
MANUFACTURING FARMWORKER DISPLACEMENT: HOW LOCAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ARE DISPLACED IN WASHINGTON STATE



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Executive Summary

Washington State's agricultural industry — ranked first in the nation in the production of apples, blueberries, cherries, and hops — relies heavily on immigrant farmworkers who have sustained the sector for decades. In recent years, however, the rapid expansion of the H-2A guestworker program has begun to reshape agricultural labor markets across the state. Originally intended as a temporary solution to labor shortages, the H-2A program is increasingly being used as a primary hiring mechanism, raising concerns about the displacement of local farmworkers and the erosion of job opportunities in already vulnerable communities.

This report examines how the growth of the H-2A program is affecting local immigrant farmworkers in Washington State. Drawing on 75 interviews with farmworkers, advocates, growers, and state officials, 179 surveys of farmworkers in Eastern Washington, and evidence from state enforcement actions, the analysis documents how recruitment practices, regulatory gaps, and weak oversight are reshaping hiring patterns and limiting access to work.

This report finds:

- Growers are increasingly relying on online job postings to meet federal hiring requirements, even though many local workers never see these postings, allowing employers to expand their use of H-2A workers.
- State enforcement cases confirm that some employers have unlawfully replaced local farmworkers with H-2A workers, with particularly severe impacts on women.
- Across the state, local farmworkers report fewer job opportunities, reduced hours, and declining earnings, often on farms where they have worked for years.
- These shifts are contributing to rising economic insecurity, including food and housing instability, compounded by fear of immigration enforcement.

To address these challenges, the report recommends:

- Strengthening farmworker labor rights, collective bargaining protections, and gender-based labor protections for female farmworkers who are disproportionately impacted by displacement and the growth of the H-2A program.
- Improving data collection on the agricultural workforce.
- Closing recruitment loopholes and strengthening oversight of H-2A hiring practices.
- Expanding enforcement capacity and legal protections.
- Investing in economic supports for farmworker households, including childcare.

Together, these actions are necessary to ensure that employer use of H-2A recruitment loopholes does not undermine access to jobs for local farmworkers and that Washington State’s agricultural economy remains fair, stable, and sustainable.



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Introduction

Washington State is one of the largest agricultural states and the largest producer of apples, blueberries, cherries, and hops, bringing in more than \$21 billion in annual revenue to the agricultural industry.¹ Labor-intensive seasonal work has been the farm labor system in the state’s two largest fruit-growing regions: the Central (or Yakima Valley) and the Wenatchee Valley of Eastern Washington.

Washington State’s agricultural workforce includes an estimated 113,174 farmworkers. A substantial share of this workforce is immigrant-born, including undocumented workers who live and work in the state year-round as well as H-2A guestworkers hired on temporary contracts. National data indicate that 42 percent of farmworkers were undocumented as of 2022, and farmworker organizations estimate that this share is higher in Washington State. At the same time, nearly 30 percent of the state’s agricultural workforce is now employed through the federal H-2A temporary guestworker program.

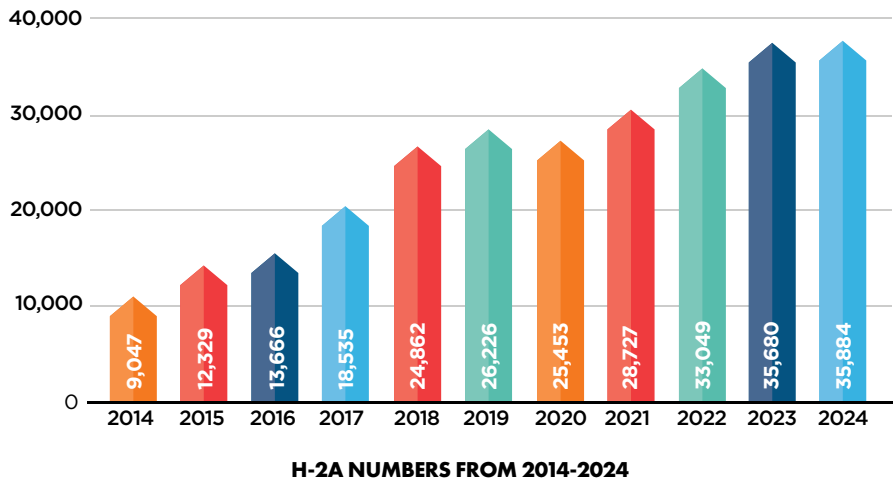
The H-2A temporary visa program allows growers to hire foreign workers for seasonal agricultural work when there are no “willing and able” domestic workers available.² The H-2A guest worker program is an uncapped temporary visa program that is the fastest-growing US work visa program. The total number

