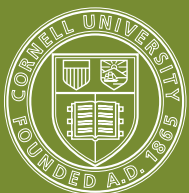


# Immigrants and the Community Farmworkers with Families

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# Preface

**T**his report is the second in a series based on the research project “Integrating the Needs of Immigrant Workers and Rural Communities.” The first report in this series can be found at [http://rnyi.cornell.edu/poverty\\_and\\_social\\_inequality](http://rnyi.cornell.edu/poverty_and_social_inequality). The four-year project attempts to inform New York communities on the nature and consequences of increasing immigrant settlement. This project was sponsored by a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Fund for Rural America (grant no. 2001-36201-11283) and the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station (grant no. 33452). The USDA funding was part of a larger effort to identify major population trends and their consequences for rural America. The goal of the four-year project is to provide information about the nature and consequences of increasing numbers of immigrants settling in New York communities.

Many upstate New York communities have experienced decades of population loss and economic decline. In the past decade, increasing numbers of immigrants have settled in many of these communities, which poses many possible community development challenges and opportunities. Many of these immigrants are farmworkers, and this report focuses on their integration into community life. Because each community must address these issues in its own way, this report is not intended to propose broad answers to the questions communities face but rather to make communities aware of changes in their populations and highlight issues they may choose to address.

This project benefited from the assistance of many individuals and organizations including collaborators from the Cornell Migrant Program and Rural Opportunities, Incorporated

(ROI). Individuals associated with the Catholic Rural Ministry, the Independent Farmworkers Center (CITA), and the Farmworkers Community Center (the Alamo) also provided valuable assistance. We were able to conduct this research because of support and encouragement offered at Cornell University by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the Division of Nutritional Sciences, and the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station.

As authors of this report, we accept sole responsibility for its contents and any errors contained within.

Pilar A. Parra and Max J. Pfeffer  
April 2005

# Highlights

- The ethnic composition of the agricultural workforce has changed in the past decade. Currently, Hispanics/Latinos are the predominant ethnic group. Most of the Latinos are of Mexican origin; and Mexicans comprise 80 percent of farmworkers nationwide, and 95 percent in this study. The presence of Mexicans in New York's agricultural labor force started to increase steadily in the early 1990s.
- Mexican-origin workers in our study have been working in the United States an average of 6 years; 80 percent are male, half of them report being married, and are on average 30 years old. Educational attainment of farmworkers is low, with an average of 6.5 years. Approximately one-third reported they could understand or speak English.
- More farmworkers in New York are staying in the area year-round, and many have family living with them.
- Approximately 60 percent of the workers reported having family in New York. About 30 percent have a wife and/or children living in the U.S., and these workers have different characteristics from other migrant workers.
- Workers with immediate family (i.e., a spouse and /or children) present have been in the U.S. longer, are about 4 years older, and have completed slightly more schooling.
- Workers with immediate family present have higher language proficiency than others. Sixty percent said they could understand English compared to 29 percent of those with no family present, and about half of them said they could speak English, compared to 23 percent of those with no family present.
- Those with family present are very self-reliant in meeting various needs. For example, about two-thirds of those with family present reported that on their own they had obtained a drivers' license, opened a bank account, and applied for citizenship.
- Farmworkers with family who also had English language skills were more self-reliant in meeting their needs. A higher proportion of workers who could read and write in English applied for a drivers' license, opened a bank account, applied for a work permit or citizenship, and were able to find a non-farm job on their own.
- The ability to establish friendships with other groups in the community improved with language skills. More than half of those who could read and write in English reported having American friends.
- Those with families present who had established friendships with Americans in the community were twice as likely to have received help in participating in social and community activities such as going to church, playing sports, finding a school for their children, and attending festivals or parties, all of which provide opportunities to become more integrated into the life of the community.



# Introduction

America's hired farm workforce has changed considerably in the past decade. The most apparent change has been its latinization during the past two decades. This is largely a consequence of large numbers of Mexicans coming to the United States to work. Although Mexican immigrants work in numerous industries across the American landscape, they are especially important in agriculture. The U.S. Department of Labor has estimated that 80 percent of hired farmworkers are Mexican. Historically, Mexican farmworkers in the U.S. have been migratory, moving seasonally around areas of the U.S. to follow agricultural harvests, often returning to Mexico for holidays at year's end. Others might remain in the U.S. for several years. They would send money to their family who remain in Mexico, maintaining the household there. In fact, regardless of how long Mexican farmworkers remained in the U.S., the most common pattern was for males to come to the U.S. alone while their immediate family remained in Mexico. However, this pattern has become less common.

