides GAO's analyses of information on the extent to which federal laws, regulations, and programs protect the health and well-being of hired farmworkers. It contains no recommendations.

Agency Comments

GAO did not solicit agency comments.

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Abbreviations

AFDC	Aid to Families With Dependent Children
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FIFRA	Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act
FLSA	Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938
HCS	Hazard Communication Standard
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act
JTPA	Job Training Partnership Act
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income

Introduction

Hired farmworkers receive some protection and assistance under various federal laws, regulations, and programs. Some of these cover workers in all occupations or the general population; others cover primarily hired farmworkers or migrant farmworkers. Yet, many hired farmworkers face the hardships of substandard living and working conditions. Many, especially migrant farmworkers, receive low wages, are exposed to health hazards, and are homeless or live in substandard housing (see app. I). Hired farmworkers may need job search and placement assistance because much hired farm work is characterized by unstable and short-term employment (see app. II). In addition, their children, who may be working or staying in the fields because the family needs the money or lacks access to child care facilities, are subject to educational disadvantages and health risks from injuries and pesticides (see app. III).

Hired farmworkers are people who harvest crops and do other farm work for wages. Estimates of the size of the hired farmworker population range from about 1.5 to 2.5 million.¹ Many hired farmworkers are employed for only part of the year because of the seasonal nature of agriculture. Those who are willing to travel for agricultural work become migrant and take up temporary residence at their work sites. Hereafter, the terms migrant farmworkers and migrants are used to refer to the subpopulation of hired farmworkers who are migrant or seasonal or both.

Estimates of the size of the migrant farmworker subpopulation vary widely—between 1 and 4 million—because some include dependents of migrants and migrants who are undocumented aliens. Migrant farmworkers are predominately young married Hispanic men with families.² The annual average earnings of these farmworkers are low, and many families are among the working poor.³ Adult migrant farmworkers on average have completed 8 or fewer years of formal education.⁴

For more than a century, many hired farmworkers, particularly migrants, have experienced difficult living and working conditions. Periodic reports on the plight of migrant farmworkers began in the 1940s. During the 1960s, the difficult lives of migrant farmworkers became a national

¹Victor J. Oliveira, *Trends in the Hired Farm Work Force, 1945-87* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Apr. 1989), p. 3; and *Farm Labor* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Nov. 13, 1990), p. 1.

²Office of Program Economics, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, *Findings From the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 1990* (U.S. Department of Labor, July 1991), p. 53.

³*Findings*, p. 53.

⁴*Findings*, p. 35.

concern, which led to laws, regulations, and programs designed to improve conditions for migrant farmworkers.

Hired farmworkers receive some protection and assistance under various federal laws, regulations, and programs. Laws and regulations that cover workers in all industries include those that protect workers from harmful pesticides, other toxic substances, and unsanitary work conditions, as well as those that safeguard children from abusive labor practices. Programs that serve the general population or all workers include (1) the Medicaid program, which pays for medical care for eligible low-income people; (2) Social Security insurance programs, which pay cash benefits to eligible retired and disabled workers and survivors based on a worker's lifetime earnings; (3) the Social Security Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, which provides cash assistance to aged, blind, or disabled people, including children, with limited income and resources; and (4) the Employment Service program, which provides job placement services to unemployed workers. Programs that primarily serve hired farmworkers or migrant farmworkers and their families include those that provide federal assistance for the construction and rehabilitation of hired farmworker housing, job training and job search assistance for migrant farmworkers, and health care for migrant farmworkers. (See table 1.1.)

Table 1.1: List of Selected Federal Laws, Programs, and Agencies That Protect or Assist Hired Farmworkers

Federal law or program	Federal agency for enforcement or administration	Area of responsibility
Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) and Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act	Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	Regulates pesticides and their uses
Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970	Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) (part of Department of Labor)	Ensures safe and healthful workplaces for employees
Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA)	Employment Standards Administration (part of Department of Labor)	Regulates working conditions and wages of workers, including children
Medicaid program	Health Care Financing Administration (part of Department of Health and Human Services)	Pays for medical care for eligible low-income individuals
Migrant Health Program	Public Health Service (part of Department of Health and Human Services)	Operates rural health clinics to serve migrant farmworkers
Social Security Retirement, Disability, and Survivors Insurance programs	Social Security Administration (SSA) (part of Department of Health and Human Services)	Pays cash benefits to the eligible retired, disabled, and survivors
Social Security Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program	SSA	Provides financial support to eligible low-income persons who are aged, blind, or disabled
National Housing Act, sections 514 and 516 programs	Farmers Home Administration (part of Department of Agriculture)	Provides financial assistance for hired farmworker housing construction and rehabilitation
Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), section 402 program	Employment and Training Administration (part of Department of Labor)	Provides job training and job search assistance to migrant farmworkers
Employment Service program	Employment and Training Administration (part of Department of Labor)	Provides a labor exchange for those seeking work and employers with jobs to fill

Note: This list includes only those federal laws and programs we reviewed.

The states also have a role in protecting and assisting hired farmworkers. Under certain conditions, states may have regulations that are more stringent than federal regulations for pesticide use and job safety and health. States protect employed children through their own child labor laws. Medicaid is a state-administered program, and within broad federal guidelines, each state designs its own program. Five states have programs that offer

financial assistance for constructing and rehabilitating housing for hired farmworkers.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The Chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging and the former Chairman of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families; the Chairmen of the House Committee on Education and Labor and its Subcommittee on Human Resources; and Representative Jim Jontz asked us to provide information on the extent to which federal laws, regulations, and programs protect the health and well-being of hired farmworkers.

To accomplish this objective, we reviewed selected federal laws, regulations, and programs that affect hired farmworkers. We also reviewed our own past work as well as documents, studies, and other data obtained from the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Education, and Treasury and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In addition, we obtained general information on state laws and regulations covering hired farmworkers. To determine the extent to which the federal laws, regulations, and programs we reviewed meet hired farmworkers' needs, we obtained the views of federal and state officials, farmworker advocates, associations of agricultural employers, and other experts.

We limited our review to the impact selected federal laws, regulations, and programs have on hired farmworkers' living and working conditions. We did not address the impact of other important factors, such as the supply of hired farmworkers, the state of the country's economy, or the costs associated with increased regulation and enforcement. Our review was also limited by the lack of reliable national data on health problems, including pesticide poisonings; mortality rates; and other issues affecting hired farmworkers. When we cite data from the literature, the information represents the most current available at the time of our review. Our work was carried out from January to August 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Hired Farmworkers Are Given Inadequate Protection

The health and well-being of hired farmworkers are inadequately protected by federal laws and regulations. These laws and regulations do not ensure that hired farmworkers receive sufficient information about pesticide hazards and adequate protection from them. Many hired farmworkers work on small farms that are not required by federal law and regulations to provide field sanitation—drinking water, handwashing facilities, and toilets. Children employed in agriculture, the second most dangerous occupation in the United States, are allowed by federal law and regulations to work at a younger age than children in other industries.

Inadequate Protection From Pesticides

Federal laws and regulations give inadequate protection to hired farmworkers exposed to harmful pesticides, which increases the risk of pesticide poisonings among hired farmworkers. Laws and regulations do not ensure that hired farmworkers are given sufficient information about pesticide hazards. In 1983, EPA recognized that its regulations provided hired farmworkers with inadequate protection against pesticides. New EPA regulations, some of which take effect in 1992 and others later, should increase protection for hired farmworkers. However, many pesticides have not been fully tested to determine their harmful effects.

