

COVID-19 in Rural America: Impact on Farms & Agricultural Workers

Note: NCFH typically relies on peer-reviewed research and government reports for its fact sheet series, but due to the urgent and constantly evolving nature of the pandemic, we have utilized reputable media sources as well. This fact sheet will be updated on a weekly basis.

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Impact of COVID-19 in Rural America

- As of December 8th, 99% of rural counties in America had reported positive COVID-19 cases and 93% had reported one or more deaths. More than 2.4 million rural residents have tested positive for COVID-19 and 39,927 deaths among rural Americans have been attributed to the disease.¹
- The current prevalent case rate in rural counties is 504.58 cases per 10,000 residents and the current death rate is 8.66 per 10,000 residents.¹ The prevalent case rate is now higher in rural counties than urban counties. In late May, the prevalent case rate was 28.95 per 10,000 residents in rural areas, so the prevalence of COVID-19 in rural counties has increased 16-fold in six months.²⁾
- Epidemiologists generally consider rural Americans more vulnerable to the pandemic than urban Americans. Higher proportions of elderly persons, higher smoking usage, higher prevalence of certain chronic diseases, and lower proportions of persons covered by health insurance contribute to this vulnerability.^{3,4}
- Emerging research is beginning to demonstrate stark disparities in the rate of COVID cases and COVID-related deaths among people of color in the U.S., a pattern that has emerged in both urban and rural areas.^{5,6} A major factor in this disparity is likely due to the fact that a high proportion of essential workers are people of color and thus have greater risk of exposure.⁷
- A lack of physicians and in-patient hospital beds is another major concern for rural areas that will experience a relatively high number of COVID-19 cases. Nearly half of rural hospitals operate in a financial deficit, and many hospitals have had to lay-off or temporarily furlough staff or completely close their doors due to the financial impact of the pandemic.^{1,8}
- Cases and deaths from COVID-19 have generally been higher in metropolitan areas of the U.S., but non-metropolitan areas of the U.S. have seen rapidly increasing numbers of cases and deaths, beginning in late April.⁹ As of mid-October, current hot spots (defined as highest number of cases in past week per capita) include Gove, Norton, & Sheridan

counties, Kansas and Toole, Roosevelt, & Wheatland Counties, Montana, all counties without a major metropolitan area.¹⁰

COVID-19 on American Farms & among Agricultural Workers

- The widespread shutdowns of businesses, schools, and universities have had a dramatic economic impact on American farms. Corn prices have fallen by 15% since February, dairy prices have fallen by 28%, and beef and pork prices have fallen by more than 30%.¹¹ Researchers from the University of Missouri estimate that U.S. farmers and ranchers will lose approximately \$20 billion in revenue during 2020 due to the pandemic.¹²
- Because of COVID outbreaks in over 700 meatpacking and food processing plants, U.S. beef and pork production declined by 40% in the summer of 2020.¹³ Produce processing plants have reported declines in production as well, and the U.S. apple industry has lost \$174 million during the pandemic.¹⁴
- Farm bankruptcies in the U.S. were up by 23% from March 2019 to March 2020, the third-highest level in the past two decades. The number is expected to increase sharply during the pandemic.¹⁵
- Mass layoffs of agricultural workers have been reported in various locations in order to meet social distancing guidelines, low product demand, and due to positive cases among a cohort of workers.^{16,17} Many workers fear testing for COVID since a positive test may mean a permanent job loss.
- Systemic barriers to testing, prevention measures, and medical care exist. OSHA has only provided guidance, rather than requirements for agricultural employers, some employers have refused to offer testing or threatened retaliation if workers do seek testing, and public health officials have often been resistant or reluctant to control or respond to COVID outbreaks among agricultural workers.¹⁸ Research has also found that workers employed by farm labor contractors may be less likely to receive PPE from their employer.¹⁹
- Research conducted with over 1,000 farmworkers in central California found current COVID infection in 13% of the sample according to lab testing done from July – November 2020. Twenty percent of the 1,091 workers had antibodies for COVID-19.²⁰
- Research by the CDC found that Hispanic or Latino workers employed in food production or agriculture had a substantially higher prevalence of COVID-19 compared to non-Hispanic workers in those industries. Among the 31 states who reported data, only 37% of workers in those industries were Hispanic or Latino but they represented 73% of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the food processing and agriculture industries.²¹

