



The Needs of Farmworkers in Washington State *Preliminary Report*

The 2022 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to conduct a study of the needs of farmworkers in Washington. WSIPP was directed to work with Latino-led community organizations throughout the state to administer a survey of farmworkers focusing on workplace health and safety, wages, and retaliation for asserting their rights. WSIPP was also directed to examine how various state and federal agencies work together in enforcing laws and providing services related to farmworkers. Finally, WSIPP was tasked with providing options for improved coordination and service delivery.

This preliminary report is the first in a two-part series in response to this assignment. This report describes the needs of farmworkers in the United States to contextualize the forthcoming survey and examination of state agencies.

This preliminary report is organized as follows: [Section I](#) provides background information on farmwork and farmworkers; [Section II](#) reviews the research literature on challenges faced by US farmworkers; [Section III](#) overviews our plan for conducting the survey; and [Section IV](#) describes the next steps for the project.

Summary

This report provides a brief overview of farmwork and farmworkers in the US, including a comparison of farmworkers to the general US workforce and a discussion of how farmwork differs from most other occupations. We also discuss agriculture and farmwork in Washington.

We summarize the existing research literature on challenges many farmworkers face related to workplace health and safety, labor and pay, immigration, and socioeconomics in the US. For each issue covered, we describe the impacts and pervasiveness.

Finally, we outline our plan for the survey required by the legislation that will be conducted in Washington in 2024. We discuss the size and scope of the survey, the procedure for each interview, partnering organizations, topics covered, and measures taken to preserve respondent confidentiality. We conclude with a description of work already completed on the project.

The legislature specifically directed WSIPP to study the needs of farmworkers and relevant policies and state agency programs. WSIPP was not asked to examine the perspective of farm owners or employers. This limitation will be discussed in the final report.

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A final report on the survey results, state agency coordination, and potential policies to address coordination will be published on June 30, 2025.

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Exhibit 1 Legislative Assignment

- i. *[An appropriation is made....] solely for a comprehensive study to assess specific needs of farmworkers in the state in order to help policymakers determine whether those needs are being met by state administered programs, policies, and statutes. The [Washington State Institute for Public Policy] must consult with farmworker advocacy organizations, state agencies administering programs and policies impacting farmworkers, and nonprofit organizations that work directly with farmworkers.*
- ii. *As part of its information gathering, the institute must hear from farmworkers, either directly or through the nonprofit organizations, regarding farmworkers' experiences and working conditions. These personal, real-life experiences from farmworkers must be based on informal interviews or surveys conducted by Latino nonprofit organizations that have well-established connections and relationships with farmworkers.*
- iii. *The study must focus on needs related to health and safety in the workplace, payment of wages, and preventing harassment and discrimination of, and retaliation against, farmworkers for asserting their rights regarding health and safety standards, wage and hour laws, and access to services.*
- iv. *The study must include:*
 - A. *An examination of how the relevant state agencies coordinate with each other and federal agencies in administering and enforcing the various laws, policies, and programs, and of the agencies' education and outreach to farmworkers regarding farmworkers' rights and protections;*
 - B. *A review of available data from, and research of, programs that are intended to increase health and safety outcomes for farmworkers and that are intended to provide farmworkers access to services and benefits; and*
 - C. *Options on ways to improve agency coordination and the effectiveness of reviewed programs.*
- v. *It is the intent of the legislature to provide funding in the 2023-2025 fiscal biennium budget for the institute to complete the report by June 30, 2025, with a preliminary report submitted by December 1, 2023.*

[Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5693](#)
[Chapter 297, Laws of 2022](#)

I. Farmworkers and Agriculture in the US and Washington State

Farmwork and Farmworkers

For this study, we define a farmworker as any non-supervisory, non-farm-owning individual employed for at least part of the year in agriculture. This includes crop production, livestock production, and working in food packing and shipping houses.

Farmworkers involved in crop production work on farms, orchards, or greenhouses. Their tasks can include planting, tending to, and harvesting vegetables, fruits, nuts, or grains. They till and weed soil, apply pesticides, and load produce for transportation.¹ In livestock production, farmworkers feed, clean, and treat animals such as cattle, sheep, or poultry for disease, harvesting meat, fur, skin, eggs, milk, or honey.² Farmworkers prepare food for transportation and consumption in packing houses or sheds by sorting, cleaning, and treating produce with chemicals and packing it for transportation to markets. Virtually all farmwork is physically demanding, involving rapid hand movements, lifting, bending, squatting, reaching, and/or cutting.

