

# MIGRATORY AND SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS: THE UNSEEN FORCE THAT FEEDS AMERICA



It is a scene we are familiar with: walking through the produce section of our local grocery store, enjoying the bold colors of the fruits and vegetables and the fresh scents of the herbs. We ponder which variety of apple is best for baking and eagerly anticipate the sweet taste of watermelon on a hot summer day. Yet, we often give little thought to the names, faces and lives of those who grow and package the food that nourishes and sustains us. For generations, Migratory and Seasonal Agricultural Workers (MSAWs, also referred to as farmworkers), have been sharing their agricultural skills and strong work ethic in the orchards, farms and packing sheds with very little recognition or support from society. In recent years, the national debate around borders and entry into the country has raised important questions concerning foreign workers generally, and farmworkers specifically. The spotlight on the critical role that MSAWs play was amplified with the emergence of COVID-19 when it quickly became apparent that farmworkers were absolutely vital to maintaining our nation's food supply. At a time when many other foreign groups were being restricted from the United States, farmworkers were deemed essential and exempted from exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the undeniable contributions to the economy and our communities that MSAWs make, these men and women, and their children, are often left without the resources, access and information they need to lead their healthiest lives. With funding provided through a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) Eugene Washington Engagement Award, researchers, community and national organizations, and MSAWs have partnered to build capacity for patient-centered research, promote the allocation of funding to carry it out, and link networks of national and local agencies to support the sharing of results.

## WHO ARE MIGRATORY AND SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS (MSAWS)?

There are several terms that are important to clearly define and understand in the context of migratory and seasonal agricultural work. Migratory and seasonal agricultural workers are people working temporarily or seasonally in agricultural settings.<sup>2</sup> The type of work they do varies by location and requires differing sets of skilled labor, some of which are highly technical. MSAWs perform a wide variety of tasks such as irrigating, harvesting and inspecting crops by hand, operating and servicing farm machinery and tools, applying fertilizer and pesticides, and maintaining the land.<sup>3</sup> They are involved in the production and packaging of an abundance of crops. Every one of the 10 most popular fruits and seven of the top 10 most popular vegetables in the nation must be harvested by hand, and it is MSAWs who perform this work for crops on these lists that are grown domestically, including: apples, grapes, strawberries, oranges, watermelon, lemons, blueberries, peaches, cantaloupe, tomatoes, onions, lettuce, broccoli, peppers, celery and cucumbers.<sup>4</sup>

**MIGRATORY AND SEASONAL WORKERS.** Within this group, *migratory* or *migrant workers* are individuals who temporarily leave their home communities and travel a significant distance (75 miles or more under the National Agricultural Workers Survey) during a 12 month period to acquire a farm job.<sup>5</sup> Individuals are generally classified as *seasonal*/workers if their primary employment is in agricultural work on a seasonal rather than year-round basis, for a certain minimum period (according to one set of federal regulations, at least 75 days within the past 24 months).<sup>6</sup>

Among the overall group of farmworkers, including both migratory and seasonal workers, more than 80% are considered “settled” and work within one location within 75 miles from their homes. Among the remaining 20%, the majority are “shuttlers” who travel to a single location more than 75 away from home, with only about 5% being “follow the crop” workers who regularly move from state-to-state.<sup>7</sup>



**REFUGEES.** MSAWs differ from *refugees* in that refugees are fleeing persecution or violence. The federal government defines a refugee as a person “unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>8</sup>

**IMMIGRANTS.** Though the definition varies widely depending on the context, an *immigrant* is generally considered to be an individual who makes a conscious decision to leave his or her home and move to a foreign country with the intention of settling there.<sup>9</sup> Some MSAWs are a subset of immigrants because they are working in the U.S. with hopes of remaining permanently. Others, however, are working temporarily in the country with no intention of resettling and would not be considered immigrants by this definition.

## HOW MANY MSAWS ARE CURRENTLY IN THE U.S., WHERE ARE THEY FROM, AND WHERE DO THEY TRAVEL AND WORK?

There are an estimated 2.4 million MSAWs in the United States,<sup>10</sup> with 69% being born in Mexico, 24% being born in the U.S., 6% being born in Central America and the small remainder originating from various other regions. About half work in the country legally, with 29% being citizens, 21% being legal residents and 1% entering under the H-2A Program for Temporary Agricultural Workers (colloquially referred to as H-2A workers) or other visa program. Roughly half of MSAWs are under age 35 (44%), married (57%), have children (55%) and live away from their nuclear families (40%).<sup>5</sup>

MSAWs work all over the nation, with the states with the highest populations being California, Texas, Washington, Florida, Oregon, and North Carolina. MSAWs who do travel often have a “home base,” in a large agricultural state such as Florida, Texas or California.<sup>10</sup> As the growing season progresses, they travel northward to “receiver communities,” generally in one of three recognized migrant streams: Eastern, Midwestern and Western.<sup>11</sup>