Another, perhaps less apparent, change in the American hired farm workforce has been the growing tendency of farmworkers to settle in rural communities together with their immediate family. Often these workers no longer migrate from place to place following the agricultural harvest. Instead the farmworkers and their families put down roots and begin to become integrated into the social and economic life of the community. But how and to what extent does this community integration occur? How do these foreigners who have little familiarity with American culture become integrated into the community? Answers to these questions have practical importance to farmers interested in retaining their workforce, service providers working to improve farmworker well-being, and

communities interested in helping the new residents contribute to community development.

Previous studies have shown that farmworkers who have family with them are more likely to settle in the U.S. This report focuses on farmworkers who have family in the U.S. and how they gain access to the things they need to live in the U.S., including friendships with Americans who can help them become integrated into the social and economic life of their communities. To help us understand the factors that both promote and limit the integration of immigrants into rural communities, we chose five New York agricultural communities in different economic and

social contexts that have relied heavily on hired farm labor. Each community has a minority population of some significance and a history of immigrant farmworkers settling there.

Our qualitative data are drawn from interviews with key informants and focus groups with foreign-born farmworkers. We also conducted focus groups with white non-immigrant residents in the communities. Key informants included political, business, and religious leaders; police and school officials; farmers; and nongovernmental social service providers. The quantitative data are from a survey of farmworkers. Details on our data and their collection are provided in the Appendix.



