

Survey Evidence on Legal and Illegal Hispanic Immigrants' Perceptions of Living and Working in US Agriculture

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This study presents survey evidence on legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of living and working in the United States. Three key findings emerge that present a negative outlook for the agricultural industry labor supply if a path to legal permanent residence is granted for current illegal immigrants or insufficient provision of temporary work visas for agriculture workers is provided. We find for our sample that there is a marked transition from initial employment in the agricultural industry upon entering the United States to non-agricultural jobs (i.e., agriculture is a gateway job to other opportunities). Second, immigrants working in agriculture jobs perceive greater discrimination and unfair treatment by their employers compared to other industries. Third, workers in agriculture strongly feel that they are not paid fairly for their work. These three features point to a challenging outlook for the future agricultural labor supply.

Key words: agricultural workers, immigration, immigration reform.

Introduction

Immigration and potential reforms to immigration policies and enforcement mechanisms are among the most contentious national, state, and local legislative issues in the United States, with divides across political parties, industry, and ethnic lines. While there is a wide spectrum of elements encompassing the debate over immigration policy and possible reforms, there are two issues of particular consequence for the agricultural industry: 1) the quantity and design of temporary agricultural worker visas and 2) potential pathways to legal permanent resident (LPR) status for current immigrants unlawfully in the United States. The US agricultural industry is acutely sensitive to any changes (or continuing the status quo) to immigration policy and enforcement due to the sheer number of foreign-born workers employed on farms and processing plants across the United States (Martin, 2012; Martin & Calvin, 2010). According to the 2010 National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), 78% of all crop farmworkers in the United States were foreign born, with the vast majority (71%) originating from Mexico. While estimates vary, according to US Department of Labor surveys, about half of all farmworkers between 2005 and 2009 indicated that they were working without employment authorization (Hertz & Zahniser, 2013). For fruits, nuts, and vegetable crops, the percentages approach nearly two-thirds of all farm workers.

The combination of potential changes to immigration policies and persistent difficulties among growers across the United States obtaining sufficient pools of

workers (Martin, 2012) presents a significant challenge to the agricultural industry. A number of studies and surveys have documented the sensitivity of agricultural productivity and profitability to stricter or looser immigration policies. Zahniser, Hertz, Dixon, and Rimmer (2012) estimate that tightening immigration policies could result in a long-run reduction of 2% to 4% in the acreage of labor-intensive crops, and Devadoss and Luckstead (2011) estimate that it could decrease farm exports by \$181 million. In the same vein, relaxing constraints and increasing the availability of nonimmigrant farm workers would have a large positive impact on labor-intensive crops including fruits, vegetables, and nursery products (Gunter, Jarrett, & Duffield, 1992; Zahniser et al., 2012). Recent experiences with changes to immigration enforcement laws at the state level tend to support the concerns that tightening immigration rules has at least a short-run negative impact on the agricultural industry. House Bill 87 (HB87) in the state of Georgia, which implemented penalties for certain employers failing to utilize the federal work authorization program (E-Verify), led to widespread anecdotal evidence of labor shortages and production losses from crops being left unharvested. A survey of growers by the Georgia Department of Agriculture found that Georgia growers following the passage of HB87 experienced labor shortages, which they perceived was in part due to the tougher laws. Approximately one-fourth of Georgia growers experienced income losses due to these labor shortages (Black, 2012). Similarly, following the passage of House Bill 56 in Alabama—which is considered

Table 1. Survey question to elicit initial immigration status of respondent.

When you first came, what was your status in the U.S.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent resident/green card • Border crossing card/commuter • Temporary resident nonimmigrant visa (tourism, job, study) • Pending status (awaiting official decision) • Other
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one of the strictest immigration bills in the nation—estimates suggest that it could cost Alabama’s gross domestic product (GDP) by between \$2.3 and \$10.8 billion (Addy, 2012).

