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# How Many People Work in Agriculture in the United States?

## Introduction

Multiple federal sources provide information on the agricultural labor force, but these sources measure different parts of this labor force and count workers in different ways. Some federal sources focus on measuring the number of people involved in agricultural production; others focus on measuring the primary type of employment for each person. These sources lead to different estimates of agricultural employment in the United States. This In Focus summarizes these estimates (excluding U.S. territories), by type of employment. CRS Report R48368, *Measuring Employment in the Agricultural Sector in the Context of the H-2A Visa Program*, provides a more complete description of the measurement of agricultural employment in the United States.

Type of employment is categorized in the following groups: self-employed people (including farmers and ranchers), hired workers, and unpaid employment. Self-employed farmers and ranchers receive income from their businesses, rather than receiving a paycheck. Hired agricultural workers (agricultural employees) are paid for their labor. Unpaid agricultural workers are not paid for their work.

## Self-Employed Farmers and Ranchers

The Census of Agriculture (COA), conducted every five years by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, includes a count of people who are “involved in decisions” for every farm or ranch in the United States that produces and normally sells at least \$1,000 of agricultural products during the census year. These data were most recently collected in 2022.

The Current Population Survey (CPS) and the American Community Survey (ACS), conducted by the Census Bureau, ask U.S. residents about their recent labor force activity. Both surveys collect information on industry, occupation, and class of worker (e.g., whether they are self-employed). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes CPS-based tables of the number of people for whom work in agriculture and related industries is their main job, regardless of their occupation. Some self-employed workers in agriculture in CPS data are farmers and ranchers; others are independent contractors who work on farms or ranches.

**Table 1** shows estimates of employment for self-employed people in agriculture. Estimates of farm and ranch operators in the COA are higher than estimates from other sources. This may be because COA estimates include everyone who was a farm or ranch operator during the census year—such as people who have other jobs (in agriculture or in other industries), many people who operate small farms as a hobby, and people who are largely retired.

**Table 1. Estimates of Self-Employed People in Agriculture in 2022 and 2023, by Data Source**

Source	Year	Estimate
Census of Agriculture, all farm and ranch operators except those hired as managers	2022	3,200,000
Census of Agriculture, as above, for people whose primary occupation is farming	2022	1,241,000
Current Population Survey	2023 average	698,000
American Community Survey	2023 average	553,000

**Sources:** NASS, 2022 COA, Table 52; BLS, CPS Annual Tabulations, Table 15; CRS tabulations of ACS microdata.

**Notes:** Hired managers in the COA (removed from these totals) are assumed to have a primary occupation in farming. Estimates of self-employed people from the CPS and the ACS do not include people in incorporated businesses and are an average across all months of self-employed workers in agriculture and related industries.

## Hired Agricultural Workers

There are additional federal sources providing data on the number of hired workers (wage and salary employees) in agriculture. These workers may be hired directly by farms or ranches, or they may be hired to work in agricultural support businesses. Some work for farm labor contractors (FLCs), which provide contract labor to farms and ranches.

The BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) program assembles data for workers covered by state Unemployment Insurance (UI) programs. Agricultural employers—whether they are farms, ranches, or FLCs—must participate in UI if they pay total wages of \$20,000 or more in any quarter of the current or preceding year or employ 10 or more workers on at least one day in each of 20 different weeks in the current or preceding year. Several states also require UI coverage for agricultural employers at lower employment thresholds. Employers who participate in UI must report the number of workers covered by UI who they employ in each month. These employee counts become QCEW employment estimates.

The Farm Labor Survey (FLS) is conducted twice per year by NASS. This survey asks farm and ranch operators how many workers they directly hired in the second week of the previous January and April or October and July. It does not survey FLCs, so its employment estimates do not include these hired agricultural workers. However, it may include some workers who are independent contractors rather than employees.

The CPS also publishes estimates of the number of U.S. residents whose main job is work for a wage or salary in agriculture and related industries.