is expected to exceed 400,000 workers across the United States in 2026,³ and in Washington State, it is expected to double in the next few years, from nearly 36,000 H-2A workers in 2024.

The program operates as a temporary labor migration program, with roots in earlier guestworker program schemes such as the Bracero Program⁴ (1942–1964) created during World War II. While the British West Indies Program⁵ (the original version of the H-2A program) initially brought Jamaican workers to the East Coast and Florida’s sugar cane industry in 1943, the modern H-2A program was formally established as an H-2 temporary visa program in 1952 and later reorganized in 1986 as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).⁶ Since the mid-2010s, use of the H-2A program has expanded rapidly across the United States.

Washington State has experienced some of the fastest growth in H-2A program use in the country. Since 2008, H-2A usage in the state has increased by approximately 1,000 percent.⁷ In 2024 alone, nearly 36,000 H-2A workers arrived to work on Washington farms, accounting for close to 30 percent of the state’s agricultural workforce and nearly 10 percent of all H-2A workers nationwide (see Figure 1). H-2A workers are heavily concentrated in the Yakima Valley — an epicenter of apple and hop production — and in Grant County, where apples and cherries predominate.

Figure 1. H-2A Visa Program Growth in Washington State



In Washington State, the H-2A visa program has grown from 9,047 guestworkers in 2014 to more than 35,884 in 2024. Washington State accounts for 10 percent of all H-2A workers nationwide.
Source: Author’s analysis of U.S. Department of Labor, “Performance Data,” November 12th, 2024, available online. Or visit <https://tinyurl.com/2s3thzkb>.

Past research shows that the structure and lack of oversight of the H-2A program create conditions that systematically produce worker precarity.⁸ Program rules tie workers’ legal status to a single employer, while allowing employers to control housing, transportation, and contract renewal, concentrating power in employers’ hands.⁹ As a result, documented cases show that the program has enabled deceptive recruitment practices, wage theft, unsafe housing conditions, and retaliation against workers who raise concerns.¹⁰ Because future employment and immigration status depend on the employer, the program’s design discourages reporting of violations and facilitates blacklisting. H-2A visas are typically issued for three to ten months of seasonal work, during which workers are required to reside in employer-mandated housing — often on-site or in isolated rural areas.¹¹ Currently, 97% of all H-2A workers are male in the U.S., and they are predominantly male and mostly from Mexico¹². Previous studies have highlighted how, as a consequence of H-2A workers’ restrictions of not being able to travel with dependents and family members, the social reproduction costs shift to the home countries.¹³

The growth in the H-2A program is occurring within a workforce already facing structural vulnerability. Similar to H-2A workers, local immigrant farmworkers experience low wages, unstable employment, and labor exploitation. Farmworkers are among the lowest-paid workers in the United States, earning an average of \$16.66 per hour as of 2025, and frequently experience food insecurity,¹⁴ housing unaffordability,¹⁵ and inconsistent access to work throughout the year.¹⁶ Undocumented farmworkers also live with persistent fear of immigration enforcement, including ICE raids¹⁷ and deportation,¹⁸ which further constrains their ability to assert workplace rights or seek assistance.

Drawing on original interviews with farmworkers, advocates, growers, and state officials, as well as survey data from local immigrant farmworkers, the analysis focuses on how employer practices, regulatory loopholes, and weak enforcement of the H-2A program are impacting long-established agricultural workers in Washington.