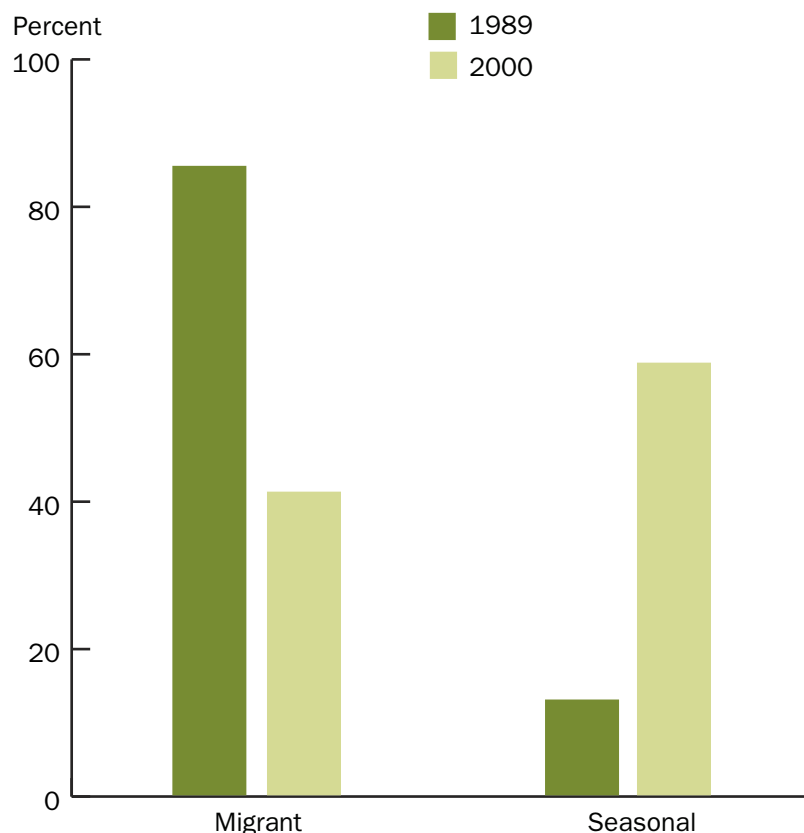
# I. Characteristics of Farmworkers

The profound change in New York's hired farm workforce is apparent in data collected by Rural Opportunities, Incorporated (ROI) in conjunction with its administration of the National Farmworker Job Program in New York. Program data show that the proportion of farmworkers classified as migrant (i.e., workers who leave the state between agricultural seasons) dropped from about 85 to 40 percent in the 1990s. The number of seasonal farmworkers (i.e., those who remain in the state between agricultural seasons) grew four-fold in the 1990s from 15 percent to almost 60 percent. By 2000, according to the ROI farmworker client database, more farmworkers were seasonal than migrant (about 60 and 40 percent, respectively) (see Figure 1). Seasonal farmworkers by definition have a year-round presence in New York communities. The change to a more seasonal hired farm workforce coincides with the arrival of large numbers of Mexican and other Latino workers from abroad. This influx began in about 1990, and grew steadily until 2001 (see Figure 2). Because of difficulties in crossing the border after September 11, 2001, farmworkers have a greater incentive to settle in the U.S., reinforcing the growth in "seasonal" farmworkers already under way in the 1990s. A significant proportion of these workers came to the U.S. with fellow family members. More than 60 percent of the farmworkers we interviewed had family in the U.S. and about the same proportion had family living in New York State. Most significant for this report are farmworkers who have their immediate family (i.e., a spouse and/or children) with them. Thirty percent of the farmworkers we interviewed had immediate family present. We focus on these individuals because past studies have shown that the presence of immediate family increases the likelihood that immigrants will settle in the U. S.

Statistically, farmworkers with family present differ noticeably from others. While the farm workforce is typically made up of a high proportion of males, farmworkers with family present are much more likely to be female. About 40 percent of those with family present were female, compared with about 12 percent of the others. Not surprisingly, almost all (i.e., more than 90 percent) were married. Those with family present were also slightly older and more educated and had lived in the U.S. more years (between 3 and 4 years longer on average). The average annual individual income of farmworkers with family present was \$5,684 (See Table 1).

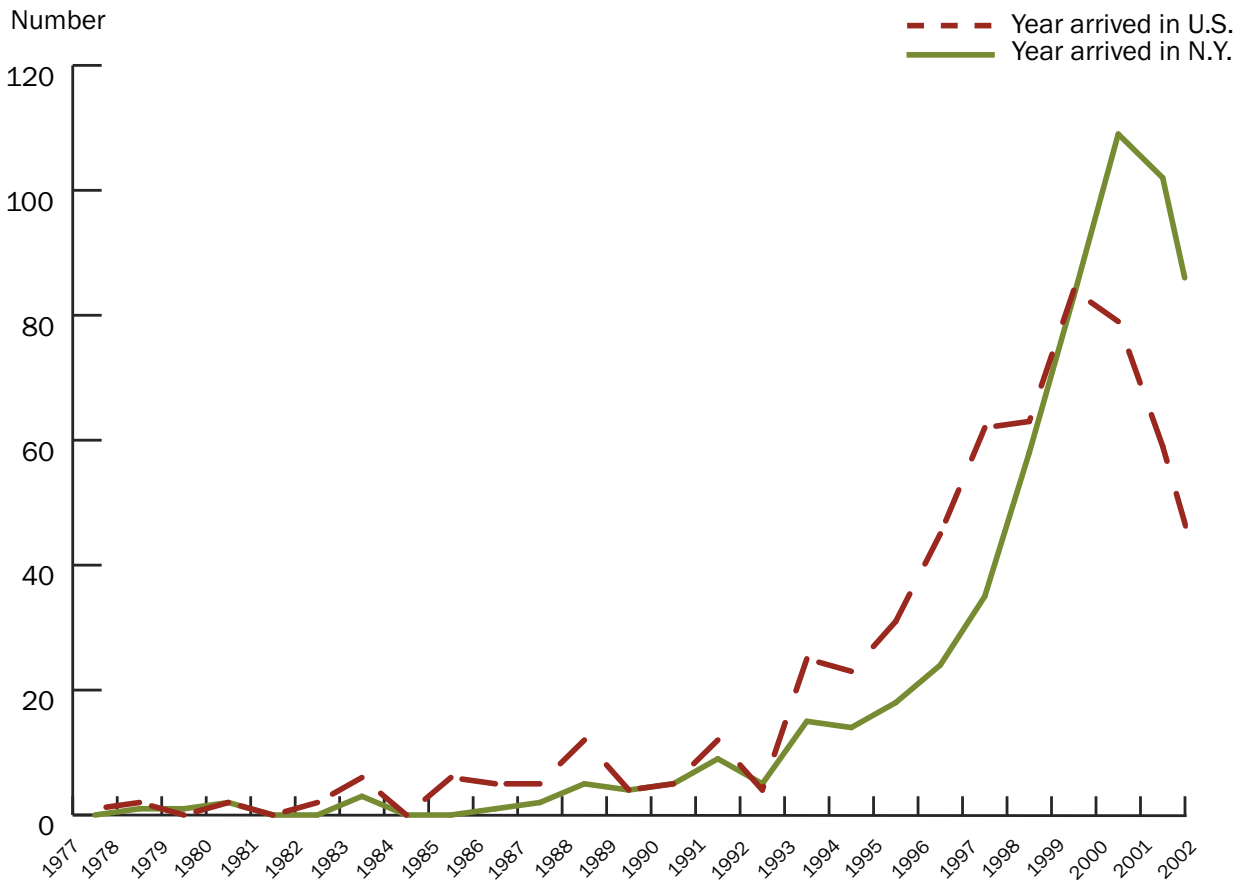
English language ability is a key skill that facilitates the social and economic integration of farmworkers into community life. Farmworkers with family present have a clear advantage in this respect. They are about twice as likely to understand, speak, and write English. They are about five times more likely to read English. About 60 percent of those with family present understand English and almost one-half speak it. The proportions who read and write English are considerably smaller (about 27 and 12 percent, respectively) (See Table 1).