**Table 2** shows estimates of employment for hired agricultural workers. Multiple estimates from the QCEW are shown, to compare with other federal data sources. The first QCEW estimates are for all employment in the agricultural sector (North American Industry Coding System—NAICS—code 11). The second QCEW estimates are for the crop production industry and animal production industries only (NAICS codes 111 and 112), to better compare with employment estimates from the FLS. Because the FLS asks about farm and ranch employment in January, April, July, and October and employment is highest in this survey in July, estimates available by month are shown for July.

**Table 2. Estimates of Hired Agricultural Workers in 2022 and 2023, by Data Source**

Source	Period	Estimate
Census of Agriculture	2022	2,184,000
Current Population Survey	2023 average	1,531,000
American Community Survey	2023 average	1,740,000
Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, all of the Agricultural sector	July 2023 2023 average	1,370,000 1,252,000
Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, crop production and animal production industries only	July 2023 2023 average	878,000 809,933
Farm Labor Survey (which includes only direct-hire farm and ranch employment)	July 2023 2023 average	781,000 680,000

**Sources:** BLS, QCEW; NASS, Farm Labor Report and 2022 COA, Table 71; BLS, CPS Annual Tabulations, Table 15; CRS tabulations of ACS microdata.

**Notes:** FLS estimates do not include hired farm labor in Alaska or farm labor contractor employment. CPS and ACS estimates include employed workers whose main job was in the agriculture and related industries. These estimates exclude self-employed workers.

Estimates of the number of hired agricultural workers are higher in the COA than in other sources. COA numbers may be particularly high because this source asked the total number of hired workers in 2022, rather than employment in a specific month or average employment during the year.

### Unpaid Agricultural Workers

A third type of agricultural workers are those who work without pay. These workers are measured differently in different sources. The COA asks for a count of workers who worked without pay for each farm or ranch covered by the census. The CPS estimates the number of people aged

16 and older for whom unpaid agricultural work is their main job, who live in the same household as the farm or ranch owner, and who worked on the family farm or ranch for at least 15 hours in the referenced week. The ACS asks people aged 15 and older if their main job was working without pay in a for-profit family business or farm for 15 hours or more per week.

**Table 3. Estimates of Unpaid Agricultural Labor in 2022 and 2023, by Data Source**

Source	Year	Estimate
Census of Agriculture	2022	1,509,000
Current Population Survey	2023 average	35,000
American Community Survey	2023 average	47,000

**Sources:** NASS 2022 COA, Table 71; BLS CPS Annual Tabulations, Table 15; CRS tabulations of ACS microdata.

**Notes:** CPS and ACS estimates include only people working at least 15 hours per week in a family farm or business as their main job.

**Table 3** shows estimates of employment for these unpaid agricultural workers. For these workers, employment estimates from the COA are higher than employment estimates from the CPS and ACS. This is likely because the COA includes people whose main job is not on the farm or ranch and people who are largely retired, while the CPS and ACS estimates include a smaller set of people for whom this is their main job. In addition, the COA likely double-counts people who work on more than one farm or ranch.

### Hired H-2A Agricultural Workers

Some hired agricultural workers are foreign nationals who enter the United States through the H-2A visa program for temporary seasonal agricultural workers. Data on the number of these visas issued are available from the Bureau of Consular Affairs in the Department of State. More information on the H-2A program is available in CRS Report R44849, *H-2A and H-2B Temporary Worker Visas: Policy and Related Issues*.

None of the data sources discussed above can be used to estimate the number of H-2A workers in agriculture. Some of these sources include H-2A workers in overall employment estimates, while others exclude them. The COA includes them. The CPS does not include them because it only includes U.S. residents. The ACS includes them if they are staying in a surveyed address for more than two months. The QCEW includes them if they are covered by UI, which occurs in 16 states. (315,000 H-2A visas were issued in FY2024. CRS estimates approximately one-third of H-2A workers that year worked in states where they were included in QCEW employment estimates.). The FLS includes H-2A workers if they are directly hired by a farm or ranch operator rather than FLCs. A growing share of H-2A workers are hired by FLCs.

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