Photo courtesy of UFW-Washington State

Data and Methodology

This study draws on interviews with seventy-five participants who work directly with H-2A workers or local immigrant farmworkers across Washington State. Of these participants, seventeen were based in Western Washington, twenty-five in Eastern Washington, and thirty-three in Central Washington-Yakima Valley (see Figures 2 and 4). This study also draws from 179 surveys with local immigrant farmworkers in Eastern Washington (see Figure 3).

Study participants included local immigrant farmworkers, legal service providers (attorneys), farmworker advocates (nonprofit staff, farmworker union staff), agricultural industry representatives (growers, staff of grower associations), and state employees (Department of Labor & Industry and Employment Security Department).

Questions to interviewees addressed:

- How long they have lived in Washington State.
- How long they have worked in agriculture.
- The impacts of the fast growth of the H-2A program on the local immigrant farmworker communities.
- Financial questions regarding work hours and wages to understand the current state of local immigrant farmworkers.

Questions to survey respondents addressed:

- How long had they worked in agriculture.
- Financial questions regarding work hours and wages to understand the current state of local immigrant farmworkers.
- Did the farm they work at have H-2A workers?
- Did they feel their work had been impacted on farms that also hired H-2A workers?

Figure 2. Background of interview participants across the state.

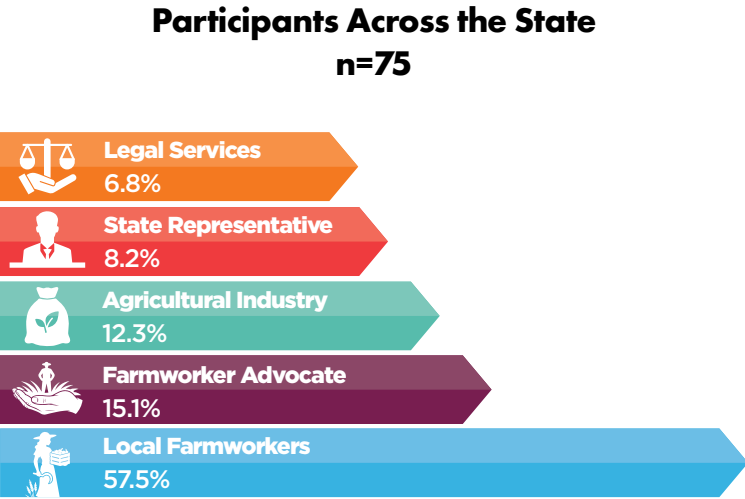


Figure 3. Gender of local immigrant farmworker survey respondents in Grant County.

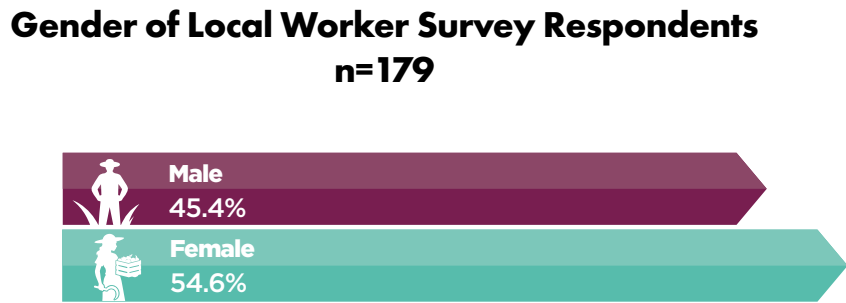
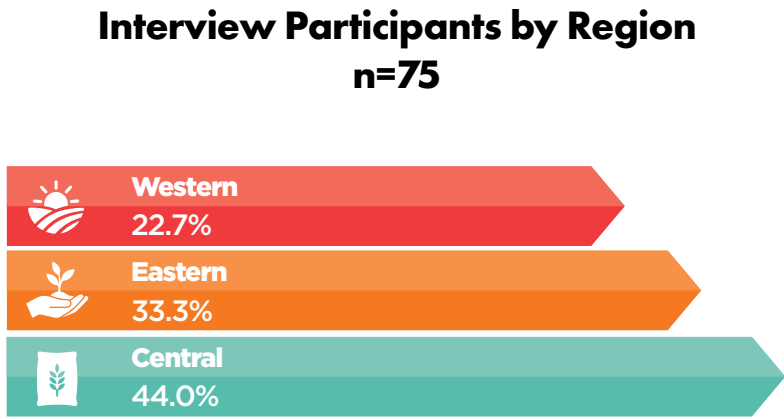


Figure 4. Interview participants across Washington State.