Harmful Effects From Exposure to Pesticides

People can be exposed to pesticides in the residues they touch, the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food they eat. Hired farmworkers are often exposed to pesticide residues on crops and in the soil. They can also be exposed to pesticides applied by crop-dusting aircraft and ground-rig sprayers. Pesticide exposure can result in a number of acute health effects: these include upper respiratory tract, skin, and eye irritation; systemic poisoning; and, occasionally, death. Studies also show that the chronic effects of some pesticides include cancer, birth defects, and neuropsychological problems.

In addition, some studies found that children are at greater risk than adults from the hazards of pesticides.¹ Children may be more susceptible because they absorb more pesticide per pound of body weight and because of their developing nervous system and organs. Furthermore, children in the fields may eat pesticide-contaminated dirt or pesticide-treated crops.

EPA, which regulates pesticides and their uses, estimates that each year farmworkers suffer up to 300,000 acute illnesses and injuries from exposure to pesticides. A 1990 study of migrant children working on farms in western New York found that over 40 percent of the children interviewed had worked in fields still wet with pesticides, and 40 percent had been sprayed while in the fields.²

Role of Federal Agencies

EPA is authorized to regulate pesticides under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), as amended (7 U.S.C. 136 et seq.), and the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, as amended (21 U.S.C. 301 et seq.). EPA registers pesticide products for specified uses before they may be sold, specifies the terms and conditions of their use prior to being marketed, and removes unreasonably hazardous pesticides from the marketplace. Enforcement of pesticide regulations under FIFRA is done in most states (except for Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming) by state regulatory agencies that have cooperative enforcement agreements with EPA. Under FIFRA, more stringent state regulations are permissible.

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is authorized to adopt and enforce specific standards to help ensure a safe and healthful workplace for employees. Also under the act, more stringent state regulations may be permitted in those states with state job safety and health plans approved by OSHA. Currently, 23 states have OSHA-approved state plans. In those states

¹Studies include (1) Natural Resources Defense Council, *Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children's Food* (Wash., D.C.: 1989); (2) S. Murphy, "Pesticides," Casarett and J. Doull in *Toxicology*, eds., C.D. Klaassen, M.O. Amdur, and J. Doull (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1986); (3) Tracy Freedman and David Weir, "Polluting the Most Vulnerable," *Nation* (May 14, 1983), p. 602; and (4) Robert C. Spear, "Farmworker Exposure to Pesticide Residues: Reflections on Differential Risk," *Banbury Report* 11 (1982), pp. 67-76 and 72-73. However, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations for protecting workers against pesticide hazards are based on adult exposure only and give no special consideration to children. EPA believes that studies monitoring field exposure to pesticides and laboratory animal studies on age-related toxic effects indicate no reason to specifically regulate children differently from adults.

²Susan Pollack and others, "Pesticide Exposure and Working Conditions among Migrant Farmworker Children in Western New York State," presented at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, 1990.

without OSHA-approved state plans, state regulations are preempted by federal regulations.

OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard (HCS) requires that employers provide their workers with information and training on chemical hazards, including pesticides, in the workplace.³ HCS was promulgated in 1983 to cover manufacturing workers. It was extended in 1987 to cover all workers, including those in agriculture. Employers in nonmanufacturing industries were required to be in compliance with HCS by May 1988. OSHA established the HCS based on the premise that workers have both a need and a right to know the identities and hazards of chemicals, including pesticides, they work with. OSHA has determined that when both employers and workers have access to this necessary information, the workplace occurrence of illnesses and injuries from chemicals will be reduced. Of the 23 states with OSHA-approved state job safety and health plans, 17 have adopted state standards identical to OSHA's HCS; the remaining 6 have adopted their own worker right-to-know laws.

Insufficient Information on Pesticide Hazards to Hired Farmworkers

Many hired farmworkers are given insufficient information about the hazardous chemicals to which they are exposed. They generally do not have access to the product label for a given pesticide. EPA requires that every pesticide product bear a label containing the product's brand name and active ingredients, warnings and precautionary statements concerning the pesticide's toxicity and effect on skin and eyes, first-aid procedures, and other information. Hired farmworkers may fear that requesting label information from employers could jeopardize their jobs. Even if they receive label information, they may be unable to read or understand it. EPA agrees that hired farmworkers need unhampered access to label or product-specific information that they can understand.

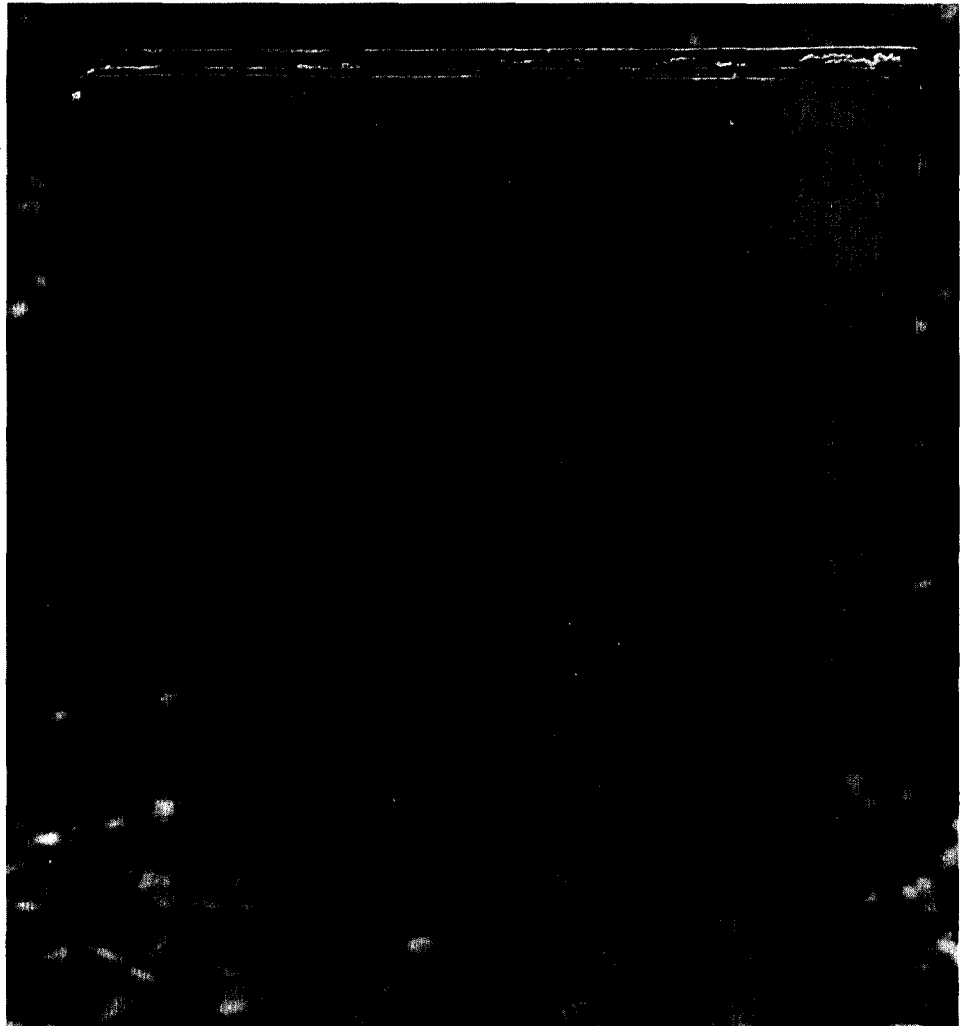
In addition to its labeling requirements, EPA has specific standards for protecting workers exposed to agricultural pesticides. EPA's worker protection standards, however, do not ensure that hired farmworkers are informed of the identities and specific hazards of the pesticides to which they are exposed. The standards require that agricultural employers provide timely warning to hired farmworkers who are expected to work in a field treated

³Occupational Safety & Health: OSHA Action Needed to Improve Compliance With Hazard Communication Standard (GAO/HRD-92-8, Nov. 26, 1991), p. 3, states that both OSHA and GAO found a substantial number of employers out of compliance with HCS. In surveying a random sample of employers, GAO found 58 percent of small employers (those with 10 or fewer employees) and 52 percent of all employers to be out of compliance with key requirements of HCS.

