Migrants and seasonal farmworkers have long struggled under some of the most challenging economic and housing conditions in America. Farmworkers often seem like an invisible population due to the rural nature of their work.

**Geography**

Unlike some populations that HAC assists, migrant and seasonal farmworkers can be found in many different parts of the U.S., according to areas of high agricultural need. The states of California, Florida, and Texas are among those with larger farmworker populations.

**Population**

Data on farmworker populations are particularly difficult to obtain, due to the lack of a centralized data system. The National Agricultural Worker’s Study (NAWS) contains the most comprehensive data on this population and is the basis for this information sheet. The migrant and seasonal farmworker population is in a state of fluctuation, due partially to the Great Recession, which has led to widespread job loss. Political changes have also impacted migration patterns of farmworkers, as traveling across borders has become more difficult in the post-9/11 world, whereas before 9/11, many farmworkers would travel between the U.S. and Mexico several times a year.

The vast majority of farmworkers are members of a racial or ethnic minority, and almost three-quarters of all farmworkers were born outside of the U.S. However, this proportion of foreign farmworkers actually represents a decrease from 1998 numbers, when 81 percent of farmworkers were foreign-born. The average amount of time that an immigrant farmworker has been in the U.S. is 15 years, and over 80 percent of farmworkers entered the U.S. before 2005. The median farmworker age increased between 1998 to 2008 from 31 to 34 years.

The vast majority (78 percent) of farmworkers are males; some live in groups of single men, while others reside with their families. More than half of all farmworkers are married, but of those individuals, only 44 percent live with their spouse. Forty-five percent of farmworkers have children, but only about half of those with children live with them.

While many farmworkers are unauthorized (50 percent), the other half are either legal residents (20 percent) or U.S. citizens (30 percent).

**Economic Characteristics**

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers face difficult economic circumstances. Agricultural work is typically low-wage employment, frequently only a stepping stone to higher-paid work. Farmworkers who do not speak English or who are undocumented are much more likely to experience labor rights violations than other workers.
The migration characteristics of farmworkers have changed throughout the past decade. Farmworkers are traveling shorter distances to work and tend to work in the same place for longer than in the past. In 1998 approximately 65 percent of farmworkers had worked under only one employer during the previous year, but by 2009 this percentage was up to 81 percent. Approximately 70 percent of farmworkers stay in the same location year-round.

Farmworkers are one of the poorest demographics in the U.S. In 2009, about one-half of all farmworkers earned $16,250 or less per year. Nationally, only 18 percent of households earned less than $20,000 in the same year. While average hourly wages have increased slightly throughout the past decade the gains pale in comparison to wage gains made in other sectors.

About one-quarter of farmworkers have a household income below the poverty line, approximately twice as high as the national household poverty rate. However, this number does represent a drastic decrease in farmworker poverty rates from 1998, when approximately 6 percent of farmworkers had incomes below the poverty level. The reduction in poverty may be partially due to the increased stability of farmworker populations throughout the past decade. Farmworkers currently work more days out of the year, earn higher wages, and are less likely to be the sole income-earner within a household than in the past.

In spite of the high poverty rates among farmworkers, this population has a low usage rate of need-based government assistance programs. While unemployment benefits are sometimes used, SNAP and WIC usages are low.

Housing Characteristics

Farmworkers face a variety of issues in their housing situations, and the decrease in mobility for this population creates more strain on housing availability. Most farmworkers attain their housing through the private market (85 percent), and many rely on rental housing. Of all farmworker housing units, 60 percent are renter-occupied, while approximately 35 percent are owner-occupied. Despite the high need for rental housing among this population, rental housing units tend to be less plentiful in rural areas.

Certain requirements for housing can pose a unique challenge to farmworkers over other groups. For instance, farmworkers may have difficulty providing a security deposit, credit check, or long-term residency commitment that are often standard in the private rental housing market.

The prevalence of employer-owned housing has declined throughout the years. In 1995, almost 40 percent of farmworker housing units were owned by the employer, while currently only about 13 percent are employer-owned. While employer-owned housing is often regulated for health and safety standards, employees may be hesitant to complain to an employer about any housing issues, due to the unbalanced nature of the relationship and fear of work-related consequences. While employer-provided housing is free for the farmworker 83 percent of the time, increasing regulations and the cost of maintaining housing have dissuaded many employers from taking this route.

Crowding is often an issue within farmworker housing, as an estimated 31 percent of non-dormitory/barrack-style farmworker housing units are crowded—meaning there is more than one occupant per room, excluding bathrooms). This estimate is over six time the national rate of crowded housing units. Farmworkers and their families are also more likely to encounter pesticide-related environmental hazards when compared to other populations.

Addressing the Needs

While farmworkers clearly struggle with myriad housing needs, less than one percent of them receive any support from a government-sponsored affordable housing program. In light of this situation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Section 514/516 Farm Labor Housing Program is a vital resource for the farmworker population. Through this program, USDA provides funding for purchasing, improving, and repairing housing for farm laborers. USDA Farm Labor Housing properties currently make up about 14,000 units of farmworker housing, most of which are off-farm projects.

However, despite moderate funding increases, the development of new Section 514/516 housing units has decreased throughout the past 25 years. Support from all sectors is needed to address the difficult economic and housing issues that the farmworker population faces.

*Unless otherwise noted, all information from this information sheet derives from HAC tabulations of the National Agricultural Worker’s Study (NAWS) data.