**Figure 1. Percent of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in New York, 1989 and 2000**



(Source: Rural Opportunities, Inc.)

**Figure 2. Number of Latino farmworkers by year of entry into the United States and New York, five New York communities**



**Table 1. Selected characteristics of Latino farmworkers in five New York communities, 2003**

Characteristics	Family Present	No Family Present	Total
Male (%)	60.0	88.3	79.9
Married (%)	93.3	33.8	51.4
Age (mean)	33.3	28.8	30.2
Years of Schooling (mean)	7.1	6.2	6.5
English Ability (%)			
Understand	60.4	29.2	39.1
Speak	48.5	23.4	31.6
Read	26.7	6.7	13.2
Write	12.1	5.0	7.7
Years in U.S. (mean)	8.6	5.4	6.3
Annual Individual Income	\$5,684	\$7,597	\$6,395
Number	170	407	577*

\*577 of the 582 farmworkers interviewed reported whether or not they had family present



"It took us two weeks to arrive here [in New York], and we paid \$2,400 each to cross the border. It was hard, dangerous . . . I think we will have to stay three [or] four years before thinking about going back."

"I am here by myself. I went back twice, but it is becoming very hard to cross. So I am stopping to think before going back again, because of the danger in crossing."

## II. Economic Integration

To consider the social and economic integration of farmworkers into community life, we narrow our focus to those with family present. As mentioned above, they are the most likely to settle in the community.

To settle in the community, farmworkers need to achieve a number of things. Because farmwork in the communities included in our study is usually seasonal, farmworkers typically need to supplement agricultural employment with a non-farm job. A large majority of foreign-born farmworkers come to the U.S. without documentation. However, documentation eases life in the community for those who choose to live there year-round. It eases entry into non-farm employment and the acquisition of other necessities like a bank account or a drivers' license. Overall, only about 10 percent

of farmworkers with family present had obtained a non-farm job, about 15 percent had applied for immigration documents or citizenship, and about 20 percent had opened a bank account or obtained a drivers' license. However, those who reported trying to obtain these things on their own were much more likely to have obtained them. Those who were self-reliant (i.e., tried to get these things themselves) were more than three times more likely to have applied for a visa or citizenship, opened a bank account or obtained a drivers' license. In fact, the majority of those who reported being self-reliant had obtained these things. While few farmworkers with family present had obtained a non-farm job, those who were self-reliant were twice as likely to have found such employment (see Figure 3).

Self-reliance clearly allows farmworkers with family present to get those things they need to become integrated into the economic life of the community. But what makes farmworkers self-reliant? English language ability is a clear factor contributing to such self-reliance. Farmworkers with family present but who did not understand English were almost completely reliant on others to get any of the things we asked about. The likelihood of being self-reliant in trying to get any of these things increased steadily with the level of English ability (see Figure 4). For example, less than 5 percent of those who did not understand English had applied for a drivers' license, compared with almost one-half of those who could write in English.