While there is a growing body of literature documenting the difficulties for agricultural producers to obtain a stable supply of labor and how immigration policies affect this supply, there is surprisingly little information from the perspective of legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants themselves on how they view working in the United States, particularly in the agricultural sector. This study presents unique evidence on legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants’ perceptions of living and working in the United States and the contrast between those employed in agricultural versus non-agricultural jobs. Based upon the survey, three key findings emerge that present a negative outlook for the agricultural industry labor supply if a path to legal permanent residence is granted to existing illegal immigrants and highlights the importance of strengthening the provision of temporary work visas for agricultural workers. First, we find for our sample of workers that there is a marked transition from initial employment in agriculture upon entering the United States to non-agricultural jobs (i.e., agriculture is a gateway job to other opportunities). Second, immigrants working in agriculture perceive greater discrimination and unfair treatment by their employers compared to other industries. Third, workers in agriculture strongly feel that they are not paid fairly for their work. Each of these three features, which are detailed in the remainder of this article, point to a challenging outlook for the future agricultural labor supply.

Survey and Sample Characteristics

In order to assess how legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants perceive working and living in the United States, a survey was conducted in the summer of 2013 in northern Georgia. Georgia, which is home to the nation’s sixth highest share of illegal immigrants in the labor force (Passel & Cohn, 2011), has a sizable Hispanic population in the northern region working in agriculture (e.g., ornamental and poultry processing), landscaping, and service professions. The survey, which was delivered in Spanish, was administered at various locations

including churches, farmers markets, Hispanic organizations, and select local business where a diverse array of Spanish-speaking adults of Hispanic origin could be recruited. Due to the sensitive nature of the study’s focus on immigration, no identifying information was collected at any point of the survey. The survey was administered by two graduate students born and raised in Latin American countries to aid in delivering the survey, particularly to respondents who struggled with reading questions. As compensation, each participant received a \$10 gift card.

The survey contained questions covering several key elements, including 1) socio-demographic, immigration, and work history; 2) motivations for originally coming to the United States; 3) perceptions about living and working in the United States, and 4) a choice experiment (which is the subject covered in Melo, Colson, & Ramirez, 2014). Since one key aim of the survey was to identify the opinions of Hispanic immigrants who are currently working and living in the United States illegally—given they will be most impacted by any changes to current immigration policies—ideally the survey would have explicitly asked about legal status. However, given the obvious legal and ethical issues surrounding inquiries about legal versus illegal status, this question was not included. Instead, respondents were asked to classify their status upon entering the United States from a list of legal alternatives, as shown in Table 1. The authors originally intended to use the “other” response and other questions in the survey to infer which individuals *might* have entered the United States illegally. As discussed in Melo et al. (2014), to the surprise of the authors—but giving credence to the other sensitivity-conscious mechanisms employed in crafting and conducting the survey—a significant percentage of respondents voluntarily stated that they entered the country illegally. In total, 156 of the 229 respondents (68%) who participated in the survey stated that their immigration status upon entering the United States was illegal. Although we are confident in the veracity of the statements regarding the illegality of entering the United States, it is important to note that we cannot concretely infer the legality of respondents’ current status. However, given that it has been 28 years since the last major amnesty (Immigration Reform and Control Act

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Variable	Variable definition	Entire sample (n=229)	Stated illegal entrants (n=156)	Non-stated illegal entrants (n=73)	Difference between groups ^a
Socio-demographic information					
Age	Years	34.11 (9.57)	33.90 (9.21)	34.56 (10.35)	-0.66
Male	1 if male	0.52 (0.50)	0.54 (0.50)	0.47 (0.50)	0.07
Married	1 if married	0.47 (0.50)	0.46 (0.50)	0.49 (0.50)	-0.03
Mexico	1 if from Mexico	0.77 (0.42)	0.86 (0.35)	0.58 (0.50)	0.28***
Education	Number of years of education	10.31 (2.73)	9.94 (2.57)	11.10 (2.89)	-1.16***
English level	Self-rating of English skills (1=very poor, 5=very good)	2.96 (1.12)	2.81 (1.10)	3.31 (1.08)	-0.50***
Employment information					
Agricultural job	1 if work is in agriculture	0.09 (0.28)	0.11 (0.31)	0.04 (0.20)	-0.07*
Monthly income	Average \$ for employed	1,686.78 (770.25)	1,613.34 (671.88)	1,838.90 (930.45)	-225.56*
Immigration information					
Stated illegal entry	1 if stated illegal entry	0.68 (0.47)	1.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-
US years	Number of years in the United States	14.37 (7.12)	14.13 (6.50)	14.93 (8.38)	-0.80

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

^a T-test of difference in mean between stated and non-stated illegal entrants, where *, **, *** denote 10%, 5%, and 1% significance, respectively.