- Overcrowded and substandard housing conditions are a major concern for the potential of COVID-19 to spread through agricultural worker communities.^{22,23} A single building may house several dozen workers or more, who often sleep in dormitory-style quarters, making quarantining or social distancing efforts difficult if not impossible. Limited access to restrooms and sinks, at home and in the field, may complicate hygiene prevention efforts.²⁴
- Extremely low annual incomes and a widespread lack of access to health insurance may limit health care-seeking behaviors among agricultural workers, even if they are experiencing symptoms of an illness.^{25,26}
- **Outbreaks on farms:** Purdue University estimates that more than 276,000 agricultural workers have tested positive for COVID-19 nationwide, but this figure likely underestimates the number greatly since it excludes contracted and temporary labor.²⁷ No comprehensive national or industry-wide testing or reporting of positive COVID cases among agricultural workers is being systematically conducted, but some case clusters among agricultural workers are being reported in the media:
 - **ARIZONA:** Although the exact number of cases among farm workers in Yuma County, Arizona is not reported, 143 positive COVID-19 cases in the county have occurred in or near farm labor camps.²⁸ Five female prison inmates employed on Hickman's Family egg farm tested positive in June.²⁹
 - **CALIFORNIA:** The largest outbreak on a single farm that has occurred to date in California is on a poultry farm (Foster Farms) in Merced County, where at least 392 employees have tested positive, and at least 8 workers have died.³⁰ Another large outbreak occurred on the Villa Las Brisas berry farm in Ventura County, where 201 H-2A workers tested positive.³¹ Ventura County also saw an outbreak among 28 H-2A workers who were employed in avocado and citrus orchards, and over 35 employees of Calavo Growers in Ventura County tested positive in early May.^{32,33} In late July, another outbreak among H-2A workers in Santa Barbara county has occurred, with 91 workers testing positive, one of whom has died.³⁴ Twelve additional H-2A workers employed by Rancho Nuevo Harvesting in Santa Barbara county have also tested positive.³³ Altogether, a total of 1,180 agricultural workers in Santa Barbara County have tested positive.³⁵ A reported 247 agricultural workers in Monterey County, California have tested positive for the virus.³⁶ Other outbreaks among farmworkers are being reported in California among fruit and vegetable packing house workers.³⁷ One hundred and fifty employees of a pistachio farm in Wasco, California and 65 of their family members have tested positive, triggering a strike from other employees who learned of the outbreak through local news.³⁸⁻⁴⁰ The rural Lake County also has an ongoing outbreak where 25 farmworkers recently tested positive.⁴¹ At least 60 agricultural workers residing in Solano County and working in Sonoma and Napa vineyards have tested positive.⁴² Sonoma County has reported 12 outbreaks on farms in the county, resulting in 347 cases among agricultural workers.⁴³ In San

Joaquin County, 102 workers have tested positive for the virus.⁴⁴ Guillermo Gomez, a 39-year-old farmworker from Orange Cove, died from COVID-19 after a six week battle with the disease.⁴⁵