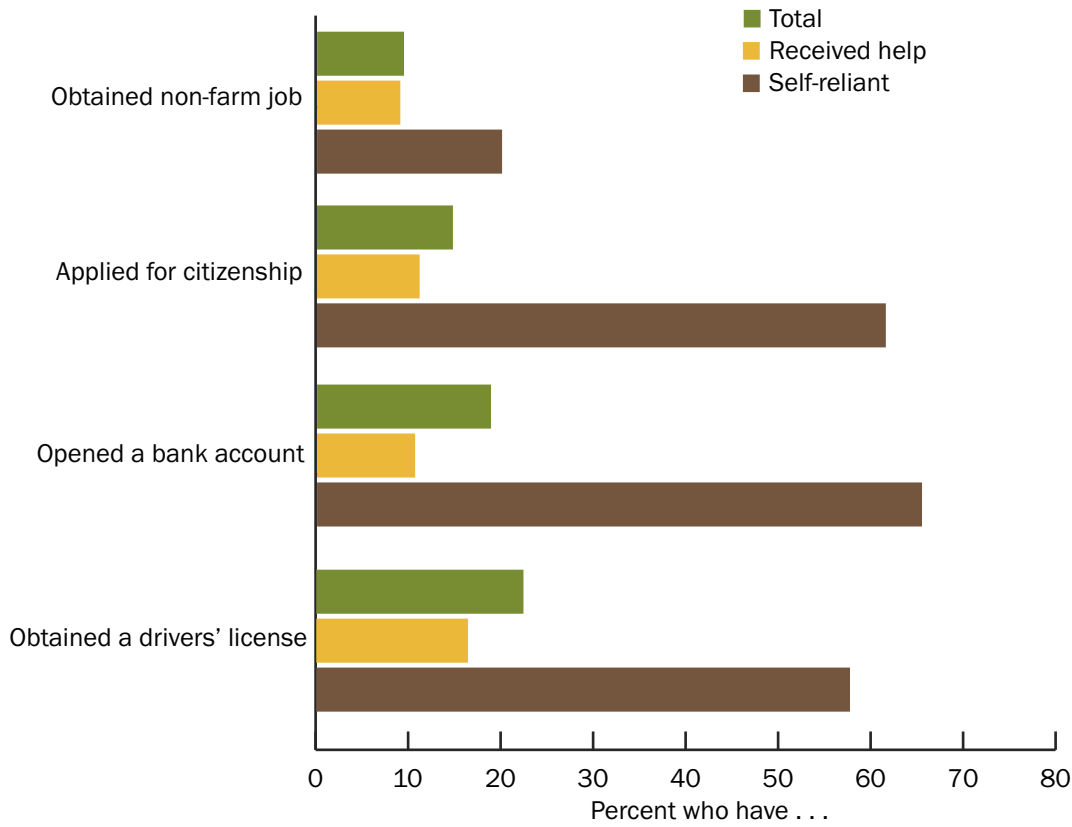
"The truth is that it is better to have our family with us . . . sometimes it is very hard to bring the whole family. I finally arrived at the decision to bring my son with me, but the risk is high. You don't know if you are going to make it or not, we all know that. We immigrants risk our lives to come to work here. Now, if you make it, well, then that is really good."