[IRCA]), the likelihood is high and indicates that a sample of individuals with direct experience living and working in the United States illegally was surveyed.

Table 2 presents basic socio-demographic and immigration information. Comparing the two sub-samples, there are statistically significant differences between the *Stated Illegal Entrant* and *Non-Stated Illegal Entrant* subsamples. In particular, *Stated Illegal Entrants* were more likely to come from Mexico (0.86 versus 0.58), have fewer years of education (10 versus 11), lower English speaking skills (2.8 versus 3.3 on a 5-point scale), are paid \$226 less per month, and are more likely to be employed in the agricultural sector including packing houses (11% versus 4%).

Initial Employment and the Transition Away from Agriculture

Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the percentage of stated and non-stated illegal entrants' first job industry when entering the United States and the current industry in which they are employed. As can be seen, about 29%

of stated illegal entrants were initially employed in agriculture when first entering the United States. This was the most common first industry in which stated illegal entrants were employed, followed by services (28%) and construction (17%). In contrast, only about 20% of non-stated illegal entrants were initially employed in agriculture, with the service industry (40%) being the most common initial job industry. The divergence in first industry employment between those Hispanic immigrants who entered the United States illegally versus those with legal status highlights the difficulties of obtaining employment in certain industries without documentation of lawful status.

Most troubling for agricultural producers—but reflecting the difficulties they have in retaining workers over multiple years—is the transition of Hispanic immigrants initially working in the agricultural industry to other employment fields. Of the 29% of stated illegal entrants who initially began working in agriculture upon arriving in the United States, only 7% were still employed in agriculture at the time of the survey. The