- **COLORADO:** At least 11 employees of a mushroom farm in Alamosa County have tested positive for coronavirus.⁴⁶ A potato farm and processing facility in Rio Grande County had 13 employees test positive in late May, and another potato farm in the same county had 25 positive employees.⁴⁷ A greenhouse operation in Weld County had 14 staff test positive in early May.⁴⁷
- **FLORIDA:** As of mid-June, Florida is experiencing large outbreaks among farmworkers, although media reporting has been limited. In the farm labor community of Immokalee, more than 1,000 positive cases have been documented in recent weeks and the area has one of the highest infection rates in the state.⁴⁸ A watermelon farm in Alachua County reportedly had 90 out of 100 workers test positive for the virus.⁴⁹ A 17-year-old female migrant farmworker from Immokalee, Florida nearly died from COVID-19 while working in Georgia.⁵⁰ A reported COVID-19 death of an Immokalee farmworker was reported in May, but the employer has denied any cases on his farm and has called the pandemic a “hoax”.⁵¹ In mid-July, over 20 employees of Costa Farms in the Miami-Dade area have reportedly tested positive.⁵²
- **GEORGIA:** An outbreak among agricultural workers has been reported in Echols County, where 58 of 73 tested persons were found positive for COVID-19.⁵³ Echols County now has the highest case rate in Georgia, with over 4,000 cases per 100,000 residents. Lanier County saw a tripling of case numbers in a single day after 59 farmworkers tested positive in mid-June.⁵⁴ On June 23rd, the first death of a migratory farmworker from Georgia was reported in the media.⁵⁵
- **ILLINOIS:** In early July, 100 COVID-19 cases had been reported among agricultural workers employed in northern Illinois on different farms.⁵⁶
- **MAINE:** Small outbreaks of 3-10 workers have started occurring in late July and early August on blueberry farms.⁵⁷ In December, 13 workers tested positive on Flood Brothers Farm, a dairy farm in Clinton.⁵⁸
- **MICHIGAN:** A multi-county outbreak occurred in late April due to a COVID-19 cluster on a poultry farm in Ionia County. At least fifteen farm employees tested positive, and health department officials traced a total of 84 cases in five different counties to the original poultry farm cases.^{59,60} Oceana County has reported an outbreak among 216 farmworkers and the workers’ contacts.⁶¹ A single farm in Branch County had 57 workers, primarily working with H-2A visas, tested positive in late June.⁶² Several case clusters have been reported on farms in Missaukee County in late July, but the number of cases has not been released.⁶³
- **MISSOURI:** Thirteen out of 60 workers have tested positive for the virus on a hog farm in Audrain County, Missouri.⁶⁴
- **NEW JERSEY:** Fifty-nine agricultural workers in Upper Pittsgrove Township, New Jersey have tested positive for coronavirus, over half of the town’s seasonal agricultural labor force.⁶⁵ More than 50 farm workers on a specialty crop farm in Gloucester County, New Jersey have tested for coronavirus as of late May.⁶⁶ A

total of over 400 farm workers have tested positive in the state of New Jersey, and at least 2 workers have died from the disease.⁶⁷

- **NEW YORK:** A large outbreak of COVID-19 occurred in Madison County, New York, where 169 workers from a single farm have tested positive for coronavirus. Public health officials raised concerns about a lack of isolation procedures during transportation to and from the farm and in the workers' sleeping quarters.⁶⁸ OSHA is conducting an investigation at the farm.⁶⁹
- **NORTH CAROLINA:** In early July, the total number of positive cases of agricultural workers residing in camps in the state was 177 in early July.⁷⁰ Bottomley Evergreens & Farms in Alleghany County has now reported the largest outbreak on a farm in the state, with 112 positive cases as of August 18th, 2020.⁷¹ Other large outbreaks have occurred in the state in August, with 46 positive cases in Macon County, 31 cases in Greene County, and 27 cases in Wilson County, all occurring on farms with shared worker housing.⁷¹
- **OHIO:** A cluster outbreak with an unknown number of workers have been reported on two farms in Canton and Holmes counties.⁷² In Champaign County, 50 workers on a single farm tested positive in July and August.⁷³
- **OREGON:** Three separate outbreaks have occurred at Townsend Farms, with one outbreak occurring in April with 51 workers who tested positive, and a second outbreak occurring in May with 56 workers who tested positive, and a third outbreak in June, affecting 22 workers.⁷⁴ According to the Oregon Health Authority, an additional 263 agricultural workers and their close contacts have tested positive for COVID due to workplace outbreaks with five or more cases since the start of the pandemic.⁷⁵ Klamath County authorities reported a new outbreak of 59 positive agricultural workers in October 2020.⁷⁶
- **TENNESSEE:** Nearly 200 farm employees on a single farm in Rhea County, Tennessee tested positive for COVID-19 in late May. 100% of the employees on the farm tested positive.⁷⁷ Thirty-eight out of 119 employees have tested positive in late May on a single strawberry farm in Unicoi County, and in early June a second farm in the county reported that 10 of their workers had tested positive.^{78,79} On a mushroom farm in Loudon County, 74 employees tested positive out of the nearly 300 tested so far.⁸⁰
- **TEXAS:** According to the Centro de Trabajadores Agricolas Fronterizos, four farmworkers tested positive for COVID-19 in late May, and one of them died from the disease.⁸¹ An H-2A guestworker named Marco Antonio Galvan Gomez died from COVID-19 a few weeks after arriving in Texas to work on Blaine Larsen farm, where reportedly at least 35 other workers became ill and two additional COVID deaths occurred.⁸² Personal communication with the Texas Department of State Health Services has found approximately 35 other positive COVID cases on other farms in Dallam and Hartley counties.
- **VERMONT:** Twenty-six H-2A agricultural workers employed at Champlain Orchards tested positive for COVID-19 in October 2020.⁸³
- **WASHINGTON:** Over 70 farm and fruit-packing workers in Yakima County, Washington have tested positive for COVID-19.⁸⁴ In Okanogan County, 120

