



*Photo Courtesy of Student Action with Farmworkers*

## **From Sun-Up to Sun-Down: Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in South Carolina**

From sun-up to sun-down, migrant and seasonal farmworkers work to support South Carolina's multibillion dollar agribusiness sector and economy. This research brief identifies the contributions and challenges farmworkers in South Carolina face based on research, interviews, site visits and a Listening Session held in collaboration with Student Action with Farmworkers.

Farmworkers plant, cultivate, harvest, process, pack for market and store fresh foods that feed families each day. Migrant farmworkers leave their permanent residence to relocate for temporary employment in agriculture following the crops; seasonal farmworkers work during the agricultural season without relocating from their permanent community of residence.

In South Carolina, like many other regions of the country, the majority of farmworkers are Mexican. Most farmworkers are young men with a very limited education. Some are husbands and fathers who leave their homelands in pursuit of opportunities to earn a living for their families who remain in their countries of origin, others bring members of their family with them. Women, adolescents and children can also be found working in the fields.

Farmworkers possess multiple strengths, adding value and resources to the communities where they work and live. They bring a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency and pride in the contributions they make. Some come from a long lineage of generations of farmworkers with a rich background in agriculture. Many have a deep cultural heritage that goes unnoticed in the communities they migrate to due to language or communication barriers and isolation. Often strong family bonds keep farmworkers inspired and motivated as they work long days laboring in the fields.



*Research Brief written by Stephanie Cooper-Lewter, Ph.D., Senior Research Director, and designed by Langley Shealy, Communications Director, under the leadership of Tom Keith, President. We especially thank Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF), led by Melinda Wiggins, Executive Director, for sharing information, pictures and resources with us. Since 1992, SAF has served more than 700 students committed to social change through their programs, internships and fellowships. SAF has provided more than 80,000 farmworkers and their families with supportive services in North and South Carolina ([saf-unite.org](http://saf-unite.org)). © 2014, Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina. All rights reserved. [www.sistersofcharitysc.com](http://www.sistersofcharitysc.com)*



*Photo Courtesy of Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina*

## Encountering a Broken Labor System

South Carolina boasts locally grown peaches, strawberries, blackberries, grapes, tomatoes, peppers, watermelon, sweet corn, onions, along with collards, kale, turnips and other specialty crops. South Carolina growers must maintain their farms with rising water, energy and other costs; and keep up with changing food regulations. Despite agriculture's modernization, one of the biggest obstacles growers confront is the current labor and work force shortage among the domestic workforce, often not interested or willing to do farm work. In a 2013 testimony, South Carolina farmer Chalmers R. Carr, III, President of Titan Farms and President

of USA FARMERS, reported within a two year period only 25% of applications for the 2,000 job opportunities were submitted by domestic workers; 89% of the domestic workers who accepted the job never reported for work or quit, 5% failed to meet their contract requirements and only 6% (31 people) worked the entire season<sup>1</sup>. Like this example illustrates, many growers cannot depend on a domestic workforce to manage their farms so they must rely upon immigrant workers to keep their farms operating. Some growers hire through the H2A program which allows foreign "guestworkers" to perform seasonal farm work under a temporary work visa designed for agricultural workers in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The H2A program has application, housing, transportation, visa fees and other costs associated with compliance for growers. In other cases, undocumented individuals are hired to meet grower labor needs.

## Performing Dangerous Work

Farmworkers in South Carolina are expected to perform intense physical labor in varying seasons, under extreme weather conditions. For example, in the heat of the summer, South Carolina's temperatures easily hit 100 degrees Fahrenheit with high humidity. In some fields, there are no outhouses, portable toilets or hand washing facilities diminishing the safety and dignity of work. Breaks or drinking water may not be provided adequately. The repetitive nature of work and long hours can result in debilitating back pain or other injuries such as heat stroke from sun exposure, dehydration, chronic muscular/skeletal pain and arthritis. Men, women and children may also be exposed to chemical pesticides which can trigger other health-related symptoms ranging from rashes to leukemia and cardiac abnormalities. Additional occupational risks may include unsafe transportation to or from work. Some farmworkers also utilize dangerous working equipment placing them at high risk for job-related hazards and injuries, such as falls. Most farmworkers are not eligible for workers' compensation, are not offered sick leave nor do they have access to regular, affordable health care.