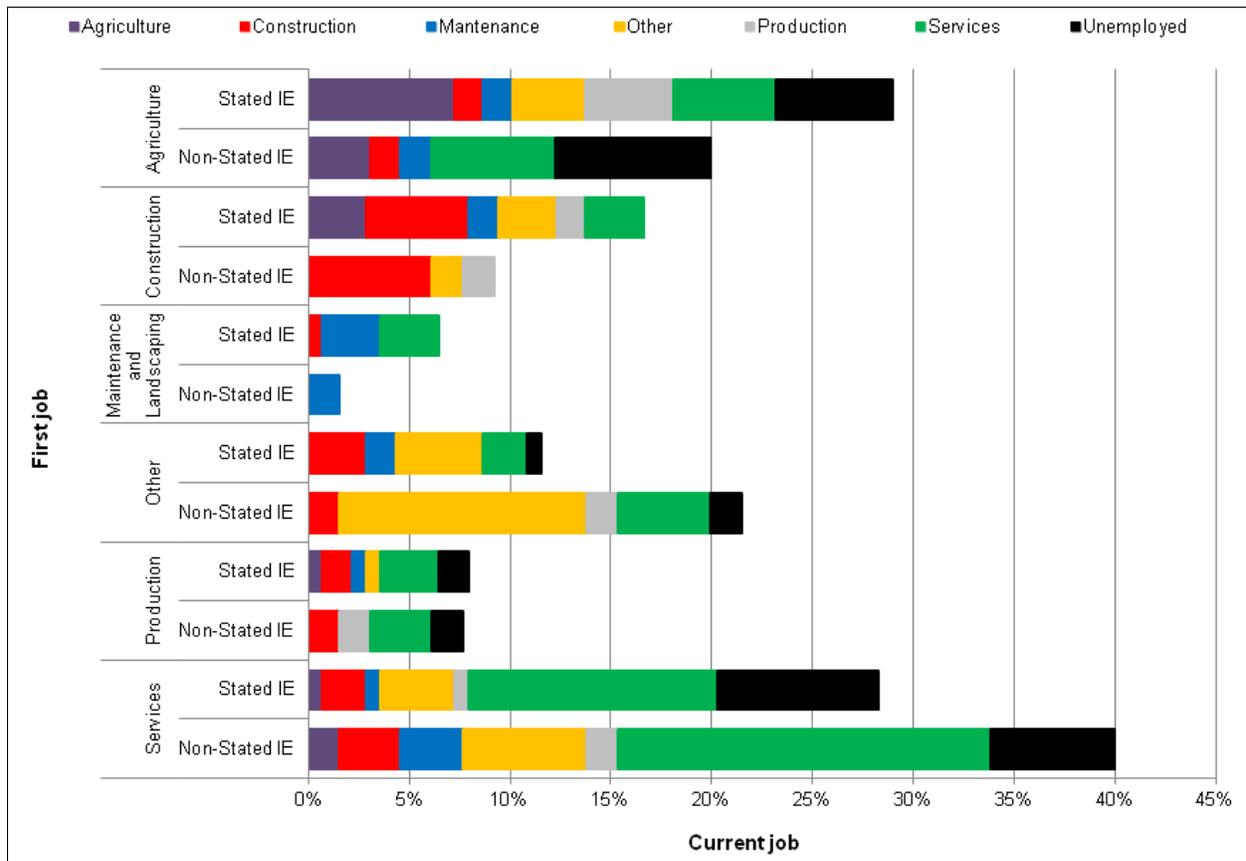


Figure 1. Industry breakdown of first and current job industry for stated illegal entrants (IE) and non-stated illegal entrants.

majority are currently working in either the production or service industries (4% and 5%, respectively) or are unemployed (6%). While attrition would certainly be expected over time given the physical requirements of field and processing work, for the entire sample of Hispanic immigrants we found very few individuals (6%) who initially worked in a non-agricultural industry who transitioned to a current agriculture job.

As a whole, the employment history suggests that for those Hispanics who enter the United States legally, agriculture is neither the primary industry of first employment nor an industry that immigrants transition to over time. For those who do enter the United States illegally, agriculture tends to be a gateway job for transitions to other fields as opportunities arise. Both of these features are troubling for agriculture producers and gives credence to their concerns that finding a stable supply of workers is difficult and that policy efforts to curb either the flow of illegal immigrants or provision of legal status to current illegal immigrants could further exacerbate labor shortages. This finding suggests that under a reformed national immigration policy specific

attention and provisions for the agricultural sector could be required to satisfy labor requirements.

Hispanic Immigrants' Perceptions of Living and Working in the United States

As part of the survey, three questions were included to better understand how Hispanic immigrants perceive their treatment by employers and society while living and working in the United States. Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," participants were asked to evaluate three statements: 1) "I have been discriminated against," 2) "My employer treats me fairly," and 3) "I am paid fairly for my work." As well, for those individuals who stated that they had entered the United States illegally, they were asked their level of agreement with the statement "I want to become a citizen." Responses to these questions are presented in Figure 2, broken-down by statements regarding illegal entry.

As would be expected, respondents who *did not* state that they had entered the United States illegally were