Chapter 2
Hired Farmworkers Are Given Inadequate
Protection

or to be treated with a pesticide. Warnings may be given orally or by posting signs at usual entry points to the field (see fig. 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: Warning Sign in California
Posted in Field Treated With Pesticides**



Photograph by Ken Light

Oral warnings, which are required for hired farmworkers who cannot read, must inform workers about fields that should not be entered without protective clothing, the time period during which a field should be vacated, and actions to take in case of accidental exposure. Written warnings have no prescribed content.

In 1983, EPA recognized that its worker protection standards were inadequate to protect hired farmworkers from exposure to harmful pesticides. The agency based its conclusion in part on continuing reports of pesticide poisonings among hired farmworkers. EPA has subsequently worked to revise its standards. Some modified standards will be effective in 1992 and others later. The new standards will require that agricultural employers inform employees about the specific pesticides being used and the dangers from exposure. Agricultural employers will have to provide hired farmworkers with written information, including the product's name and active ingredients, toxicity, symptoms of overexposure, and emergency and first-aid procedures. Employers in agriculture will also be required to provide hired farmworkers with training on how to prevent exposure and treat poisonings.

OSHA's HCS requires employers in manufacturing and nonmanufacturing industries to inform their workers in writing of the names of the chemicals being used, the potential dangers of exposure, emergency and first-aid procedures, and other appropriate protective measures. This transmittal of information is to be accomplished primarily through container labeling, data sheets for material safety, and employee training. For pesticides, HCS does not ensure that hired farmworkers receive sufficient information about pesticide hazards. OSHA exempted containers labeled in accordance with EPA requirements from additional labeling under the HCS. In addition, after reviewing EPA's pending worker protection standards, OSHA agreed to defer to EPA and not enforce the HCS with regard to hired farmworkers exposed to pesticides. OSHA believes that EPA's modified regulations, when adopted, will ensure that hired farmworkers receive information that is substantially equivalent to that required under HCS.

EPA believes that the adoption of its modified regulations will help resolve some jurisdictional issues concerning pesticides at federal and state levels. One example of potential jurisdictional difficulties is Texas, which does not have an OSHA-approved state plan. In 1988, Texas passed a state law requiring that farmers and hired farmworkers receive information about pesticides and their health effects. The state, after passing this law similar to the HCS, adopted implementing regulations that were consistent with FIFRA. Some believe that the HCS, however, preempts the Texas law and regulations. As a result, the state may be unable to enforce its law and regulations to ensure that hired farmworkers receive sufficient information about pesticide hazards. EPA believes that its pending regulations, when adopted, could assist states like Texas in implementing their own programs for ensuring the communication of pesticide hazard information in the agricultural workplace.

Until EPA's pending regulations are effective, many hired farmworkers will continue to receive insufficient information about pesticide hazards. Hired farmworkers go into fields sprayed with pesticides, but many have no knowledge of the specific chemicals they are exposed to or the potential health risks. A 1988 study of 460 hired farmworkers in Washington found that 89 percent did not know the name of a single pesticide they had been exposed to, and 76 percent had never received any information on appropriate measures for protection.⁴

Inadequate Regulations on Reentry Periods and Protective Clothing

When EPA acknowledged in 1983 that its regulations were inadequate to protect hired farmworkers from harmful exposure to pesticides, it noted weak restrictions on reentry to treated areas. For example, for many pesticides, regulations allow reentry after pesticide "sprays have dried or dusts have settled." EPA acknowledged that this is sometimes difficult to determine and, in its pending regulations, replaces this language with a minimum reentry period of 12 hours.

EPA also noted weak regulations pertaining to the protective clothing hired farmworkers must wear if they reenter treated fields before the reentry period expires. Required protective clothing, as defined in the regulations, consists of a hat, long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and shoes and socks. EPA's pending regulations change minimum protective clothing requirements to correspond with the toxicity level of the pesticide. After pending regulations are adopted, required clothing for more toxic pesticides will include chemical-resistant apparel (suit, headgear, footwear), waterproof gloves, and protective eyewear.

EPA's enforcement efforts, which focus largely on reentry periods and protective clothing requirements, may be inadequate to ensure compliance with regulations. Penalties for noncompliance are seldom assessed, an EPA official acknowledged, and when they are, the fines are too low to deter noncompliance. During 1990, EPA found noncompliance with pesticide regulations during 633 agency-initiated agricultural inspections and assessed fines in 42 of them. Few fines are levied, in part, because EPA's practice is to give a warning letter for a first offense.

⁴Michelle Mentzer and Barbara Villalba, Pesticide Exposure and Health: A Study of Washington Farmworkers (Granger, Washington: Evergreen Legal Services, Mar. 1988), pp. 28-29.

Dangers Not Fully Known for Many Pesticides in Use

EPA does not fully know the health risks of older pesticides. Thousands of pesticide products currently in use have not been completely tested to determine their harmful effects. As a result, the Congress mandated that older pesticides be retested.

EPA registers a pesticide for a specified use before it may be sold. Registration takes place only if EPA determines that the pesticide will fulfill its intended function without causing unreasonable risk to humans or the environment. The agency also takes into account the economic, social, and environmental costs and benefits for the use of the pesticide. To evaluate pesticide risks and benefits, EPA reviews data on health and environmental effects provided by pesticide manufacturers. As many as 150 studies, which take from a few months to several years to complete, may be required to support a pesticide registration.

Because the data supporting older pesticides registrations are incomplete or inadequate by present scientific standards, the Congress mandated, in 1972, that EPA reassess the safety of already-registered pesticides and reregister them. Approximately 20,000 registered pesticide products are subject to the reregistration process. In our 1986 review of the reassessment and reregistration effort, we found that most pesticides had not been fully tested and evaluated in accordance with current testing requirements.⁵ In 1988, FIFRA was amended to accelerate reregistration. In 1989, we found that despite some progress, EPA was still at a preliminary stage in assessing the risks of older pesticides.⁶ Reregistration was to be completed in 1997. However, in September 1991, EPA reported that reregistration will extend into 1999 and beyond.

