

## Farmworkers Face Barriers to Participation in Welfare Programs

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### Key Facts

Farmworkers in the U.S. can face barriers to accessing welfare programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Unemployment Insurance.

Factors impacting program participation include citizenship and immigration status, English fluency, and household composition.

To mitigate health and economic disparities, policymakers should consider targeted outreach to enhance welfare-program participation among farmworkers.

*Farmworkers are among the lowest-paid workers in the United States and are more likely than workers in other industries to experience food insecurity, poverty and health problems. Social safety net programs such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are intended to support low-income households, but farmworkers can face particular barriers to accessing them. In a recent study, we used three national surveys to compare farmworker participation in six programs: Medicaid, SNAP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Unemployment Insurance (UI), the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program (NSLP), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Among income-eligible farmworker households between 2010 and 2022, participation was highest for Medicaid, at 71 percent–79 percent, and the EITC, at 75 percent. NSLP participation averaged 68 percent, while WIC ranged from 47 percent to 59 percent. SNAP participation ranged from 26 percent to 47 percent, and UI was around 21 percent. Despite some differences between them, the surveys show broadly similar trends and identify several characteristics consistently associated with participation, including citizenship and immigration status, English fluency, household composition and the presence of an adult woman in the household. Based on these findings, policymakers should consider targeted outreach to enhance welfare-program participation among US farmworkers and mitigate health and economic disparities.*

### Background

Social safety net programs are intended to reduce economic and health insecurity among low-income households. Compared with workers in other industries, hired farmworkers are more likely to be food insecure, have incomes below the federal poverty level, and experience health issues.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Yet previous research has found relatively low participation in safety net programs among agricultural workers. Measuring participation is particularly challenging because farmworkers are disproportionately non-English-speaking, some come from Indigenous populations without written languages, and many live in unconventional housing, making them a harder population to survey.<sup>4,5</sup>

Immigration status creates additional challenges. About 42 percent of farmworkers are classified as lacking appropriate documentation to work in the United States, making them ineligible for most federal benefits (although members of their

households, including US-born children, may be eligible). Other barriers to program participation include inadequate information, administrative burdens, and social stigma.<sup>6</sup> States' discretion in the implementation and administration of the programs can also impact participation.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

In our study,<sup>10</sup> we posed three questions. What share of income-eligible farmworker households participate in social safety net programs? How do estimates differ between surveys? And which worker and household characteristics are associated with participation?

### Examining welfare-program participation among farmworkers

We compared three nationally representative datasets: the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the American Community Survey (ACS), and the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS-ASEC). We

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examined annual trends from 2000 to 2022, with a particular focus on participation between 2010 and 2022.

The NAWS is specifically designed to survey agricultural workers and interviews workers at their workplaces, while the ACS and CPS-ASEC are large household surveys covering the wider US population. These differences allowed us to examine how survey design affects estimates of farmworker program participation.

We identified farmworker households and determined eligibility for each program using simplified criteria based primarily on household income and size, and sometimes the age and gender of its members. A household was considered eligible if the household or at least one member met the simplified eligibility criteria, and participating if at least one member was enrolled. We then compared participation across surveys and over time.

## Variations in participation associated with citizenship, immigration status, English fluency, and household composition

Participation varied substantially across programs. Among income-eligible farmworker households, Medicaid participation was highest, at 71–79 percent, followed by EITC at 75 percent and NSLP at 68 percent. WIC participation ranged from 47 to 59 percent, SNAP from 26 to 47 percent, and UI was approximately 21 percent.

Trends also differed. SNAP participation rose during the Great Recession and remained high in the recovery period, and has somewhat declined in recent years. WIC participation also has a notable downward trend since 2017. NSLP participation remained relatively stable at around 70 percent, while the share of agricultural households with school-aged children increased from 27 percent in 2000 to 42 percent in 2022. Medicaid participation increased between 2003 and 2010 and then remained relatively stable. UI participation declined from around 40 percent in 2004 to around 10 percent in 2019, while EITC participation remained relatively stable, generally between 70 and 85 percent.

For some programs, the surveys produced different estimates of participation among the farmworker population. One potential explanation is that the NAWS captured a larger share of low-income, noncitizen and non-English-speaking farmworkers than the ACS and CPS-ASEC. Around one-third of NAWS farmworker households were classified as all-noncitizen, compared with about 10 percent in the ACS and CPS.

Citizenship and immigration status were among the most consistent characteristics associated with participation. All-noncitizen households had lower participation in SNAP, Medicaid and UI, while limited English fluency was associated with lower

WIC participation. Households with an adult woman were more likely to participate across programs; household composition, age and education were also associated with participation. Participation tended to increase with number of children and the age of the oldest member, and to decrease with the age of the youngest member and the annual household income.

## Targeted outreach may increase program participation among eligible farmworkers

We brought together three national surveys to provide a more complete picture of safety net participation among US farmworkers. We found substantial participation among income-eligible farmworker households in Medicaid, EITC and NSLP, but considerably lower participation in SNAP and UI.

Our findings identify farmworker subgroups that face particular barriers to participation. Limited English fluency was associated with lower WIC participation, suggesting that outreach in farmworkers' native languages may improve access. Lower participation among all-noncitizen households also reflects eligibility restrictions attached to several programs. Households with an adult woman were consistently more likely to participate, suggesting that women may play an important role in managing program eligibility and applications.

Policymakers should consider improving outreach in farmworkers' native languages and through agricultural workplaces, as well as strengthening survey coverage and eligibility measures. Adding NSLP and EITC questions to the NAWS may also be beneficial, as would improving measurement of health coverage. They should also consider whether currently employed farmworkers and their families should have greater access to safety net programs regardless of immigration status.

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