Findings

1. Growers use regulatory loopholes to treat the H-2A program as a default hiring mechanism rather than a last-resort labor program

In interviews with growers and state representatives, this study found that growers have identified and exploited a loophole in H-2A regulations that allows them to bring in large — and effectively unlimited — numbers of H-2A workers to Washington State. Under program rules, employers are required to demonstrate that they attempted and failed to hire local workers, as the H-2A program is intended to function only as a temporary emergency response to

labor shortages. However, interviews reveal that this requirement is increasingly met through procedural compliance rather than meaningful recruitment.



Specifically, growers have shifted domestic recruitment almost entirely to online job postings placed on the Washington State Employment Security Department (ESD) website. With the support of ESD, growers post job advertisements online for the same jobs that H-2A workers are being recruited to fill. This represents a marked departure from how farm employment has historically operated in Washington, where local workers accessed jobs by driving to farms, submitting applications in person, responding to Spanish-language radio and newspaper ads, reading signage at farm entrances, or receiving direct messages — often using WhatsApp — from farm supervisors seeking workers.

Local immigrant farmworkers interviewed for this study stated that they were largely unaware that farm jobs were now being posted online through ESD. Many reported that they had never used, and could not easily access, the state’s unemployment security website. Most importantly, many local immigrant farmworkers are undocumented and therefore do not qualify to apply through ESD, meaning this recruitment method effectively excludes them from jobs they have historically performed.

Interviews with ESD staff confirm that the agency’s role is narrowly defined. The department approves H-2A applications before sending them to the US Department of Labor for final approval and reviews whether domestic recruitment has occurred in a procedural sense. As one ESD director explained, “unless there are issues, it sends to [the] DOL for ultimate approval,” while ESD is responsible only for ensuring that “the domestic recruitment part of that application is met.” Staff acknowledged that the agency has had difficulty reaching local

workers about jobs posted online, further limiting the effectiveness of domestic recruitment by ESD.

Growers and grower association staff stated that placing job advertisements through ESD fully complies with H-2A requirements. When asked about local workers' inability to access these jobs, growers shifted responsibility to farmworker advocates. As Eddy Gonzales, president of a major grower association, explained, from the employer's perspective, "it's all online and through ESD." In practice, this framing allows growers to interpret the absence of online applications as proof that no local workers are "willing and able," thereby justifying continued and expanded reliance on H-2A recruitment while limiting meaningful employment opportunities for local workers.

An ESD manager acknowledged that the number of H-2A workers in the state is inflated beyond actual labor needs, noting that employer preference for H-2A labor is driven by the level of control the program affords. As the manager stated, "control is very appealing," allowing employers to position themselves more competitively by structuring and managing their labor force more tightly. This control allows growers to manage the mobility of H-2A workers, including when they arrive, work, and leave. This ensures they have a controlled workforce with little recourse for rights in a program that is highly unregulated, with very little oversight of workplace abuses.

2. State enforcement actions confirm that employer misuse of the H-2A program has enabled widespread gender discrimination against women workers and disproportionate displacement on Washington farms

Evidence from enforcement actions by the Washington State Attorney General's Office (AGO) corroborates patterns identified in interviews and surveys, demonstrating that employer misuse of the H-2A program has facilitated the displacement of local immigrant farmworkers. In recent years, the AGO has filed multiple lawsuits alleging discrimination against local workers and unlawful replacement with H-2A labor.