Farmwork is highly seasonal as farm labor demand is largely driven by what crops are grown and the time of year. Some farmworkers, termed migrant seasonal farmworkers, travel between locations to follow these changing labor demands throughout the year.³

Agriculture in Washington

Agriculture is a major industry in Washington, with farms in the state generating more than \$20 billion per year in revenue.⁴ Washington's top agricultural commodities include apples, milk, cattle, wheat, and potatoes. The state is the nation's top producer of apples, blueberries, hops, pears, and sweet cherries.⁵ Different regions are responsible for different types of produce. With its cooler climate, Western Washington produces berries, flowers, poultry, nursery products, and dairy. Eastern Washington is better suited to ranching, wheat, fruits, and vineyards.⁶ Other regions, like the Yakima and Wenatchee Valleys, specialize in apples, hops, and herbs.⁷

In 2022, Washington farms employed 113,174 workers, about 3% of total employment in the state.⁸ There are nearly 36,000 farms in Washington. Most (89%) of these are categorized as small, generating less than \$250,000 in revenue annually.⁹

¹ US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022a, April 25).

² US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022b, April 25).

³ US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. (2022).

⁴ US Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (2017).

⁵ US Department of Agriculture (2023).

⁶ Washington State Department of Commerce (n.d.).

⁷ Washington State University (n.d.) and Wenatchee Valley Visitors Information (2023).

⁸ This number is generated by eliminating farm owners and supervisors, farm management services, and farm labor contractors from total agricultural employment counts and adding workers brought on by the H-2A visa program.

⁹ Washington State Department of Commerce (n.d.).

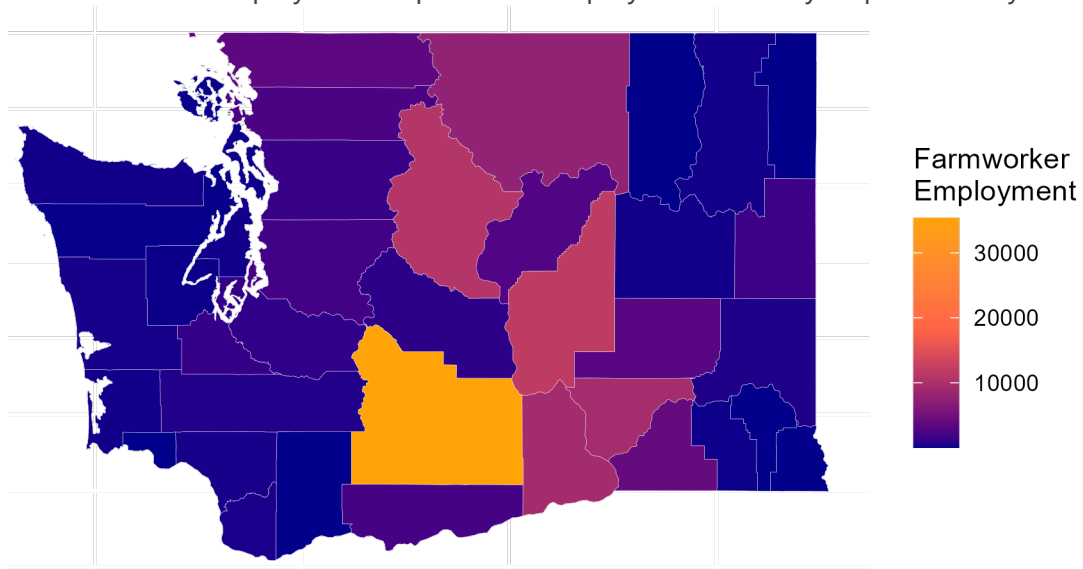
Many farms do not employ farmworkers, while larger operations may employ tens or hundreds of individuals.

As shown in [Exhibit 2](#), the distribution of farmworkers across the state is not even, with Yakima having more than three times as many farmworkers as any other county. Grant and Chelan also have over 10,000 farmworkers, while other counties like Ferry and Wahkiakum have very few. The unequal distribution of farm employment reflects different levels of agricultural activity in different parts of the state.