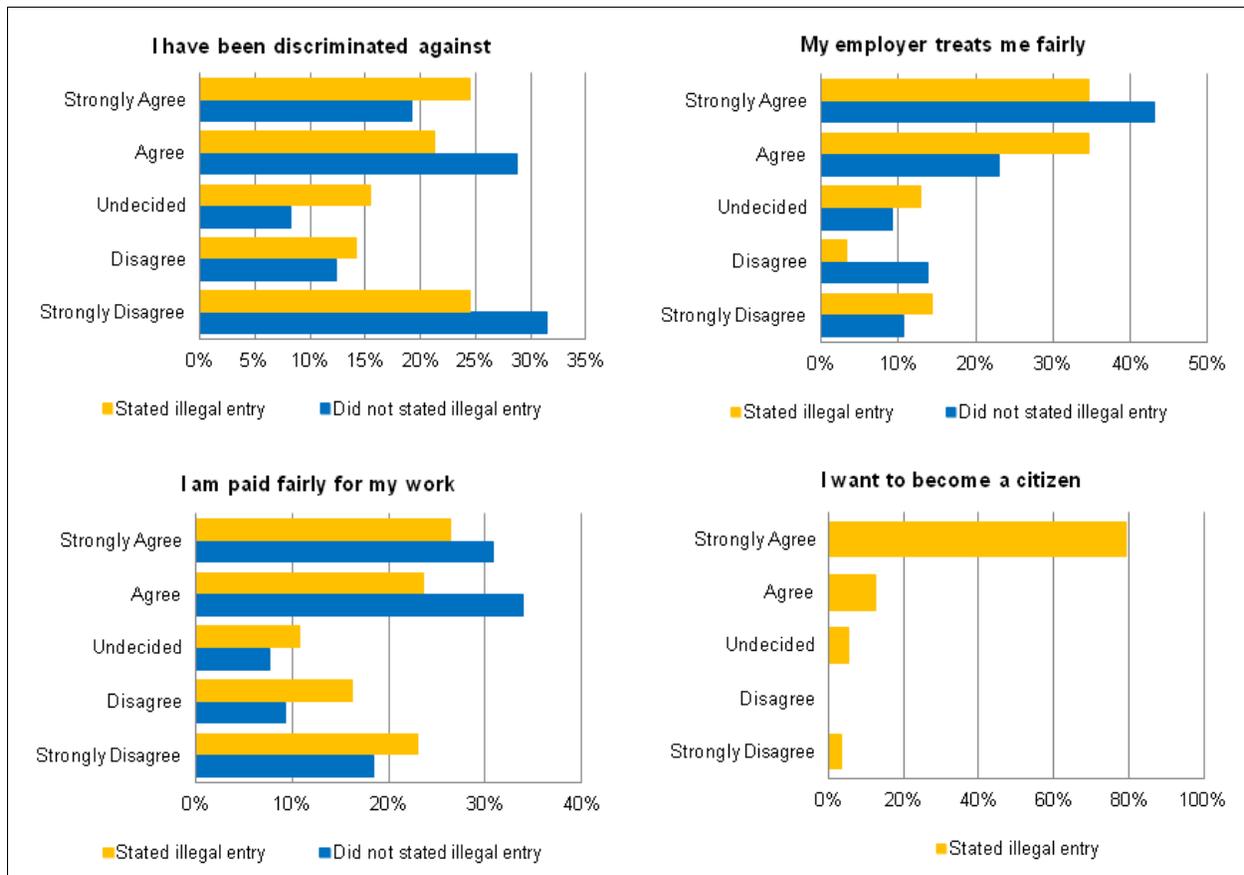


Figure 2. Perceptions of living and working in the United States.

more likely to strongly disagree with the statement that they have been discriminated against (32%) compared to those who stated that they *did* illegally enter the United States (25%). It is possible that imposing penalties against employers for hiring undocumented workers through the E-Verify system led to discrimination against immigrant workers as occurred under the IRCA provision (Pena, 2010; Phillip & Massey, 1998). Similarly, focusing on agreement with fair treatment by employers, stated illegal entrants were less likely to strongly agree with this statement (35% versus 43%). However, aggregating both “strongly agree” and “agree,” both stated and non-stated illegal entrants yielded roughly equivalent levels of agreement with the statement that employers treat them fairly (70% versus 66%). Contrasting responses for the “my employer treats me fairly” and “I have been discriminated against” presents an interesting contrast. Relatively, a much lower percentage of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their employer treats them fairly (about 20%), while more than double that percentage

agreed or strongly agreed that they have been discriminated against. This tends to suggest that Hispanic workers, regardless of their legal status, feel more fairly treated by their employer than society in the United States.

In terms of perceptions of wages, stated illegal entrants were less likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that they are fairly paid for their work (49%) compared to those who did not state that they had illegally entered the United States (65%), which reflects the marked difference in their monthly income (\$226). Contrasting responses for the “I am paid fairly for my work” and “my employer treats me fairly” statements further reinforces that Hispanic immigrants tend to feel that they are treated fairly, but less so in terms of their wages.