Field Sanitation Inadequate

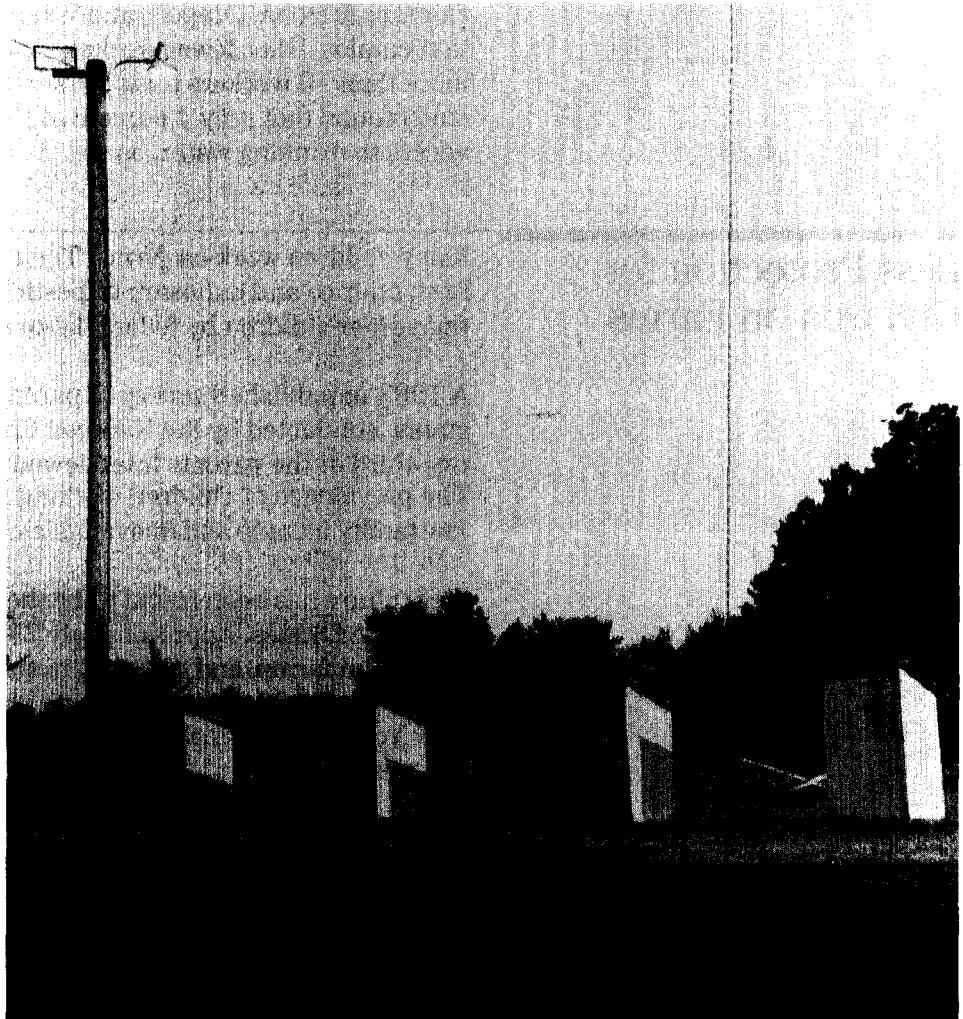
Many hired farmworkers are unprotected by federal regulations for field sanitation. The absence of drinking water, handwashing facilities, and toilets in fields constitutes a serious health hazard to hundreds of thousands of hired farmworkers. Insufficient drinking water may result in dehydration, heat stroke, or other heat-related illnesses. The absence of handwashing facilities contributes to the spread of communicable diseases and the retention of pesticide residues on the skin. The absence of toilets also contributes to the spread of communicable diseases and may increase the risk of urinary tract infection.

⁵Pesticides: EPA's Formidable Task to Assess and Regulate Their Risks (GAO/RCED-86-125, Apr. 18, 1986), p. 3.

⁶Reregistration and Tolerance Reassessment Remain Incomplete for Most Pesticides (GAO/T-RCED-89-40, May 15, 1989).

Regulations adopted under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 require agricultural employers who employ more than 10 farmworkers to provide drinking water, handwashing facilities, and toilets (see fig. 2.2 for required toilets). Farms with 10 or fewer workers are exempt from field sanitation standards. The intent of the exemption is to avoid placing an undue financial burden on small farms and to comply with an annual amendment to the House appropriations bill, which prohibits the Department of Labor from regulating farms with 10 or fewer workers.

Figure 2.2: Toilet Facilities in the Field



Photograph by Roger Manley

As a result of the exemption, many hired farmworkers on small farms may not have access to toilets and other basic sanitation facilities. In addition, compliance with field sanitation standards by larger farms with more than 10 workers is poor. Violations of field sanitation standards were found in 62 percent of field inspections in 1989 and in 69 percent of field inspections in 1990, said an OSHA safety specialist. In a 1990 national survey of migrant farmworkers conducted by Labor, 31 percent of those surveyed work in fields without one or more basic sanitation facilities. States with OSHA-approved state plans can establish their own field sanitation standards. Of 21 states with state field sanitation standards, 4 (Alaska, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington) require compliance on farms that employ 10 or fewer workers. In North Carolina, where farms with more than 10 workers must follow state field sanitation standards, a 1990 study found that only 4 percent of the hired farmworkers surveyed had access to drinking water, as well as handwashing and toilet facilities.⁷

Less Protection for Children on Farms

Many children work on farms. Their health and well-being are at risk from farm injuries and exposure to pesticides. These children are less protected than other children by federal labor law and child labor regulations.

A 1988 unpublished survey of parents who were hired farmworkers in six states, conducted by the National Child Labor Committee, found that about one-third of the parents interviewed had children working in the fields.⁸ The prevalence of children working in agriculture is usually attributed to low family income and unavailable child care facilities.

Agriculture has been found to be the second most dangerous occupation in the United States. Approximately 23,800 children and adolescents were injured on farms, and 300 died from these injuries from 1979 through 1983.⁹ In a 1990 study of migrant children working on farms in western New York, one-third of the children had been injured while working during the past year.¹⁰

⁷Maureen Sweeney and Stephen Ciesieski, *Where Work Is Hazardous to Your Health* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Farmworkers Legal Services of North Carolina, Apr. 1990), p. v.

⁸The National Child Labor Committee is a child labor advocacy group for youth-related issues, including education, job training, and employment.

⁹Frederick P. Rivara, "Fatal and Nonfatal Farm Injuries to Children and Adolescents in the United States," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 76 (Oct. 1985), pp. 567-73.

¹⁰Pollack and others, "Pesticide Exposure."

Child labor is regulated under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) (29 U.S.C. 201-219), which is the primary federal law regulating working conditions and wages of American workers, including children. Labor is responsible for the administration and enforcement of the act. Regulations issued under the act set a minimum age requirement for work in certain occupations. For work that Labor has determined hazardous, age limits are higher than for nonhazardous work.

Federal child labor regulations allow children to work in agriculture at a younger age than in other industries. The minimum age at which children can work in hazardous occupations—such as mining and logging—is 18. But 16-year-olds are allowed to do hazardous farm work—such as operating a tractor, hay bailer, or grain combine. Furthermore, on farms either owned or operated by their parents, children of any age can do hazardous farm work. Minimum age standards differ between agriculture and other industries, in part to exclude family farms from federal regulation.

Federal child labor regulations for nonhazardous work also specify lower age restrictions for children in agriculture than for those in other occupations. The minimum age at which minors can work in nonhazardous occupations other than agriculture is 14 or 16. Children younger than 14, however, can do nonhazardous farm work under certain conditions (see fig. 2.3): Minors at the age of 12 or 13 can work in agriculture outside school hours with parental consent. Children of any age can work on family farms.

Figure 2.3: Seven-Year-Old Boy Working
on Farm in Ohio



Photograph by Ken Light

Labor's enforcement of federal child labor provisions may be ineffective. The National Child Labor Committee estimates that each year, there are at least 100,000 minors illegally working on farms and 1 million child labor violations. Limited resources and low fines for child labor violations have hampered Labor's child labor enforcement in all industries. During 1989, Labor inspected only 1.5 percent of all workplaces covered by FLSA. In 1990, penalties for child labor violations averaged \$212 a violation. Labor acknowledged that its penalties were inadequate to deter violations. As part of the fiscal year 1991 budget legislation, the Congress gave Labor the

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Hired Farmworkers Are Given Inadequate
Protection

authority to increase the maximum civil monetary penalty for a nonwillful violation from \$1,000 to \$10,000 for each child.¹¹ Despite this new authority, Labor generally has increased assessed penalties by far smaller amounts for violations that do not involve a serious injury.¹²

¹¹Child Labor: Characteristics of Working Children (GAO/HRD-91-83BR, June 14, 1991), pp. 2-3.

¹²Child Labor, pp. 2-3.