Unlike many other states, Washington law protects farmworkers' rights to collective bargaining protections, overtime pay, the state minimum wage (which exceeds the federal minimum), and workers' compensation.¹⁰

Exhibit 2

2022 Farmworker Employment Reported to Employment Security Department by County



Notes:

This figure is generated by eliminating farm owners and supervisors, farm management services, and farm labor contractors from total agricultural employment counts and adding workers brought on by the H-2A visa program. Source: [Washington State Employment Security Department, Data Architecture, Transformation, and Analytics \(2023\)](#).

¹⁰ Washington's overtime policy for farmworkers has had a phase in period beginning in 2022. Starting in January of 2024, farmworkers are entitled to time-and-a-half pay for

any hour worked over 40 hours per week. However, certain trades, such as dairy, are not covered. [RCW 51.12.010](#); [Final Bill Report: ESSB 5172](#); [Mikolajczyk \(n.d.\)](#); and [RCW 49.32.020](#).

II. Challenges Faced by Farmworkers in the US

The legislature directed WSIPP to work with Latino-led community organizations to administer a comprehensive survey on farmworker needs. In order to develop this survey, we examined the research literature on the challenges faced by farmworkers in the US. Though research specific to farmworkers in Washington is very limited, many of the challenges farmworkers face at the national level are likely also experienced by farmworkers in the state.

This section describes the research literature on the challenges farmworkers face in the US that we will ask Washington farmworkers about in our survey. It is important to note that the challenges discussed in this section may have numerous and complex causes. Each challenge described does not impact all farmworkers equally. This section is meant to introduce each survey topic and to provide context for its inclusion in the survey.

We present some potential actions and policies to address each challenge in [Exhibit 4](#) at the end of this section.

Work-Related Factors

Injuries and Musculoskeletal Disorders

Farmwork and agricultural occupations are among the most injury-prone jobs in the US.¹¹ In 2019, the fatal injury rate for crop production workers was more than 4.5 times the rate across all private-sector workers. Crop production workers were also 1.6 times more likely to experience non-fatal injuries requiring time away from work.¹² The physically demanding nature of farmwork and use of heavy machinery contribute to the high injury rate. Research finds that at least two-thirds of farmworkers experience work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and injuries, like lower back pain, chronic hip pain, arthritis, osteoarthritis, and carpal tunnel syndrome.¹³ The type of injury most likely to occur for a given farmworker depends on their job.

Heat

Heat is another common health risk for farmworkers. Prolonged exposure without adequate rest, water, and shade breaks can lead to heat-related illnesses (HRIs), including heat rash, cramps, fainting, exhaustion, and heat stroke. Symptoms for these HRIs range anywhere from mild discomfort to seizure or death.¹⁴ An HRI of particular concern is acute kidney injury, a sudden, often reversible drop in kidney function brought on by dehydration.¹⁵ The rate of heat-related death for farmworkers is 20 times higher than the average civilian worker in the US.¹⁶

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. (2023).

¹² Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2021).

¹³ Osborne et al. (2012).

¹⁴ State of California Department of Industrial Relations (2023).

¹⁵ Goyal et al. (2023).

¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control (2008).

Sexism is of particular concern, as women are often paid less and given different types of working assignments than men.⁶⁵ The most frequent source of discrimination is farmworkers' employers and supervisors.⁶⁶

Experiencing discrimination has been linked to poor physical and mental health in farmworkers.⁶⁷ It has also been shown to decrease access to jobs, safe housing, educational opportunities, and healthcare.⁶⁸

Psychological Impacts

The challenges detailed in this section can cause farmworkers to suffer psychological distress and mental illness. Farmworkers are routinely found to suffer from conditions like depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation at rates far exceeding the general US population.⁶⁹ Poor mental health in farmworkers is associated with working conditions, social isolation, acculturation stress, poor housing, fear of deportation, food insecurity, and many other stressors.⁷⁰ Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has been tied to an increase in mental health issues in farmworkers.⁷¹

Solutions to Challenges Faced by Farmworkers in the US

Finally, we offer a sample of actions and policies to address each of the challenges faced by US farmworkers described in this section. We conducted an extensive review of the research literature to identify potential actions that could address the identified needs of farmworkers and selected two to three examples of potential actions for each. This is not a comprehensive list of all possible actions, nor does it constitute recommendations.