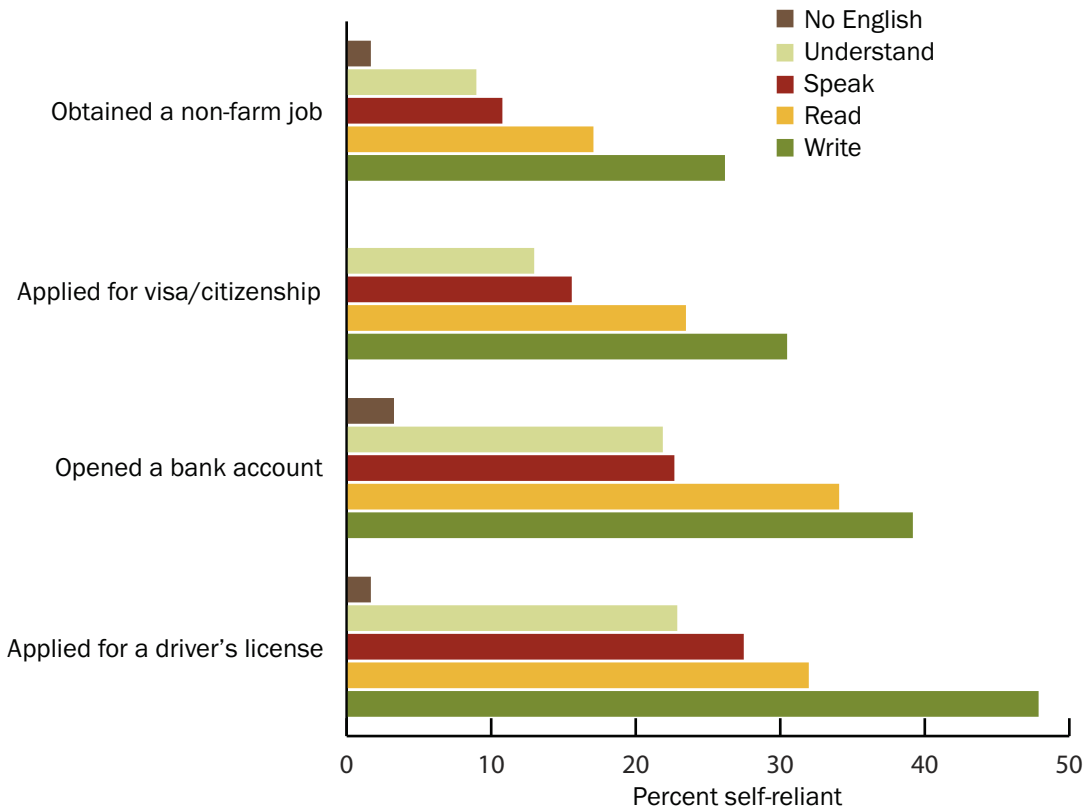
"My daughter is living here. She is married. I have my bank account in my grandson's name. He was born here."



**Figure 3. Self-reliance in meeting selected needs, Latino farmworkers with family present, five New York communities, 2003**



**Figure 4. Latino farmworkers with family present who were self-reliant in meeting selected needs, by English language ability, five New York communities, 2003**



### III. Social Integration

**E**conomic integration allows farmworkers to establish a foothold in the community. But their well-being also depends on their ability to become socially integrated into the community. By social integration we mean the formation of relationships with community members who are neither Latinos nor farmworkers. Such relationships are important emotionally because they give farmworkers who settle in the community a sense of belonging. Social ties to people from other groups can also help individuals gain access to certain civic and material resources that both make them even more self-reliant and improve their well-being.

As indicated above, English language ability is crucial. It also helps farmworkers develop friendships with other community members. For example, less than 20 percent of farmworkers who did not understand English had close American friends. As indicated in Figure 5, the likelihood of having a close American friend increases steadily with English language ability. Sixty percent of those who write English had close American friends, three times the proportion of farmworkers who did not understand English.

Farmworkers who formed close friendships with American community members benefited in different ways. Those with close friendships felt more welcomed and appreciated in the community. Close friends also contributed to the civic integration of farmworkers with family present. Farmworkers with close friends were more likely to have received help to go to church, play sports, find a school for their children, and go to a social event such as a party or festival. For example, more than half of the farmworkers who had close American friends had received help finding a school for their children, compared with just 30 percent of those who had no

close American friends (see Figure 6). The friendships also help farmworkers become more self-reliant. Those with close American friends were much more likely to be self-reliant in obtaining a drivers' license, opening a bank account, applying for citizenship, or obtaining a non-farm job.