Many Hired Farmworkers Do Not Receive Federal Health Care Assistance and Full Social Security

Many hired farmworkers do not receive Medicaid or Migrant Health Program assistance because of either eligibility and administrative requirements or budget constraints. Many do not receive all the Social Security insurance program benefits to which they are entitled because their employers have not fully reported their earnings. Some do not receive SSI because they are unaware of the program or their eligibility.

Medical Needs Unmet by Federal Health Care Programs

Medicaid, as a federal-state entitlement program, pays for medical services for eligible low-income people. Within broad federal guidelines, each state designs and administers its own Medicaid program. Generally, to be eligible for Medicaid, people must be citizens or nationals of the United States or aliens with a satisfactory immigration status.¹ People who qualify for cash assistance under either the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program or the SSI program are generally eligible for Medicaid. To qualify for AFDC, people have to meet the program's definition of membership in a family with dependent children. To qualify for SSI, people have to meet the program's definition of age, blindness, or disability. To receive cash assistance under the AFDC or SSI program, people must also have income and resources that are low enough to qualify them.²

Many hired farmworkers are ineligible for Medicaid because they either are undocumented aliens or do not qualify for the AFDC or SSI program. Estimates of the percentage of the hired farmworker population who are undocumented aliens are as high as 50 percent. Many hired farmworkers who are currently employed are ineligible for AFDC or SSI benefits because their incomes are too high to qualify for cash assistance. Labor's 1990 nationwide survey of migrant farmworkers found that only 3 percent of migrant farmworker households had received AFDC benefits during the past 2 years. Furthermore, currently employed hired farmworkers are unlikely to meet the SSI program's definition of blindness or disability.

Migrant farmworkers who do qualify for Medicaid face barriers to the program posed by state enrollment procedures and other administrative requirements. Some migrant farmworkers who apply for Medicaid leave the state before the 45-day period, allowed by federal regulations, for Medicaid application processing elapses. Others who have Medicaid coverage

¹ Medicaid covers treatment for emergency medical conditions of undocumented aliens who otherwise meet the program's eligibility criteria.

² Medicaid can cover people who do not qualify for AFDC or SSI assistance but who have relatively large medical bills.

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Many Hired Farmworkers Do Not Receive
Federal Health Care Assistance and Full
Social Security

in one state are often unable to find health providers in other states who will accept an out-of-state Medicaid card.

Barriers to Medicaid created by state enrollment procedures and other administrative requirements could be removed through agreements, between two or more states, that would recognize Medicaid eligibility across state lines. States are not required to make these agreements, however, and may choose not to make them because of additional costs and administrative problems. The three states with the most migrant farmworkers—California, Florida, and Texas—do not have interstate agreements with other states.

Data on the number of hired farmworkers nationwide who have Medicaid coverage are not available. In a 1982 study, less than 12 percent of migrant farmworkers in New York had Medicaid coverage.³ Lack of Medicaid coverage or benefits increases the likelihood that many poor and uninsured hired farmworkers, particularly migrants, will not get the health services they need. Poor and uninsured migrant farmworkers have reduced access to physician care and hospital services.⁴ In Labor's 1990 survey of migrant farmworkers nationwide, about half of these workers and their families had incomes below the poverty level, with the median family income between \$7,500 and \$10,000 a year. Furthermore, in the survey, about four out of five migrant farmworkers did not have employer-provided health insurance.

Recognizing that migrant farmworkers and their families do not have access to the same health protection and services generally available to others, the Congress established the Migrant Health Program. Through the operation of rural health clinics across the country, the program is a primary source of health care for migrant farmworkers. However, the Department of Health and Human Services reports that budget constraints limit the program to serving less than an estimated 15 percent of the country's migrant farmworkers.

³Peter S. K. Chi, "Medical Utilization Patterns of Migrant Farm Workers in Wayne County, New York," *Public Health Reports*, Vol. 100 (Sept.-Oct. 1985), pp. 480-90.

⁴David R. Smith, M.D., "Hospitalization Access for Patients of Migrant Health Centers and Combined Migrant and Community Health Centers," *Clearinghouse Review* (Summer 1986), pp. 513-14, and Peter S. K. Chi, "Medical Utilization" (Sept.-Oct. 1985), pp. 480-90.

Full Social Security Benefits Not Received

Many hired farmworkers who are retired or disabled, as well as survivors of deceased hired farmworkers, do not receive the full Social Security benefits—retirement, disability, and survivors insurance—they are entitled to. Social Security pays cash benefits to the eligible retired and disabled, as well as to survivors; these benefits are based on a worker's lifetime earnings, as reported by his or her employer. However, if an employer does not report some or any of a worker's earnings, he or she will not receive full Social Security benefits.

Hired farmworkers are more likely than other workers to receive less than the Social Security benefits to which these farmworkers are entitled; this is because their employers do not report all their earnings to SSA. SSA data for 1989 show that agricultural employers were at least three times as likely as other employers to not report or underreport their employees' earnings, said an SSA official. As a result of underreporting of wages by agricultural employers, hired farmworkers are at greater risk of either not receiving Social Security benefits or receiving lower benefit amounts than they should.

The SSI program provides financial support to eligible low-income people who are aged, blind, or disabled. Children can qualify for SSI on the same basis as blind or disabled adults. Most hired farmworkers who are currently employed earn too much to qualify for SSI. However, some hired farmworkers who have stopped working because of age, blindness, or disability can qualify for SSI. Blind or disabled children of hired farmworkers can also qualify for SSI.

However, of those who qualify for SSI, some do not receive SSI support because they are unaware of the program or their eligibility. In 1990, we reported that most of the SSA district managers we surveyed believe there is a continuing need to inform the public about SSI.⁵ The managers acknowledged a particular need for outreach to the rural poor and the non-English-speaking populations. Given that hired farmworkers often live in rural areas and are non-English speaking, many are unaware of the SSI program.

⁵The Social Security Administration's Supplemental Security Income Outreach Activities (GAO/T-HRD-90-22, Apr. 5, 1990), pp. i and 4.

Summary Observations

Many of the nation's hired farmworkers face the hardships of substandard living and working conditions: Pesticides poison hired farmworkers every year, and fields without sanitation facilities expose these workers to many health hazards. Some families have no homes or live in overcrowded and unsanitary housing. Many hired farmworkers do not get needed medical services and their entitled Social Security benefits. Their children, who often work in the fields, are exposed to the same poor conditions and may be more susceptible to health risks.

Hired farmworkers receive some protection and assistance under various federal laws, regulations, and programs, but their need for adequate living and working conditions often goes unmet. The health and well-being of hired farmworkers, as a group, are inadequately protected by federal laws, regulations, and programs. Hired farmworkers exposed to pesticides are given insufficient information about pesticide hazards, and the harmful effects of many pesticides are not fully known. Many hired farmworkers are not protected by field sanitation standards. Young children are allowed to work in agriculture, the second most dangerous occupation in the United States. In addition, many hired farmworkers do not receive federal health care assistance and Social Security benefits to which they are entitled.

Historically, making changes to improve the living and working conditions of hired farmworkers has been difficult and slow. If the Congress should consider proposals to improve hired farmworkers' conditions, changes may again prove to be slow in coming. Given the federal budget deficit, there are questions about program costs and funding priorities to consider. In addition, changes that result in increased costs to the agricultural employer will most likely be passed on to the consumer; this, in turn, may affect the United States's competitiveness in the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, a balance must be struck between increased costs and progress toward improving hired farmworkers' living and working conditions.