Exhibit 4 presents our findings from the research literature, organized by whether each would require action at the individual- or farm-level, action by service providers (including government agencies), or a change in state or federal policy. Actions that multiple parties can take appear in multiple columns. For instance, education about musculoskeletal disorders could be carried out by farm owners and service providers or mandated by state or federal policy. Other interventions, like national immigration reform, must be implemented at a policy level.

and harassment of employees based on these factors can occur after hiring.

⁶⁵ Fisher et al. (2022).

⁶⁶ Snipes et al. (2017).

⁶⁷ Williams et al. (2003).

⁶⁸ Ramos (2017).

⁶⁹ Hovey & Magaña (2000).

⁷⁰ Dodge (2009); Weigel et al. (2007); and Mora et al. (2016).

⁷¹ Keeney et al. (2022).

Upon completing the survey, respondents will be given a \$30 reward in an envelope. The back of the envelope will contain a statement that respondents will sign to confirm their receipt of the reward. These envelopes will then be securely stored to ensure that respondent identities are not revealed. There will be no mutual identifiers between the envelope with respondents' signatures and their responses so that no connection can be made by anyone between their identity and responses. The surveyors will then thank respondents for their time, ask if they have any questions, and the interview will conclude.

Partners

WSIPP will contract directly with two organizations in Washington State to conduct the survey.

Comunidad para el Avance Familiar Educativo (CAFÉ) is a Wenatchee, Washington-based, Latino-led non-profit organization that seeks to advance families and communities through education. They administer various programs in the Wenatchee area focused on family education, community participation, leadership, and environmental justice. WSIPP selected CAFÉ after submitting the most favorable bid in an open bidding process between June and August 2023. Members of CAFÉ or subcontracted organizations will travel throughout Washington to conduct the survey. CAFÉ fulfills the requirement to work with a Latino-led nonprofit organization.

The Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at Washington State University has over 50 years of experience conducting surveys and other types of research on various sociological topics. SESRC will provide training courses for all surveyors on neutrality and confidentiality.

Survey Topic Coverage

The questions for survey respondents are largely derived from the legislation for this study. The specific questions in the survey were developed after an extensive review of the research literature on issues faced by farmworkers in Washington and the US, as described in [Section II](#).

Questions are also informed by outreach to community organizations, largely Latino-led, that work directly with farmworkers throughout the state. The survey itself was reviewed by a number of these organizations from June to August of 2023, and their suggestions and edits were incorporated where possible. Topics covered by the survey are presented in [Exhibit 5](#).

First, respondents will be asked about their background and demographics, such as age, sex, and ethnicity. Next, the survey will cover health and safety in the workplace, issues with the payment of wages, access to government services, and harassment and retaliation against farmworkers for asserting their rights concerning any other topics. Finally, questions will ask more about respondents' experiences with food insecurity, poverty, and healthcare.

IV. Conclusion

This preliminary report has provided an overview of farmwork and a summary of the research literature on challenges faced by farmworkers in the US. Farmworkers in the US are a diverse but often vulnerable population. Farmworkers are paid significantly less than the general US workforce and are more likely to experience poverty, food scarcity, housing instability, and a variety of other socioeconomic problems.

The final report, which will be published in June 2025, will cover the results of WSIPP's survey of farmworkers, as outlined in [Section III](#). The information gathered via the survey will offer a more comprehensive portrait of the identities, experiences, and needs of farmworkers in Washington than is currently available.

The final report will also feature a detailed accounting of the various actions taken by Washington State and federal government agencies to provide services to farmworkers and ensure workplace protections in the state.

Finally, the report will describe policies to deliver services to farmworkers in other states and analyze the survey results for opportunities for improved cohesion and collaboration between agencies.

The survey and this study in general are focused on the needs of farmworkers. The needs of farm owners or employers will not be explicitly examined within this study effort. The final report will discuss this limitation.