In 2022, the AGO filed a lawsuit against Ostrom Mushroom Farms for discriminating against local female farmworkers. Over the course of a year, these workers were subjected to increasingly unattainable harvest rates. As they struggled to meet productivity targets, they were gradually fired and replaced by male H-2A guestworkers. By the time the AGO filed the lawsuit, nearly 170 local farmworkers had been displaced and replaced entirely with H-2A workers.

Additional cases filed in 2025 reinforce these findings. The AGO sued Shinn & Sons Farms for firing local workers — most of whom were women — and replacing them with H-2A workers. In a separate lawsuit filed the same year, the AGO accused Cornerstone Ranches of unlawfully terminating local and female

farmworkers and replacing them with foreign H-2A agricultural workers. Both farms are located in the Yakima Valley, a region that has experienced particularly rapid growth in H-2A employment since 2021.

Together, these cases illustrate how employer hiring practices, combined with weak oversight and enforcement, have enabled systematic displacement of predominantly undocumented local farmworkers, and in particular female workers, through the expanded use of H-2A labor.

3. Expanded use of the H-2A visa program has reduced employment opportunities for local immigrant farmworkers across the state

Across interviews and surveys, local immigrant farmworkers, farmworker advocates, and legal representatives unanimously identified loss of farmwork as a central driver of growing precarity. Workers in Western Washington, Eastern Washington, and the Yakima Valley repeatedly reported difficulty finding work on farms where they had been employed for years or even decades.

This study found that displacement is most acute in the Yakima Valley, which also hosts the highest concentration of H-2A workers. Interviewees consistently linked reduced access to work to growers' growing reliance on H-2A labor. Workers described being told that farms were "fully staffed" before the season began because H-2A crews had already been requested and approved.

Survey and interview data further indicate that displacement often takes subtler forms than outright termination. Local immigrant workers reported less work than H-2A workers during peak harvest periods. Workers also indicated that fewer hours are being given to workers hired on farms with large numbers of H-2A workers, with the average reporting only sixteen hours a week.

Workers reported being removed from high-yield "good harvest blocks," and reassigned to areas with fewer crops. Because agricultural workers are often paid by piece rate or by the bin, these reassignments translated directly into lower earnings even when workers remained employed. Workers interviewed also reported having their workdays cut short, often working only three days a week on average, increasing the economic precarity of workers across the state.

Many workers interpreted these practices as evidence that growers increasingly prioritize H-2A recruitment over retaining and recruiting local workers. However, their accounts point less to worker competition than to a structural reorganization of hiring practices, in which local workers are increasingly marginalized as farms build a predominantly H-2A workforce supplemented by a small number of local farmworkers.

4. Loss of farm employment has triggered deep and compounding impacts for farmworker households amid heightened immigration enforcement

The reduction in access to farmwork has produced cascading effects on farmworker households and communities, particularly given existing economic vulnerability and immigration enforcement pressures. Nonprofit organizations in Eastern Washington reported rising food insecurity among farmworker families and increased strain on local food banks. Staff emphasized that this surge in demand was new and directly linked to workers being squeezed out of agricultural jobs.



Photo courtesy of Familias Unidas Por La Justicia

Many local immigrant farmworkers are undocumented and therefore excluded from state-funded assistance programs, further compounding hardship. Workers also reported avoiding public assistance and other services due to fear of deportation. Workers interviewed also reported housing insecurity due to reduced work availability and heightened precarity in making ends meet. Interviews conducted after early 2025 revealed intensified fears of immigration raids at workplaces, at homes, and in the broader community. Workers described changing daily routines to reduce exposure, ensuring that at least one parent remained home at all times in case of detention. Parents reported modifying shopping schedules, avoiding public spaces, and preparing children for the possibility of family separation by storing photos of citizenship documents on mobile phones.