Hired Farmworker Housing

Shortage of Housing for Hired Farmworkers

The number of hired farmworkers in need of housing exceeds the number of available housing units. The only national data on hired farmworker housing show that in 1980, available units could house only about one-third of the estimated 1.2 million migrant farmworkers who require housing.¹ In more recent data for California, Oregon, and Washington, the total amount of hired farmworker housing available—including private camps, employer-provided housing, and California's state-run camps—had the capacity to house less than 30 percent of the annual migrant farmworkers in those three states, excluding dependents who migrate with the workers.²

Agricultural employers recognize that the lack of housing is a serious hardship for hired farmworkers, but employers face several disincentives to providing housing for their workers. Construction and maintenance of housing is expensive, especially if the housing will only be occupied during a short harvest season. In addition, employers may hesitate to provide housing because of the administrative problems associated with operating housing, such as applying for loans, maintaining the units, and handling hired farmworker complaints. In addition, local opposition, by using zoning regulations and denials of building permits, can prevent agricultural employers from building hired farmworker housing.

Some employer-provided housing does exist, but economic disincentives have created a trend, spanning the last two decades, toward agricultural employers' discontinuing the provision of housing. These employers are not required to provide housing to hired farmworkers unless the employers hire them from other states through the Department of Labor's Employment Services. Few employers hire farmworkers through these means.

Hired farmworkers, particularly migrants, also face barriers to obtaining housing in the local private housing markets. Small rural communities may not have enough rental units available to accommodate a large influx of migrant farmworkers needing temporary housing. In addition, many private rental units are unavailable to migrant farmworkers because they cannot provide deposits, meet credit checks, or make long-term rental commitments.

¹David Cavanaugh, Rosemary Schmidt, and Howard Mitzel, National Farmworker Housing Study: Study of Housing for Migrant and Settled Farmworkers (Rosslyn, Virginia: InterAmecia Research Associates, Inc., Dec. 1980), pp. 1 and 53.

²Immigration Reform: Potential Impact on West Coast Farm Labor (GAO/HRD-89-89, Aug. 17, 1989), p.69.

Limited Government Assistance for Hired Farmworker Housing

Federal funding to construct and rehabilitate hired farmworker housing has been cut substantially over the past decade, from \$68.7 million in 1979 to \$22.0 million in 1990. Agricultural employer associations have suggested that the federal government could help alleviate the housing shortage by making more money available for hired farmworker housing through the Farmers Home Administration.

Most states do not offer financial assistance for the development of hired farmworker housing. California, however, operates state housing centers for migrant farmworkers and their families. In 1988, the centers provided housing for 12,324, of which 7,010 were adults and the rest were minors. Five states (California, Florida, Ohio, Oregon, and Virginia) have hired farmworker housing programs, which offer financial assistance to groups that construct or rehabilitate hired farmworker housing.

Much Available Housing in Poor Condition

Although some hired farmworkers live in well-kept housing, much of the housing that hired farmworkers occupy is deficient, crowded, and unsanitary. These observations are from studies we reviewed and discussions we held with farmworker advocates, agricultural employer associations, and government officials.

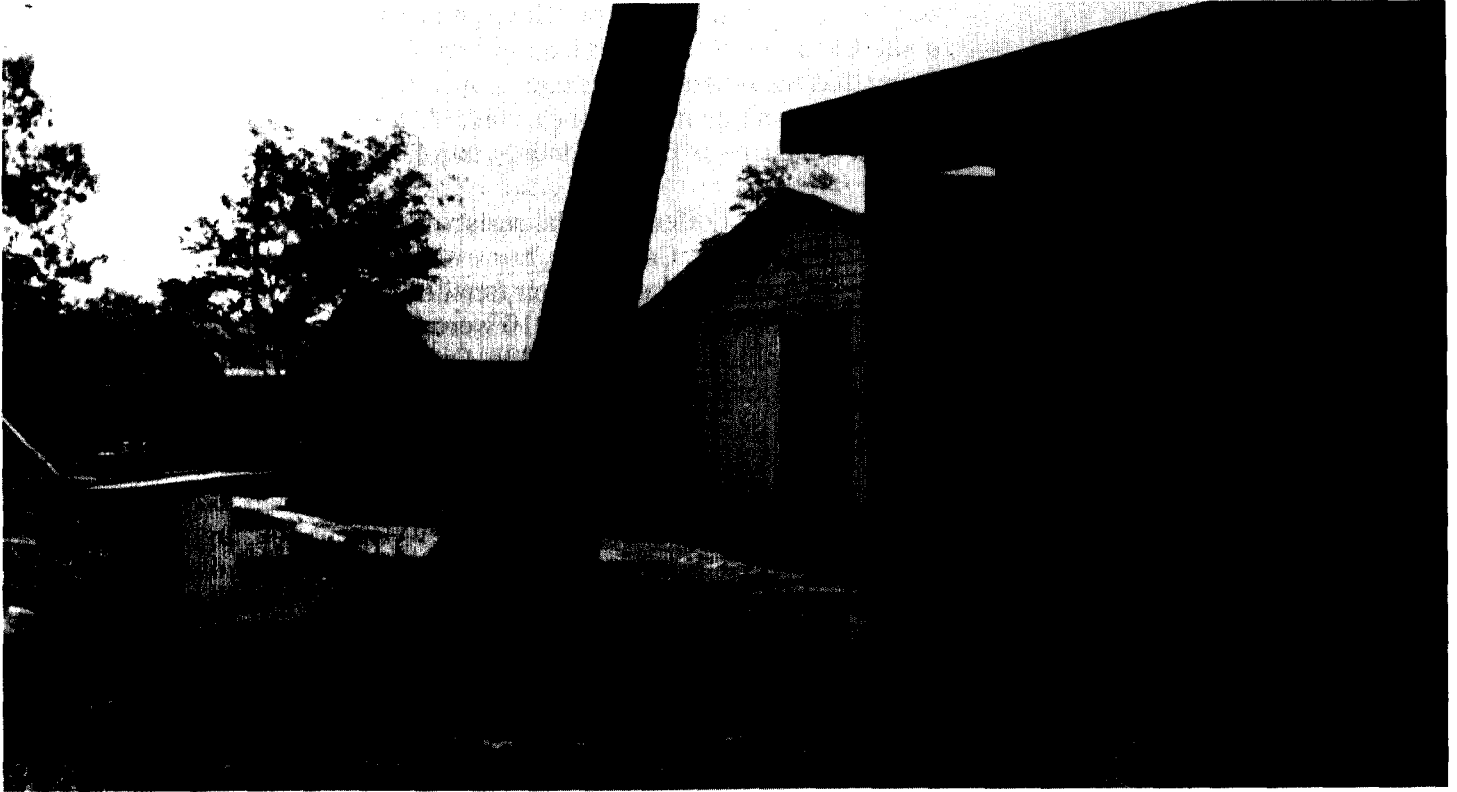
In 1989, deficient and overcrowded housing conditions appeared to be common for hired farmworkers, especially migrants.³ Numerous studies tell of migrant farmworkers living in shacks, barns, old school buses, and other seriously substandard dwellings.⁴ (See fig. I.1.) A family may have to sleep on a dirt floor in a 1-room house with no furniture, running water, or electricity.

³Immigration Reform: Potential Impact on West Coast Farm Labor (GAO/HRD-89-89, Aug. 17, 1989), p. 74.