Finally, in terms of desire to become a citizen, responses among stated illegal immigrants mirror previous polls that have focused on this question. For our sample, 91% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they want to become a citizen. Previous Latino

Decision polls indicate that 9 in 10 undocumented Hispanic immigrants would like to become citizens if afforded the opportunity (Barreto & Segura, 2013; Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, & Taylor, 2013).

Determinants of Hispanic Immigrants' Life and Work Satisfaction in the United States

To better understand the factors influencing Hispanic immigrants' satisfaction of living and working in the United States, responses to the three qualitative statements presented in the previous section are analyzed. Table 3 presents estimates from three separate ordered logit models assessing respondents' level of agreement with the following statements: 1) "I have been discriminated against," 2) "my employer treats me fairly," and 3) "I am paid fairly for my work." In each model, the socio-demographic and employment characteristics presented in Table 2 are included.

Across all three models, employment in agriculture is the only consistently statistically significant variable in explaining Hispanic immigrants' responses to the three satisfaction statements. The positive coefficient on agriculture in the discrimination model indicates that respondents employed in agriculture are more likely to agree that they have been discriminated against. The negative coefficient on agriculture in the employer and fair wage models indicates that on average respondents employed in agriculture are more likely to disagree with the statement that their employer treats them fairly and that they are paid a fair wage. This supports previous evidence that has found that wage discrimination against Latino immigrant workers exists (Bansak & Raphael, 2001; Donato, Aguilera, & Wakabayashi, 2005), especially against undocumented agricultural workers (Taylor, 1992). The negative sentiment of agricultural workers in terms of discrimination, employer treatment, and wages does not present an optimistic outlook for agricultural producers to retain a stable and happy labor supply, particularly if current agricultural workers are afforded new alternative employment opportunities under immigration reform. The negative perception by agricultural workers—relative to other industries—tends to agree with the previously presented evidence showing that both legal and illegal immigrants upon entering the United States tend to move away from agriculture when new opportunities arise. This finding further reinforces that policy efforts to attract and retain workers in agriculture, particularly under potential new employment opportunities under a reformed immigration policy, may be required.

Table 3. Ordered logit model coefficient estimates.

Variable	Discrimination model	Fair employer model	Fair wage model
Age	-0.020 (0.018)	-0.004 (0.020)	-0.002 (0.020)
Male	0.439 (0.364)	-0.761 ** (0.372)	-0.444 (0.359)
Married	0.146 (0.331)	0.036 (0.324)	-0.248 (0.313)
Mexico	0.284 (0.384)	-0.114 (0.394)	0.355 (0.372)
Education	0.060 (0.056)	-0.034 (0.062)	-0.093 (0.059)
English level	-0.146 (0.178)	0.111 (0.175)	-0.103 (0.153)
Agricultural job	0.781 * (0.468)	-1.092 * (0.558)	-0.786 ** (0.343)
Monthly income	-0.0001 (0.0002)	0.00007 (0.0002)	0.0007 *** (0.0003)
Stated illegal entry	0.153 (0.341)	-0.018 (0.380)	-0.379 (0.320)
US years	0.039 (0.029)	-0.009 (0.027)	0.017 (0.028)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

Considering the other socio-demographic and employment factors included in the three regression models, few other factors are found to be significant in explaining perceptions. We find that males are less likely to agree that they are fairly treated by their employer. As expected, higher monthly incomes are positively related to good perceptions of earned wages.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the survey highlights the difficulties facing the US agriculture industry under status-quo immigration policies and the challenges for sustaining a reliable labor supply under immigration reforms that either offer a path to legal permanent residence for existing illegal immigrants or fail to provide sufficient provisions for temporary agricultural workers. The survey indicates that agriculture is commonly a gateway job to other opportunities and that Hispanic immigrants working in the agricultural sector have more negative impressions of their wages compared to workers in other industries. As a whole, this suggests that the US agricultural sector needs to be proactive in the decisions of potential immigration policy reforms and take steps to improve the conditions and compensation for immigrant workers to better sustain the labor supply.

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