



Undocumented Immigrants in the Food Supply Chain

By Nicole Prchal Svajlenka February 2, 2021

Across the country, 5 million undocumented immigrants are working alongside their neighbors to keep the country safe amid a global pandemic—including nearly 1.7 million immigrants who are working in every step of the food supply chain. Agricultural workers and those in food processing facilities ensure that crops growing in fields become food on the table and that the nation does not run into shortages, all while being among some of the groups hit hardest by the coronavirus.¹ This fact sheet highlights the many different ways that undocumented immigrants contribute to the food supply chain in the United States.

Notable occupations and industries

TABLE 1
Industries that Make up the Food Supply Chain

Industry	Number of Undocumented Workers
Farming and agriculture	296,300
Crop production	199,000
Animal production and aquaculture	66,100
Support activities for agriculture and forestry	29,600
Food production	205,800
Animal slaughtering and processing	82,700
Bakeries and tortilla manufacturing, except retail bakeries	29,700
Seafood and other miscellaneous foods, n.e.c.	23,000
Fruit and vegetable preserving and specialty food manufacturing	22,000
Food-related wholesale	74,900
Grocery and related product merchant wholesalers	69,600
Grocery and convenience stores	154,000
Restaurants	832,900
Other food related work	90,100
Total	1,654,000

Note: Other food related work includes individuals in sectors such as hotels, residential and nursing care, and schools.

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of pooled 2018 and 2019 1-year American Community Survey microdata, accessed via Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2016, 2017, and 2018 and 2019 American Community Surveys: 1-year estimates" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

What are some of the most common occupations for each of these subsectors?

- Farming and agriculture: agricultural workers, product graders, and sorters²
- Production: machine operators, butchers, and food processing workers
- Wholesale: prep workers and dishwashers, packers and packagers, and truck drivers
- Grocery stores: managers, cashiers, stockers, and order fillers
- Restaurants: cooks, wait staff, and food preparation workers

Family members

- Undocumented immigrants working in the food supply chain are family to 619,000 undocumented spouses and minor children. Extending protections to these individuals is necessary to maintain family unity and ensure that they can do this important work without fear and uncertainty surrounding their loved ones.

Economic and fiscal contributions

- Each year, these undocumented workers and their households pay \$13.3 billion in federal tax contributions and \$7.8 billion in state and local taxes. These households hold \$60.6 billion in spending power.
- These workers' employers annually contribute payroll taxes totaling \$3.5 billion to buoy Social Security and Medicare.
- Undocumented immigrants working in the food supply chain own 328,000 homes, paying \$3 billion in mortgage payments and \$10.6 billion in rental payments annually.

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For state-level data on the family members and economic contributions of undocumented workers by sector, please see "[Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors](#)."³

Endnotes

1 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, "Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: Immigrants Are Essential to America's Recovery" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2020/12/02/493307/protecting-undocumented-workers-pandemics-front-lines/>. Estimates presented in this fact sheet are based on CAP analysis of pooled 2018 and 2019 1-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata, accessed via Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2018 and 2019 American Community Surveys: 1-year estimates" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa>. See CAP report for occupation and industry codes. For more information, see Kimberly Adams, Nova Safo, and Alex Schroeder, "Meat processing plants are COVID-19 hot spots. What does that mean for U.S. food supply?," *Marketplace*, April 27, 2020, available at <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/04/27/covid-19-meat-processing-tyson-food-supply-chain/>; Vivian Ho, "Covid and California's farmworkers: study lays bare disproportionate risks," *The Guardian*, December 2, 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/02/california-farmworkers-covid-19-infections>.

2 This analysis uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's ACS, and there is an important item to note about the survey with respect to agricultural workers. The ACS is administered throughout the year, which poses difficulty for capturing highly seasonal work such as agriculture. Depending on the time of year a respondent completes the survey, the ACS likely undercounts the actual number of workers in the sector. Combined with the ACS' difficulty in measuring certain populations, including undocumented immigrants, the estimated number of undocumented farmworkers presented here is likely to be lower than the reality. To that account, the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture estimates that there are 2.4 million farmworkers in the United States, compared with the ACS' estimate of 1.6 million, and the U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey finds that 49 percent of workers in the field are undocumented. See National Agricultural Statistics Service, "2017 Census of Agriculture: United States Summary and State Data" (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019), available at https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usv1.pdf; Trish Hernandez and Susan Gabbard, "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers" (Rockville, MD: JBS International, 2019), available at https://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/ETAOP_2019-01_NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf.

3 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, "Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors," Center for American Progress, February 2, 2021, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=495017>. For downloadable state-level data on undocumented workers in the food supply chain, see Center for American Progress, "State-level data on undocumented workers in the food supply chain," available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2021/01/29060908/StateDataFoodSupply.xlsx> (last accessed February 2021).