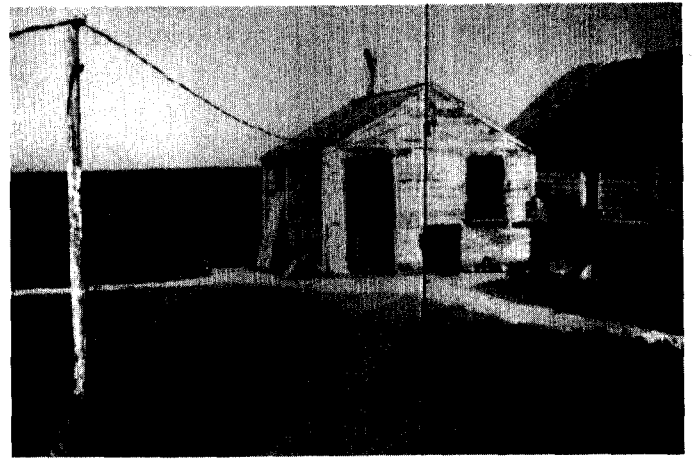
⁴Reports include (1) Joseph O. Prewitt Diaz, Robert T. Trotter II, and Vidal A. Rivera, Jr., The Effects of Migration on Children: An Ethnographic Study (State College, Pennsylvania: Centro De Estudios Sobre la Migracion, 1989), pp. 55-56; (2) Immigration Reform: Potential Impact of West Coast Farm Labor (GAO/HRD-89-89, Aug. 17, 1989), pp. 74-75; (3) State of California Department of Housing and Community Development, Migrant Farmworker Housing in California (Sacramento, California: State of California, 1988), p. 4; (4) Ken Pallack, Oregon Farm Labor Housing Survey (Newberg, Oregon: CASA of Oregon, Jan. 1991), p. 14; and (5) Edward F. Dement, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: An Update on Migrant Farmworker Issues in Today's Agricultural Labor Market (Raleigh, North Carolina: National Governors' Association, Aug. 1985), p. 38.

**Appendix I
Hired Farmworker Housing**

Figure I.1: Substandard Housing in Which Farmworkers Live



Lynda Diane Mull, Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs



Jim Ramos, Proteus Employment Opportunities Inc., Iowa

The majority of hired farmworkers in Oregon, a 1991 Oregon farm labor housing survey found, live in private rental units that are overcrowded and substandard. Of the private rental housing surveyed, 65 percent was in need of significant repairs. Most of the employer-provided housing, however, was in good physical condition.⁵

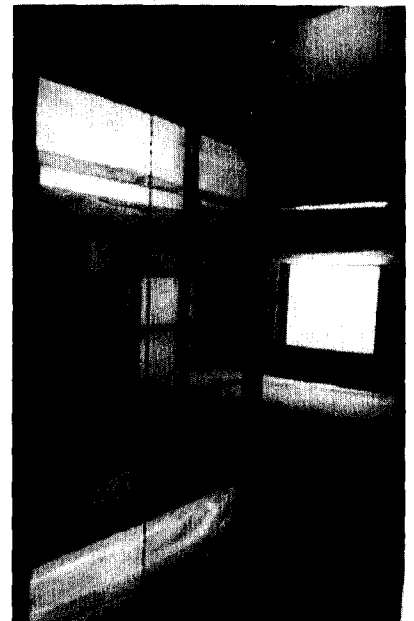
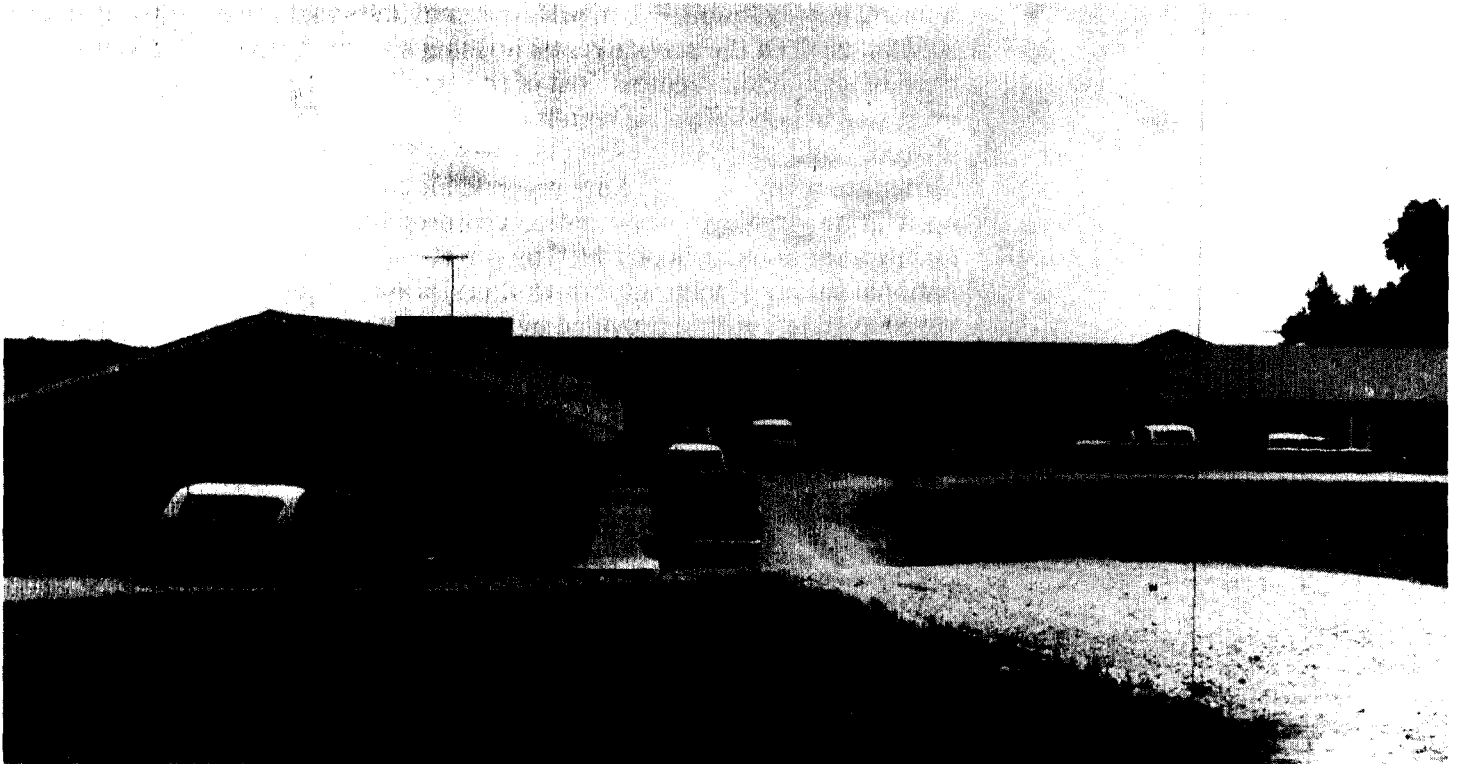
Agricultural employers are not responsible for such deficient housing, an agricultural employer organization representative said, because most hired farmworker housing is provided by private landlords. In Labor's 1990 national survey of migrant farmworkers, about 28 percent of those surveyed lived in housing provided by employers (see fig. I.2).⁶ When agricultural employers provide housing for their workers, the employers must follow Labor standards regulating the size, safety, and sanitation of rooms and buildings.

⁵Ken Pallack, Oregon Farm Labor Housing Survey (Newberg, Oregon: CASA of Oregon, Jan. 1991).

⁶Office of Program Economics, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Findings From the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 1990 (U.S. Department of Labor, July 1991), p. 73.

**Appendix I
Hired Farmworker Housing**

Figure I.2: Scenes From Employer-Provided Housing In Good Condition



Paul Hiscocks, Proteus Employment Opportunities Inc., Iowa

We and others have reported that enforcement of federal regulations for hired farmworker housing has been limited, in part because of the unavailability of resources for enforcement.⁷ If housing regulations were better enforced, however, this could worsen the housing shortage as agricultural employers who provide housing may shut down substandard housing rather than make costly repairs.

⁷Reports include (1) Edward Dement, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: An Update on Migrant Farmworker Issues in Today's Agricultural Labor Market (Raleigh, North Carolina: National Governors' Association, Aug. 1985), p. 38; (2) Immigration Reform, p. 72; and (3) Susan Peck, California Farmworker Housing (Davis, California: California Institute for Rural Studies, Feb. 1989), pp. 14, 15, and 30.