Advocacy organizations reported that this climate of fear has also weakened collective action and labor enforcement. Annual marches and organizing events have been canceled, and workers are increasingly reluctant to file complaints,

even in cases of clear abuse. In this context, job loss does not operate as a singular economic shock, but as a trigger that amplifies vulnerability across housing, food security, family stability, and worker power.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

This report draws on interviews with key stakeholders and local immigrant farmworkers to examine changing labor conditions amid the rapid expansion of the H-2A program in Washington’s agricultural sector. The findings indicate that employer use of H-2A recruitment mechanisms is reshaping hiring practices and limiting employment opportunities for many local immigrant farmworkers. Washington State is an agricultural state that relies on its local workforce, and local immigrant farmworkers rely on seasonal work to support their families. Farmworkers are the backbone of Washington State’s agricultural economy.

Findings suggest the H-2A guestworker program is in dire need of structural and systemic reform, as the program leads to labor abuse and exploitation. We also need stronger federal and state oversight to ensure the H-2A program is not misused and that local workers are prioritized for those jobs. Current evidence indicates that weaknesses in recruitment requirements and enforcement mechanisms can undermine meaningful local labor recruitment and increase vulnerability among both local farmworkers and H-2A workers.

Based on the findings presented in this report, four policy priorities emerge for state policymakers, regulatory agencies, and community organizations seeking to strengthen worker protections and improve oversight of agricultural labor markets:

1. Strengthen labor rights for farmworkers across the state: The Washington State Legislature can help strengthen the labor and collective bargaining rights of farmworkers across the state by passing Senate Bill 6045. SB 6045¹⁹ seeks to bring farmworkers under the jurisdiction of the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) to secure collective bargaining rights. Historically, farmworkers have been excluded from the federal National Labor Relations Act, which has left them without most basic labor protections and the right to collective bargaining and union formation. Farmworkers in Washington currently lack enforceable collective bargaining rights. As already precarious, low-wage workers, the ability to form unions will drastically improve their wages and working conditions. Currently, cannabis farmworkers²⁰ are covered under PERC, and SB 6045 would extend that right to all farmworkers in the state. Passing SB 6045 would enshrine workers’ rights statewide and require employers to recognize collective bargaining efforts.

2. Develop a statewide biannual survey to accurately count the number of local farmworkers in the state: The agricultural industry has claimed that the state is facing a labor shortage, which is why farmers are bringing in large numbers of H-2A temporary workers across the state. This data is based on the low number of applicants to ESD online ads. However, local immigrant farmworkers and farmworker advocates across the state allege that local workers are being discriminated against and displaced from farms to make room for H-2A workers. To obtain an accurate count of willing and available workers, the state needs to invest in an annual survey conducted by the Agricultural Seasonal Workers Committee (ASWS), in collaboration with local farmworker rights organizations. In addition, the state should increase funding for ASWS and fulfill its mandate to protect local farmworkers from displacement. There is currently no accurate count of how many farmworkers live in the state and how many migrant workers travel into Washington State from other states for seasonal agricultural work. Critically, this survey should go beyond counting available workers and include displacement metrics that track whether local workers are being actively passed over in favor of H-2A recruits. This would give the legislature the evidentiary foundation needed to assess H-2A misuse and respond with targeted enforcement.

Currently, the mission of the ASWS committee is to (1) provide adequate protection for foreign and domestic workers and (2) submit a report to the governor and the legislature biannually with recommendations to increase recruitment and hiring of domestic workers in agriculture in Washington. This process should also include local nonprofits that work directly with farmworkers to facilitate the process and survey, improve accuracy, and engage workers statewide.

3. Require the Employment Security Department (ESD) to close the H-2A recruitment loophole and mandate meaningful outreach to local farmworkers: ESD should establish clear compliance standards for what constitutes a good-faith local recruitment effort, including documentation requirements and a verification process prior to pursuing any H-2A application. The legislature should also direct ESD to report annually on H-2A application approvals by county, along with data on local worker availability, to create public accountability for how the program is used at the local level.

The legislature should direct ESD to expand H-2A visa application regulations of local worker recruitment beyond online ads to include Spanish radio ads, post clear signs at farm property entrances indicating that the farm is seeking employees, and require growers to contact all local farmworkers who have worked on their farms in the past five years, regardless of immigration status and gender. The legislature should mandate that ESD work with local farmworker organizations across the state, be included in the process, and direct outreach efforts through local organizations rather than ESD. Any reforms to recruitment practices should be paired with stronger protections for H-2A workers to ensure

that reducing employer incentives to misuse the program does not increase risks of retaliation or exploitation for guestworkers.