*Photo Courtesy of Student Action with Farmworkers*



## Living on Poverty-Level Wages

Farmworkers, like their growers, are dependent on successful crop yields in an occupation that provides no job security. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers often receive low wages and have few protections. Many are paid hourly, daily, or receive piece-rate pay (are paid by the bucket based on productivity). Most have incomes at or below the federal poverty level making farm work one of the lowest paid jobs in the nation<sup>3</sup>. Farmworkers are omitted from Federal legislation that guarantees a minimum wage, overtime pay and are often excluded from organizing and other protections against child labor<sup>4</sup>. Facility owners, growers, farm labor contractors or other business entities are responsible to comply with agricultural labor standards by the U.S. Department of Labor which include the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act and Fair Labor Standards Act. However, regulations are not always enforced and violations may go unreported because of the farmworkers vulnerability and fear of speaking out against unfair or unsafe labor practices. Some farmworkers face underpayment of wages, differential treatment based on documentation status, or are charged unfairly for expenses, such as rent or transportation needs. Some experience depression or other mental health concerns arising from stressful lives. Paradoxically, the very farmworkers who work each day to ensure the plates of others are filled, may find themselves without enough resources to feed their families, and lack access to other basic necessities, health, education and family support services.

## Staying in Substandard Housing

The living conditions of migrant and seasonal farmworkers are usually hidden and out-of-sight of the general public's awareness. Housing conditions at labor camps vary tremendously and overcrowding can be a primary concern. Some live in substandard housing with multiple structural defects, such as a lack of clean running water, exposed wires, or raw sewage. These conditions can lead to additional health care issues including lead poisoning and respiratory illnesses. When health and safety standards for migrant housing go unaddressed, all farmworkers and their families are at risk. Some farmworkers report experiences of physical, emotional or sexual abuse in labor camps. Given their tentative employment status they often fear the loss of their jobs or eviction from migrant camps if they complain about injustices to or by crew leaders.



*Photo Courtesy of Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina*

<sup>1</sup> February 2013 Written Statement of Chalmers R. Carr, III. US House of Representatives Hearing on Agricultural Labor: From H2A to a Workable Agricultural Guestworker Program.

<sup>2,3,4</sup> Student Action with Farmworkers, United States Farmworkers Factsheet.

## Accessing School

Migrant farmworkers often have children that accompany them in their migration journeys traveling from farm to farm in search of work. According to Dr. Jennifer Almeda, SC Migrant Education State Coordinator, last year more than 1,300 migrant students from birth to 21 years were identified across the state. Although forty percent of these children attended grades K-12, only fourteen percent remained enrolled in a South Carolina school<sup>5</sup>. This data highlights the incredibly mobile status of migrant K-12 eligible youth. Due to constant moving, migrant children often attend several schools in one academic year. Multiple interruptions result in unstable and incomplete schooling which may lead to high drop-out rates.



*Photo Courtesy of Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina*

## Stand in Solidarity

From sun-up to sun-down, farmworkers are the quiet, humble foundation and backbone of South Carolina's agricultural system. Despite the harsh working conditions and multiple sacrifices farmworkers make to ensure others have food on their tables, they remain incredibly resilient, giving their best in hopes of achieving their dreams for a better tomorrow for themselves and their children. *Sí se puede!*



*Photo Courtesy of Student Action with Farmworkers*

### Join the Farmworker Movement:

Eat organic, which reduces farmworkers' exposure to pesticides and unhealthy chemicals.

Support farmers who employ humane working and living conditions.

Spread awareness about farmworker issues; advocate for improved wages and working conditions.

Support the Children's Act for Reasonable Employment which impacts children in agricultural families to prevent them from working in harsh conditions.

Volunteer with organizations that provide access to health care, education and support for farmworkers and their families.

<sup>5</sup> South Carolina State Department of Education, Migrant Education Program Data.