Appendices

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Appendices

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I. Sources for Exhibits

Exhibit A1

Sources used in Exhibit 3

Characteristic	Sources for total workforce
Total (millions)	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). <i>Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey</i> .
Avg. hourly wage	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). <i>Average Hourly Earnings of All Employees, Total Private</i> .
% Female	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). <i>Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey</i> .
% Born in US	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). <i>Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics</i> .
% Hispanic	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). <i>Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2020</i> . Report No. 1095.
% Citizen	American Immigration Council. (2021). <i>Immigrants in the United States</i> .
% Documented*	American Immigration Council. (2021). <i>Immigrants in the United States</i> .
% Below poverty line	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). <i>A profile of the working poor</i> . Report No. 1099.
% Health insurance*	US Census Bureau. (2021). <i>Health insurance coverage in the United States: 2020</i> . Report No. P60-274.
% HS diploma	US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). <i>Educational attainment for workers 25 years and older by detailed occupation</i> .
% Some college	Hodge, N., Andreason, S., & Van Horn, C.E. (2023). <i>The labor market, then and now: The first two decades of the 21st century</i> . Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

Note:

* Statistic pertains to entire US population rather than just the US labor force.

Exhibit A2
Sources for Exhibit 4

Issue	Sources
Injuries and MSDs	Naeini, H.S., Karuppiah, K., Tamrin, S.B., & Dalal, K. (2014). Ergonomics in agriculture: an approach in prevention of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) . <i>Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences</i> , 3(2), 33-51; Singh, S., & Arora, R. (2010). Ergonomic intervention for preventing musculoskeletal disorders among farm women . <i>Journal of Agricultural Sciences</i> , 1(2), 61-71.
Heat	Smith, D.J., Ferranti, E.P., Hertzberg, V.S., & Mac, V. (2021). Knowledge of heat-related illness first aid and self-reported hydration and heat-related illness symptoms in migrant farmworkers . <i>Workplace Health & Safety</i> , 69(1), 15-21; Bethel, J. W., & Harger, R. (2014). Heat-related illness among Oregon farmworkers . <i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health</i> , 11(9), 9273-9285; Fleischer, N.L., Tiesman, H.M., Sumitani, J., Mize, T., Amarnath, K.K., Bayakly, A. R., & Murphy, M.W. (2013). Public health impact of heat-related illness among migrant farmworkers . <i>American Journal of Preventive Medicine</i> , 44(3), 199-206; Jackson, L.L., & Rosenberg, H.R. (2010). Preventing heat-related illness among agricultural workers . <i>Journal of Agromedicine</i> , 15(3), 200-215 Courville, M.D., Wadsworth, G., & Schenker, M. (2016). We just have to continue working": Farmworker self-care and heat-related illness . <i>Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development</i> , 6(2), 143-164.
Smoke	Riden, H.E., Giacinto, R., Wadsworth, G., Rainwater, J., Andrews, T., & Pinkerton, K.E. (2020). Wildfire smoke exposure: awareness and safety responses in the agricultural workplace . <i>Journal of Agromedicine</i> , 25(3), 330-338; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. (2023). Outdoor Workers Exposed to Wildfire Smoke ; California State Department of Industrial Relations. (2021). Protecting Outdoor Workers Exposed to Smoke from Wildfires .
Pesticides	Quandt, S., Arcury, T., Austin, C., & Saavedra, R. (1998). Farmworker and farmer perceptions of farmworker agricultural chemical exposure in North Carolina . <i>Human Organization</i> , 57(3), 359-368; Oregon State Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (n.d.). Personal Protective Equipment: Selecting the Right PPE for Pesticide Use . Publication No. 440-1018; Quandt, S.A., Hernández-Valero, M.A., Grzywacz, J.G., Hovey, J.D., Gonzales, M., & Arcury, T.A. (2006). Workplace, household, and personal predictors of pesticide exposure for farmworkers . <i>Environmental Health Perspectives</i> , 114(6), 943-952.
COVID-19	Matthew, O.O., Monaghan, P.F., & Luque, J.S. (2021). The novel coronavirus and undocumented farmworkers in the United States . <i>New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy</i> , 31(1), 9-15; Liebman, A.K., Juarez-Carrillo, P.M., Reyes, I.A.C., & Keifer, M.C. (2016). Immigrant dairy workers' perceptions of health and safety on the farm in America's Heartland . <i>American Journal of Industrial Medicine</i> , 59(3), 227-235.
Wage theft	Rogers, B. (2010). Toward third-party liability for wage theft . <i>Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law</i> , 31(1), 1-64; Dombrowski, L., Alvarado Garcia, A., & Despard, J. (2017). Low-wage precarious workers' sociotechnical practices working towards addressing wage theft . In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 4585-4598).
Retaliation	Occupational Safety and Health Association. (n.d.). Recommended Practices for Anti-retaliation Programs . No. 3905.

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