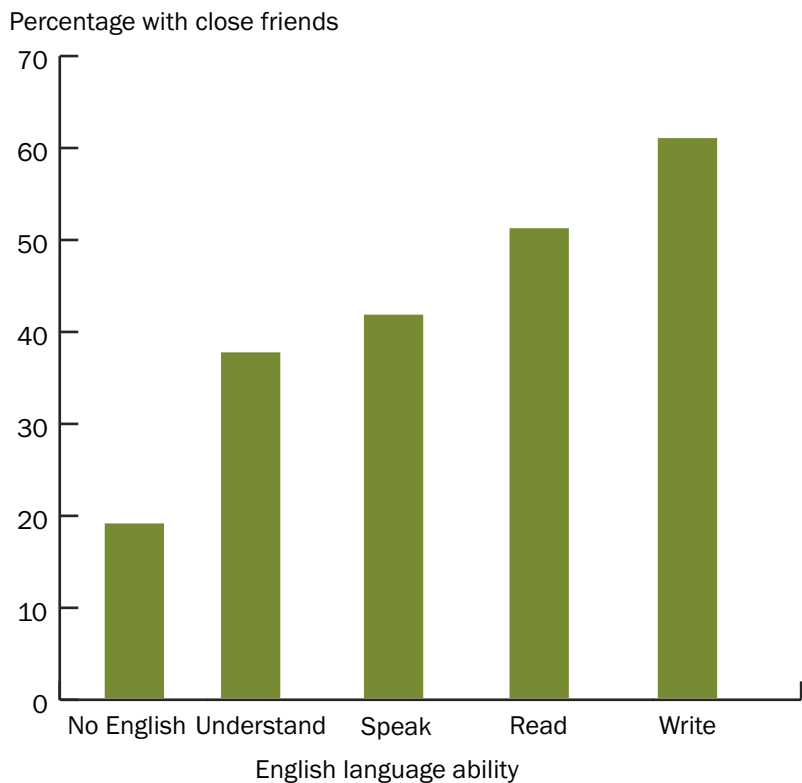


**“During my 15 years as a teacher, I noticed the change in the migrant farmworker population. It used to be mostly African American men, now they are mostly Mexican. My [elementary] school has 23 Mexican families with their kids here year-round.” -An elementary school principal**

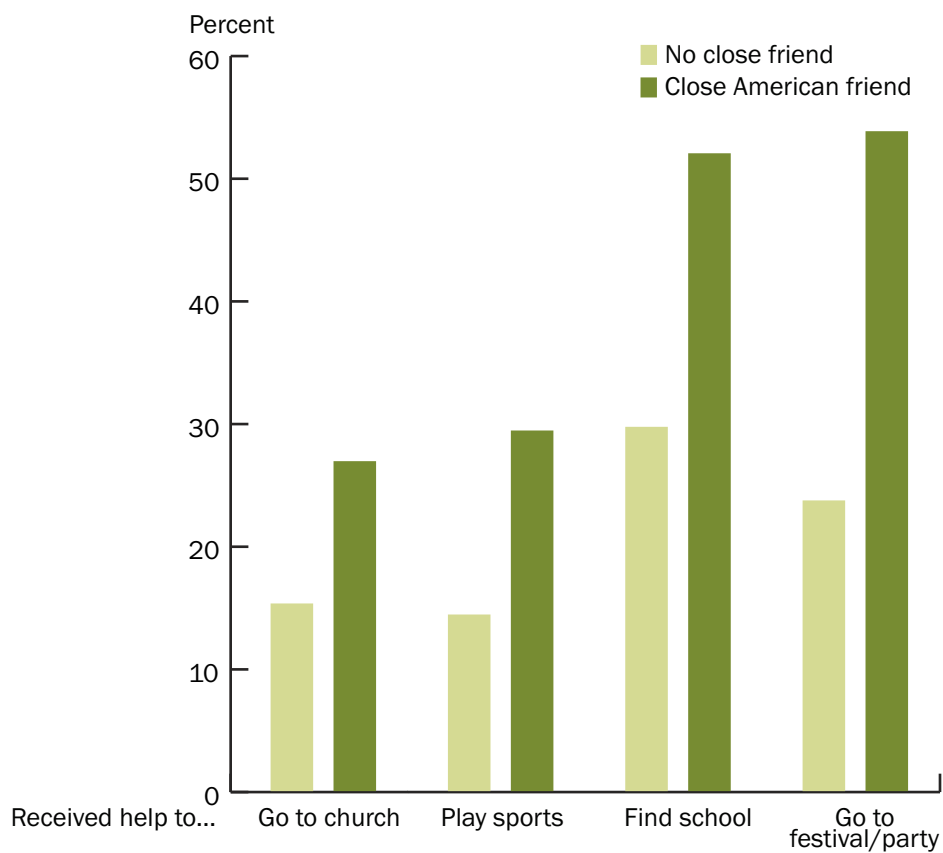
**“Year-round work of most settled families allows them to be more involved in school functions. The staff makes efforts to make families and kids feel welcome. All signs in school are in English and Spanish, notices to Mexican parents are also in Spanish. We [also] hired a staff person who speaks Spanish.” -An elementary school counselor**

**“We have an open house and we make sure all new families come. We have someone bilingual in the reception. I have seen some families meet here and then network among them[selves]. One family moved back here because the kids missed their teachers and their school so much. That makes me happy.” -An elementary school principal**

**Figure 5. Latino farmworkers with family present who have close American friends in the area by English language ability, five New York communities, 2003**



**Figure 6. Latino farmworkers with family present who received help by close friendship, five New York communities, 2003**



# IV. Conclusions

New York's hired farm workforce has changed substantially over the past fifteen years. Mexicans and other Latinos have become the predominant workers on New York's farms, and a growing proportion of the workers remain in New York year-round. Many of these workers have families with them, and their integration into the social and economic life of the community is important for their families' well-being. This report has focused on farmworkers with family present.

