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Farm Futures

Farmworker's dilemma: The hidden cost of pursuing the American dream

Undocumented agricultural workers, vital to U.S. food production, live in constant fear of deportation. Their absence could significantly impact food costs and availability.



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8 Min Read



LIVING IN FEAR: Immigrant farmworkers say although they are treated well by U.S. farmers who support President Donald Trump, there has been a noticeable shift among workers, as some are detained and deported, while others change their habits to avoid early-morning raids or going out in public GETTY IMAGES/MARIO TAMA

Ricardo tears up thinking about the family he left behind. In an ideal world, the New York farmworker and his wife would be living happily in Mexico. Their four kids would grow up with doting grandparents, aunts and uncles. But Ricardo's hometown is dangerous, offering few opportunities to build a good life.

Faced with a life of poverty and despair, he illegally entered the U.S. 17 years ago to work on a dairy farm. Ricardo still dreams of returning to his homeland. It's a desire he says many fellow Latinos share. But going home is much harder than most Americans understand.



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"It's better to stay here with my family. I don't want them to be harmed," Ricardo says. "I know nobody really wants us here, but we're just here to work."

Ricardo is not his real name. In an age where deportation is a constant threat, avoiding unwanted attention is more important than ever. More than anything, Ricardo fears his family could be separated. While they try to maintain a low profile, they still must do things like get groceries and take the kids to the doctor. Every time they go out in public, he worries someone will report them.

U.S. ag depends on immigrants

While the exact number of immigrant farmworkers lacking legal status is hard to pinpoint, most estimates put the numbers between 30% and 50% of the workforce. Some regions report even higher percentages. According to the USDA Economic Research Service, about 42% of hired crop farmworkers in the U.S. lack legal status. That's about 1 million workers not legally authorized to work in the U.S.

The National Milk Producers Federation estimates that more than half of all U.S. dairy workers are immigrants. Dairies that employ immigrant labor produce about 79% of the nation's milk supply. If those dairies lost their foreign-born workforce, retail milk prices would double, costing the U.S. economy more than \$32 billion.

Enduring a life of fear

Carlos (not his real name) is another dairy farmworker from Mexico. He originally intended to stay in the U.S. illegally for five or six years.

In search of a better life, Carlos set off on foot across the Sonoran Desert in 2013. After being detained and deported in California, he moved west and crossed the Rio Grande into Texas. He walked a few miles before finding a truck driver who took him to Houston. From there, he arranged for a ride to New York. The entire journey took two months. He continues to work at the same farm where he started 12 years ago.

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Carlos never expected to settle down. Then, he met someone special. Today, in addition to supporting his mother and sister in Mexico, his modest income provides for his wife and their two young kids, ages 1 and 4.

He says his farm's owners, who supported President Donald Trump, treat him well. Still, there's been a noticeable vibe shift among the workers. Carlos knows workers who have been detained and deported. Fearing early-morning raids, many workers who once showed up at 3 or 4 a.m. stay home before dawn.



"It's not like there's a bunch of Americans lining up to take these jobs," says a California farmer who employs noncitizen workers. "I support President Trump's commitment to border security, but we need to use common sense."

The California farmer, who also doesn't want to be identified, believes there will never be enough capable American workers to sustain his almond orchard. In an ideal world, he says the U.S. would make it easier for migrant workers to enter the country legally. While he has mixed feelings about allowing workers to become permanent residents, he says the current immigrant worker programs are too cumbersome and costly to benefit him or his workers.

"I know what I'm doing is illegal, but at the end of the day I need to earn a living," he says. "I can't do that without these workers. Like it or not, we need each other."

Trump plans remain unclear

Since taking office, Trump has promised to protect farmworkers. He has touted plans to provide more pathways to legal immigration. He has floated a plan to allow workers to go home and come back easily at a farmer's request. He also has promised to focus deportation efforts on those with criminal records. Still, the threat of farm raids remains constant.

Diego (not his real name) crossed the southern border a couple of years ago and turned himself in to border agents. He said the situation with organized crime in Mexico forced him to flee. Diego works long hours on a Vermont farm with about 35 other immigrants from Mexico and Central America. He sends most of his earnings back home to the wife he left behind. They've been married for 15 years. Diego hopes to one day bring her to the U.S. if he's granted asylum.

Earlier this year, he and several of his co-workers were detained. Diego was eventually released since he is legally authorized to work in the U.S. for now. Still, the experience left him unnerved. He worries what will happen when he goes to his next immigration hearing in early 2026.

"I feel more fear since President Trump took office," Diego says. "There have been a lot more arrests from immigration authorities, and a lot of us don't even want to go to the store right now."

That fear is not unfounded. Jose Lopez, interim executive director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance, has seen firsthand how workers are being rounded up in Southern California. Earlier this summer, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials began going door to door, looking for specific people. Before long, Lopez says, ICE agents were showing up at Home Depots and predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods, rounding up large groups of people. Many were detained despite being in the country legally.

In one highly publicized July incident, more than 300 immigrant workers were arrested at two California cannabis farms. One worker died during the raid. More than 800 immigrants were arrested in multiple Southern California raids during the early weeks of July.



"It was really sad seeing this in person," he says. "There were older ladies looking for their daughters, mothers looking for their children and grandparents looking for their grandchildren."

Just as sad, he says, is the impact this has had on entire communities. Businesses catering to the Hispanic community have shuttered. People are afraid to go to work, visit their doctors or even keep their driver's licenses current.

Lopez says multiple people he's spoken with who have been detained report squalid conditions. There is nominal access to medical care. Meals consist of little more than starches and are served at 3 a.m. This gives him little hope that even immigrants who follow the legal pathways to working in the U.S. have any chance.

"The whole immigration system is messed up," Lopez says. "When folks say just get in the back of the line, there is no back of the line. Back of the line, that's just imaginary."

Who is threatening who?

Trump has framed tougher immigration policies as combatting a national security threat. While immigrants, legal and illegal, are no doubt responsible for some crimes, there is no evidence that noncitizens present a greater threat.

According to a 2024 study by Stanford University economist Ray Abramitzky, immigrants are 60% less likely to be incarcerated than U.S.-born citizens. Another 2024 report by the National Institute of Justice examined criminal offenses in Texas for six years. That study concluded that immigrants lacking legal status committed fewer crimes than both native-born Americans and legal immigrants.

Ricardo believes the rhetoric on immigrant crime has given many American the wrong impression of what he and other farmworkers do. While he's heard accusations that immigrants are taking jobs from Americans, he says the few nonimmigrants who work on his farm usually don't stay long. And when they do, they typically perform administrative tasks, not the farmwork his bosses depend on him for.

"If people say we are bad, I would like them to explain why we are bad people," Ricardo says. "I think there has been some miscommunication, but if people are open to communicating, we can have a dialog."

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About the Author



Joshua Baethge covers food and agriculture policy issues. Before joining Farm Progress, he spent 10 years as a news and feature reporter in Texas. During that time, he covered state and local government, community news, real estate,...

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