Federal Training and Employment Programs

Some analysts are concerned that the principal federal training program for migrant farmworkers cannot serve the current migrant farmworker population because of insufficient funds. Section 402 of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) (P.L. 97-300) provides job training and job search assistance to migrant farmworkers who are unemployed or underemployed. Since the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), over 900,000 undocumented alien farmworkers have obtained satisfactory immigration status and are eligible for training and assistance under JTPA. Even though the Congress has allocated additional section 402 funds to serve this expanded client population, funds are most likely insufficient to serve all eligible migrant farmworkers. In 1989, we estimated that JTPA overall served about 6 percent of the total estimated population of eligible clients, including migrant farmworkers.¹

The principal federal job placement program—Labor's Employment Service—is not as effective as it should be, advocacy groups and agricultural employer representatives said, in finding hired farmworkers who need jobs and matching them with employers who need workers. Only 1 percent of migrant farmworkers, Labor's 1990 national survey of migrant workers indicated, found jobs through the Employment Service. Agricultural employers generally do not use the Employment Service, representatives of agricultural employer associations said, because obtaining workers, particularly outside their localities, is a cumbersome process. In part because of the availability of undocumented alien farmworkers, agricultural employers may have little incentive to use the Employment Service to hire domestic farmworkers.

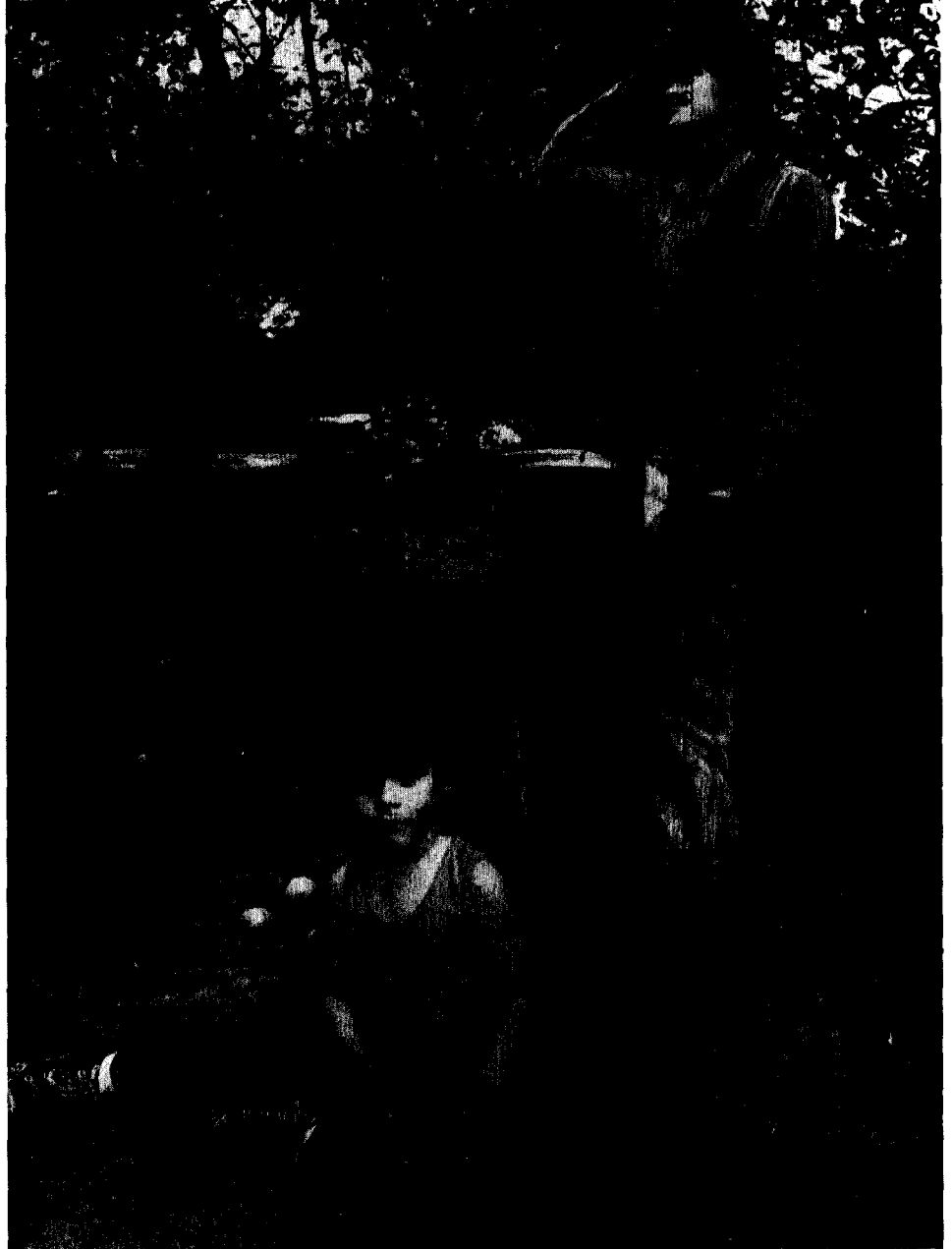
¹Job Training Partnership Act: Services and Outcomes for Participants With Differing Needs (GAO/HRD-89-52, June 9, 1989), p. 33.

Children in Agriculture

In some hired farmworker families, young children must work in the fields so that their families can earn enough to survive. Children as young as 10, a 1989 study on the effects of migration on children found, sometimes work in the fields to contribute to the family income.¹ Some children may not be hired laborers, but their presence in the fields usually means that they will help their parents with the field work (see fig. III.1).

¹Diaz, Trotter II, and Rivera, Jr., The Effects of Migration on Children, pp. 63 and 65.

Figure III.1: Young Child in Florida
Orange Grove



Lonny Shavelson, Impact Visuals

Note: Without child care, some children must go to the fields with their parents.

On the basis of interviews with hired farmworkers in six states, the National Child Labor Committee said, one-third of parents working on farms reported that their children work in the fields with them.

Day care is needed for the children of hired farmworkers, farmworker advocates emphasized, to keep them out of the fields. The federal Migrant Head Start program, in 1990, provided child care services for over 23,000 migrant children, but migrant child care program administrators and farmworker advocates have indicated that more child care centers are needed.² California's hired farmworkers had over 400,000 children under the age of 15 in 1980. Of these, more than 95,000 did not have day care. During the day, these children were either left alone or in the care of another young child.³

Children working in agriculture face educational risks. To supplement the family income, children may need to work in the fields before and after school or miss school completely. Children who migrate with their parents to do farm work face additional difficulties because frequent moves interrupt their education and may delay their progression to the next grade. Migrant children are usually 2 or more years below grade level in reading and mathematics skills;⁴ and the dropout rate for migrant students is 45 percent, much higher than the 29 percent rate for the general population.⁵

²Migrant Head Start is a federally funded child development program that provides educational and health services for low-income migrant children below the age of 6.

³"A Survey of California Farmworkers' Child Care Needs: A Special Report-1980," (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1980, pp. 1 and 13).

⁴Joseph O. Prewitt Diaz, Robert T. Trotter II, and Vidal A. Rivera, Jr., The Effects of Migration on Children: An Ethnographic Study (State College, Pennsylvania: Centro de Estudios Sobre la Migracion, 1989), p. 106.

⁵School Dropouts: The Extent and Nature of the Problem (GAO/HRD- 86-106BR, June 23, 1986) and New York State Education Department, Migrant Attrition Project (Oneonta, New York: State University of New York at Oneonta, Aug. 10, 1987), executive summary.

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