A key factor in the economic integration of farmworkers is their self-reliance in getting the things they need. Those who are self-reliant are much more likely to have obtained a non-farm job, opened a bank account, or obtained a drivers' license. English language ability is an important ingredient in helping farmworkers be more self-reliant in getting these things.

English language ability also encourages the farmworkers' social integration into the community. Proficiency in English raises the likelihood that farmworkers have close American friends, and these friendships enhance farmworkers' experiences of having been welcomed and appreciated in the community as well as their integration into the communities' civic life.

English language ability, which is central to the integration of farmworkers into the social and economic life of the community, also ultimately affects the well-being of farmworkers' families. English language training should be a priority aimed at improving the lives of farmworkers. Such training is also likely to benefit communities where farmworkers settle by helping the newcomers become self-reliant, productive, and satisfied residents.



"If I could have my family here, then I would stay, I would look for ways to get a different job . . . a more stable job. I applied for [papers for] my family but until now there has been no solution."



Farmworkers participating in a local upstate New York festival.



# Appendix: Data Collection

**W**e conducted our study in five upstate New York communities. Three communities in northwestern New York are smaller and the area is more rural in character. The local economies rely heavily on apple and vegetable production, and there has been a significant loss of non-agricultural industry in recent decades. Two communities are located in southeastern New York, about fifty miles northwest of New York City. The area specializes in apple and intensive vegetable production. The most distinctive feature of this area is the rapid urbanization of the countryside, coupled with the flight of businesses and established residents from the community centers.

The qualitative data we draw on come from two sources: 41 interviews with key informants, and 18 focus groups each with between 4 and 15 male and female participants (149 total). We conducted seven focus groups with Mexicans (three groups of migrant workers and four groups with persons who had settled in our study sites), two groups of Puerto Ricans, two of African Americans, and one group of Haitians and Jamaicans. The African American and Puerto Rican participants were former farmworkers who had settled in our study sites and the Haitians and Jamaicans were farmworkers who lived in community farmworker housing. We also conducted seven focus groups with non-immigrant long-term residents in the communities. The focus group participants were identified and recruited by collaborators from the Cornell Migrant Program, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Catholic Rural Ministry, the Independent Farmworkers Center (CITA) and the Farm Worker Community Center (the Alamo). Some of our key informants were identified by these sources, but we also drew on public records. Key informants

included political, business, and religious leaders, police and school officials, farmers, and nongovernmental social service providers. The quantitative data we report include survey data for current farmworkers (N=582).

The examination of the qualitative data provided the general guidelines for the development of our survey instrument. We pre-tested questionnaires on 150 individuals. The survey was directed at “current farmworkers,” defined as agricultural workers that may or may not cross state lines to carry on their work but were currently working on an agriculture-related job (including anyone who works on dairy or horse farms part of the year or combines packing-house and farmwork during the year).

We identified current farmworkers with the assistance of collaborators at Rural Opportunities, Incorporated (ROI). ROI works with farmworkers and other under-served populations in rural and/or agricultural areas in four northeastern states and Puerto Rico, and is active in each of our study communities. Most important for our study, ROI administers the U.S. Department of Labor’s National Farm Worker Job Program. In administering this program, ROI is in regular contact with farmworkers at work places and residences (both on-farm and off-farm residences). Bilingual ROI personnel completed interviews with farmworkers in conjunction with regular program recruitment and administrative contacts. Given ROI’s large client base in New York State, this method of selection was a productive means of identifying farmworkers and recruiting them for interviews. This selection method excludes farms and residences not accessed by ROI. Practical sample selection alternatives would have resulted in similar or perhaps more pronounced selection biases. Given the

difficulties in identifying and locating the farmworker population, we feel confident that our selection method yields a fairly accurate representation of the farmworker population in the five communities. We also drew on ROI’s National Farmworker Job Program client database to assess changes in New York State’s hired farm workforce.

# Notes







EyeWire Images



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