



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 August 24th, 98% of rural counties in America had reported positive COVID-19 cases and 68% had reported one or more deaths. More than 606,000 rural residents have tested positive for COVID-19 and 13,850 deaths among rural Americans have been attributed to the disease.¹
- The current case rate in rural counties is 131.6 cases per 10,000 residents and the current death rate is 3.01 per 10,000 residents.¹
- 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.^{2,3}
- 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.^{4,5} 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.⁶
- 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.^{1,7}
- 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.⁸ As of mid-August, current hot spots (defined as highest number of cases in past week per capita) include Taylor and Franklin counties, Florida; Karnes County, Texas; Chicot County, Arkansas; and Gulf County, Florida, all counties without a major metropolitan area.⁹

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%.¹⁰ 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.¹¹
- 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.¹²
- 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.^{13,14} Many workers fear testing for COVID since a positive test may mean a permanent job loss.
- Overcrowded and substandard housing conditions are a major concern for the potential of COVID-19 to spread through agricultural worker communities.^{15,16} 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.¹⁷
- 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.^{18,19}
- **Outbreaks on farms:** 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.²⁰
 - **CALIFORNIA:** The largest outbreak that has occurred to date in California is occurring on a berry farm in Ventura County, where 188 H-2A workers have tested positive.²¹ 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.²² A reported 247 agricultural workers in Monterey County, California have tested positive for the virus.²³ Other outbreaks among farmworkers are being reported in California among fruit and vegetable packing house workers.²⁴ Over 35 employees of Calavo Growers in Ventura County tested positive in early May.²⁵ Ninety-seven 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.²⁶⁻²⁸ The rural Lake County also has an ongoing outbreak where 25 farmworkers recently tested positive.²⁹ At least 60 agricultural workers residing in Solano County and working in Sonoma and Napa vineyards have tested positive.³⁰ In San Joaquin County, 102 workers have tested positive for the virus.³¹ Guillermo Gomez, a 39-year-old farmworker from Orange Cove, died from COVID-19 after a six week battle with the disease.³²

- **COLORADO:** At least 11 employees of a mushroom farm in Alamosa County have tested positive for coronavirus.³³ 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.³⁴ A greenhouse operation in Weld County had 14 staff test positive in early May.³⁴
- **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.³⁵ A watermelon farm in Alachua County reportedly had 90 out of 100 workers test positive for the virus.³⁶ A 17-year-old female migrant farmworker from Immokalee, Florida nearly died from COVID-19 while working in Georgia.³⁷ 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”.³⁸ In mid-July, over 20 employees of Costa Farms in the Miami-Dade area have reportedly tested positive.³⁹
- **GEORGIA:** An outbreak among agricultural workers has been reported in Echols County, where 58 of 73 tested persons were found positive for COVID-19.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ On June 23rd, the first death of a migratory farmworker from Georgia was reported in the media.⁴²
- **ILLINOIS:** In early July, 100 COVID-19 cases had been reported among agricultural workers employed in northern Illinois on different farms.⁴³
- **MAINE:** Small outbreaks of 3-10 workers have started occurring in late July and early August on blueberry farms.⁴⁴
- **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.^{45,46} Oceana County has reported an outbreak among 216 farmworkers and the workers’ contacts.⁴⁷ A single farm in Branch County had 57 workers, primarily working with H-2A visas, tested positive in late June.⁴⁸ Several case clusters have been reported on farms in Missaukee County in late July, but the number of cases has not been released.⁴⁹
- **MISSOURI:** Thirteen out of 60 workers have tested positive for the virus on a hog farm in Audrain County, Missouri.⁵⁰

- **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.⁵¹ More than 50 farm workers on a specialty crop farm in Gloucester County, New Jersey have tested for coronavirus as of late May.⁵² 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.⁵³
- **NEW YORK:** A large outbreak of COVID-19 is occurring 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.⁵⁴ OSHA is conducting an investigation at the farm.⁵⁵
- **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.⁵⁶ 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, 2020.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁷
- **OHIO:** A cluster outbreak with an unknown number of workers have been reported on two farms in Canton and Holmes counties.⁵⁸
- **OREGON:** Two 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.⁵⁹
- **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.⁶⁰ 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.^{61,62} On a mushroom farm in Loudon County, 74 employees tested positive out of the nearly 300 tested so far.⁶³
- **TEXAS:** According to the Centro de Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos, four farmworkers tested positive for COVID-19 in late May, and one of them died from the disease.⁶⁴
- **WASHINGTON:** Over 70 farm and fruit-packing workers in Yakima County, Washington have tested positive for COVID-19.⁶⁵ In Okanogan County, 120 employees on a single farm have tested positive, with another 156 workers awaiting test results.⁶⁶ Thirty-six orchard workers in Chelan County, Washington tested positive for COVID-19, out of the 71 workers tested on a single farm.⁶⁷ Stemlit Growers in Chelan County, Washington have reported two separate outbreaks among their agricultural workers.⁶⁸ In late April, the company 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-19.⁶⁶ On a single farm in Okanogan County, two H-

2A workers have died from COVID-19: 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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰⁻⁷² As of mid-July, only eight states have issued mandatory regulations for protecting agricultural workers from exposure to COVID-19 (Colorado, Michigan, New York, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin).⁷³ Sixteen states currently have non-enforceable recommendations.
- The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration will implement new rules to be in effect from May 11, 2020 through October 28, 2020 and will require more toilets and handwashing stations in the field, cleaning of those facilities three times a day, and spacing requirements for transportation and beds in employer-provided housing.⁷⁴ Washington state has also implemented special regulations for farms, requiring employers to provide facemasks and handwashing stations, requiring indoor workers to work and travel in small cohorts, and other safety measures.⁷⁵
- 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.⁷⁶⁻⁷⁸
- 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.⁷⁹ 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.^{80,81}
- 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-19.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

- An estimated 49% of horticulture workers lack work authorization to work in the U.S.¹⁸ This means that at least half of all horticulture workers are not able to access unemployment benefits if they are laid off or furloughed.⁸⁵ Undocumented workers were also not eligible to receive the federal stimulus money sent to families through the CARES Act.⁸⁶ 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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