## WHY ARE MSAWS IMPORTANT TO THE U.S. ECONOMY?

MSAWs fill critical jobs on farms and orchards that others do not seek out. A study analyzing 15 years of data in North Carolina found that there was “virtually no supply” of local manual farm laborers in the state, even in the depths of a severe recession.<sup>12</sup> Undocumented workers contribute about \$9 billion annually to the fruit and vegetable industry alone, and farmers report labor shortages as the number one limiting factor affecting their growth.<sup>13</sup> The COVID-19 outbreak highlighted the crucial role that MSAWs play in the economy. One industry official wrote that the pandemic led to agricultural labor shortages that left many farms “on the brink of collapse” and jeopardized our nation’s “ability to move crops from the fields to the markets that need them.”<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT CHALLENGES AND HARDSHIPS DO MSAWS FACE?

MSAWs face a host of trials. Most (77%) speak Spanish as a first language, have limited (41%) to no (30%) English language proficiency, and have on average only completed the eighth grade. Their annual mean incomes are below \$20,000, with one third living below the poverty level.<sup>5</sup> Agriculture is one of the most hazardous occupations in the U.S. Farmworkers do hard physical labor, working long hours in extreme temperatures, handling pesticides and other hazardous chemicals, and using dangerous heavy machinery.<sup>2</sup> Many reside in substandard housing, with over half reporting living in overcrowded dwellings, and one-fourth reporting living directly adjacent to areas in which pesticides are applied.<sup>14</sup> While MSAWs suffer higher than average mortality and morbidity rates, other issues such as language barriers, immigration status, migration patterns, and affordability make it difficult for many to access adequate health services.<sup>2</sup> MSAWs typically are paid only when they work and without sick leave or vacation time. The result is that it is difficult to take time off if they are sick or need to see a health provider.



## WHY SHOULD FUNDING SPECIFIC TO MSAWS BE A PRIORITY, AND WHERE ARE SOME THE GAPS?

MSAWs contribute immeasurably to the physical and economic well-being of the U.S., yet their needs are largely invisible to the most of us. They often live and work under extremely harsh conditions and have an array of health problems including hypertension and diabetes, among others.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, many of the challenges they face are unique. While economic hardship and poverty are common to many populations, it is not enough to simply amalgamate MSAWs with other groups that face institutional bias and inequities and then examine the needs of all these groups en masse. MSAWs are distinct from others in that they must try to access services that often are in a language they do not speak and require a literacy level they may not possess. They may need to travel great distances to reach job sites, and many have significant transportation barriers, both getting to these sites and getting around once they arrive. Local travel is complicated by the fact that farms and orchards are by nature in rural areas that present transportation barriers, as well as service obstacles, to all residents. Once reaching their employment destinations, MSAWs work long days, performing strenuous and dangerous activities. For some, this is all done under a constant fear of deportation – despite the designation of MSAWs as “essential workers.” In a study examining suicide ideation among women farmworkers, two thirds or more identified language barriers, uprooting and hard physical labor as the top three stressors.<sup>16</sup>

Increasing available information relating to MSAWs is needed, and it is not possible to conclusively identify one area as the most pressing. There is, however, a significant gap relating to farmworker health. In addition to timely information regarding basic health services for MSAWs, there is a particular dearth of data on sensitive issues like mental health, substance use and sexually transmitted diseases, which carry stigma and misinformation among many populations.<sup>17, 18</sup> Any funds allocated to well-designed projects focused on improving farmworker health would be money well spent, as the health and strength of farmworkers is vital to the health and strength of our nation.



## CENTERING THE WORK WITH MSAWS AS PARTNERS

MSAWs have an abundance of skills and expertise and are keenly aware of where challenges and opportunities exist in their lives. Yet, programs are typically created and research shaped to “serve” MSAWs, but do so without their participation. Recently, there have been calls to include farmworkers in the development of research and health initiatives, leading to more effective services.<sup>19</sup> Through two PCORI-funded engagement awards, researchers, providers and MSAWs have partnered to begin creating a research agenda specific to MSAW health.<sup>20</sup> Initially informed from a review of the literature,<sup>21</sup> it gained greater definition through the involvement of farmworkers. The partnership has expanded to include MSAWs from multiple states with work underway to develop an orientation to prepare MSAWs to participate throughout the research process.

## For More Information

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[PCORI webpage for Migratory and Seasonal Agricultural Workers and Health Research: Developing Capacity for PCOR](#)

[School of Social Welfare highlight webpage for Migratory and Seasonal Agricultural Workers and Health Research project](#)

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