4. Invest and develop emergency rental and childcare assistance programs for all workers: Local farmworker families earn minimum wage, and based on survey data in this report, earn an estimated \$31,257 annually. This places local farmworkers below the threshold for extremely low-income families in the state, where 22 percent of households are considered extremely low income.²¹ Currently, Washington State is facing an affordable housing crisis. A recent study by The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that in Washington, there is a shortage of 182,692 affordable rental units in the state.²² In the Yakima Valley, one of the largest agricultural regions of the state, 20 percent of local residents are *extremely low income*, and the median household income is \$27,301.²³ The median monthly income of residents in the Yakima Valley is \$683, which means families cannot afford the Fair Market Rent (FMR) of \$1,113 for a one-bedroom apartment in the region.²⁴ According to recent studies, having a stable home is essential for safe and healthy families.²⁵ Washington should consider expanding the Housing and Essential Needs Referral Program²⁶ for all residents statewide to help provide farmworkers with economic relief. State legislators should consider expanding affordable housing units across the state and especially in areas with higher poverty rates, such as farmworking communities.

Low median wages create additional barriers to childcare costs, which impact local female workers’ ability to remain competitive in the agricultural labor market. Creating assistance programs to support low-income families across Washington State would positively impact women’s ability to work and increase their financial stability.

Washington’s agricultural economy depends on a stable and well-protected workforce. As H-2A employment continues to grow across the state, the findings of this report raise important concerns about employer recruitment practices, access to employment for local farmworkers, and the adequacy of existing oversight mechanisms. Addressing these challenges will require stronger recruitment standards, improved enforcement, better workforce data, and investments that support farmworker families. Reforms should be designed to protect both local farmworkers and H-2A workers, ensuring that labor standards are strengthened across the agricultural workforce.



Notes

All names are pseudonyms in this report to protect anonymity.

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About the Author

Rosa María Navarro is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with a designated emphasis in Latin American and Latinx studies. She is a Latina Futures 2050 Lab Fellow at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) under the supervision of Dr. Veronica Terriquez.

Rosa specializes in international migration and temporary labor programs, with a focus on the H-2A program. Rosa has focused her agricultural worker and H-2A research on how this program’s expansion is tied to local farmworker displacement and one reason behind the increased precarity of H-2A workers from Mexico specifically. Her research centers on farmworker communities in the Pacific Northwest, as well as labor, race, gender, and class. Other areas of expertise include mestizaje and whiteness in Mexico and Latin America.

Rosa is a former immigrant rights and labor organizer whose scholar-activist lens informs her work. She is deeply committed to community-engaged research to better serve farmworker and immigrant communities. She was born and raised in rural Oregon to farmworker Mexican immigrant parents and is the granddaughter of men who came to the United States as Braceros during World War II. Rosa’s work has appeared in **Open Democracy**, **Time Magazine**, and **The Guardian**.



About Latina Futures 2050 Lab

Latina Futures 2050 Lab, a research initiative spearheaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), was created in 2022 in collaboration with the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute (LPPI). Funded by a \$15 million California state budget allocation, over the next several decades Latina Futures seeks to increase knowledge and insight through applied policy research on the contours of the economic, political, and social lives of all women and girls living in the United States. **Visit www.chicano.ucla.edu/research/latina-futures-2050-lab**



About the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), founded in 1969, is an established leader in the development of scholarly research on the Chicano-Latino population in the United States. For more information, **[visit chicano.ucla.edu](http://visit.chicano.ucla.edu)**.



About UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute is a non-partisan research institute that seeks to inform, engage, and empower Latinos through innovative research and policy analysis. LPPI aims to promote equitable and inclusive policies that address the needs of the Latino community and advance social justice. **visit latino.ucla.edu**.



Latina Futures 2050 Lab is based out of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center
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