employees on a single farm have tested positive, with another 156 workers awaiting test results.⁸⁵ Stemit Growers in Chelan County, Washington have reported two separate outbreaks among their agricultural workers.⁸⁶ In late April, Stemit Growers in Chelan County announced that 36 of their 71 H-2A workers had tested positive for the virus, and in late May another outbreak occurred in one of their packing houses, where 25 out of 60 workers tested positive. On May 30th, a farmworker in Yakima, Washington died from COVID-19.⁸⁵ Two H-2A workers have died from COVID-19 on Gebbers Farm in Okanogan County: Juan Carlos Santiago Rincon, in his 30s, died from the disease on July 8th, and Earl Edwards, in his early 60s, died in late July.⁸⁷ A third non-visa employee of Gebbers Farm, Francisco Montiel, died on August 1st.⁸⁸

COVID-Related Policies & Initiatives for Agricultural Workers

- Several state and county governments have implemented regulations, provided free testing, and started funding programs to support and protect agricultural workers during the pandemic.⁸⁹⁻⁹¹ As of December, only eleven states have issued some form of mandatory regulations for protecting agricultural workers from exposure to COVID-19 (California, Colorado, Michigan, New York, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin).^{18,92}
- In November, the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration passed a temporary rule that will require employers to provide personal protective equipment, notify workers if a workplace exposure has occurred, provide training to workers, among other measures. Oregon is the third state to enact such measures, following Virginia and Michigan.⁹²
- Several states and counties have begun funding emergency quarantine housing for agricultural workers suffering from COVID-19. Other state and counties have added funds to pay for lost wages or assistance with bills for agricultural workers affected by COVID.⁹³⁻⁹⁵ California became the first state to approve an agricultural worker relief package, which will ensure paid sick leave, stricter enforcement of guidelines, and prioritize agricultural workers for COVID testing and personal protective equipment.⁹⁶
- A number of diverse coalitions to protect the health of farmworkers across the country have emerged. A coalition of growers, researchers, and advocates has coalesced in Monterey County, California, to create health and safety guidelines, obtain PPE for farmworkers, and increase access to testing and quarantine facilities.⁹⁷ Some state governments, such as Maine and New York, have been proactively working with community health centers and local health care providers to provide testing for farmworkers and health and safety guidelines for the agricultural industry.^{98,99}
- In Oregon and California, grape growers' and wine makers' associations have come together with health care partners and farmworker-serving organizations to provide mobile testing services, PPE, and trainings to agricultural workers in grape-growing

regions.¹⁰⁰

- Even though America’s agricultural workers have been classified as “critical infrastructure” workers (also known as essential workers), many still lack essential protections and benefits:
 - The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has not provided clear guidance on employers’ responsibility to provide PPE to employees to protect them from exposure to COVID-19.¹⁰¹ Even if clear guidance or a COVID-related standard was available, OSHA cannot conduct inspections or enforce health and safety standards on farms with 10 or fewer employees.¹⁰² OSHA recently revised their guidance, and now requires employers to record COVID-19 illnesses that cause the employee to seek medical care or miss one or more days of work and that may have been contracted at work.¹⁰³
 - An estimated 49% of horticulture workers lack work authorization to work in the U.S.²⁵ This means that at least half of all horticulture workers are not able to access unemployment benefits if they are laid off or furloughed.¹⁰⁴ Undocumented workers were also not eligible to receive the federal stimulus money sent to families through the CARES Act.¹⁰⁵ U.S. citizen spouses married to a spouse without a Social Security number are also ineligible, which may impact many agricultural worker households with mixed immigration status.

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