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Hunger and Poverty Among Immigrants

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Throughout its history, people have moved here from all over the world and have contributed to their communities and our national life. Today, as in the past, immigrants are also creating prosperity and enrichment for this nation. In fact, the U.S. food-supply system depends heavily on immigrants. Nearly three-fourths of all U.S. hired farm workers who harvest the majority of our country's fruits and vegetables are immigrants, most of whom are undocumented¹.

Despite their contributions, many immigrants face discrimination and barriers to opportunity. This increases their likelihood of struggling with hunger and poverty. Many immigrants, especially those from Mexico, Central America, and parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, leave their home countries to escape deep poverty or violence. They may come wanting to contribute to this nation, but once here, they may be isolated by a combination of poverty, limited English proficiency, and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and/or gender.

Who are immigrants?

Adult and child immigrants come from various countries and for different reasons. Some become citizens,

Immigration status affects an individual's or family's vulnerability to hunger and poverty. Immigrants face challenges in:

- Accessing sufficient nutritious food
- Obtaining work authorizations and/or decent-paying jobs
- Obtaining legal protections and avoiding immigration raids and deportation



others have status as permanent residents or have seasonal work permits, and still others are considered “undocumented.”

How is being undocumented related to hunger and poverty?

People without documentation who live and work here are among the most

vulnerable people in our country. They are more likely to live in poverty and to struggle to put food on the table. The national poverty rate is 14.8 percent, while immigrants as a group have a poverty rate of 30 percent. It is likely that the poverty rate of undocumented households is even higher.

Immigrants without documentation have a food-insecurity rate twice that of the overall U.S. population. (see table at left).

Although immigrants without documentation pay taxes, they often don't apply for government nutrition programs, such as those for women, infants, and children (WIC) and low-income families (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), because they fear deportation.

FOOD INSECURITY

	General Population	Undocumented Immigrants
All households	14%	24%* ²
Households with children	19.2%	N/A
Female-headed households with children	35.3%	Between 30-46%*
Migrant and seasonal workers	N/A	50-65%*

*Percentage is based on a subset of immigrants and/or refugees.

Sources: “Food Security in the United States, 2014,” U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service and “Food Insecurity among Immigrants, Refugees, and Asylees.” Food Research and Action Center. February 2016.

What does being undocumented mean for accessing jobs and opportunity?

Having documentation to live and work in the United States improves immigrants' access to better jobs. They can create more opportunities for themselves and their families.

- The jobs that many immigrants without documentation hold are less stable and less likely to pay at least minimum wage.
- Immigrants without documentation are overrepresented in low-wage jobs with few or no benefits and are more likely to endure hazardous working conditions. They have little power to negotiate better pay or working conditions because it is difficult to change jobs.
- Seasonal workers, whether on temporary work visas or undocumented, experience more severe poverty and hunger, particularly if they are unable to find work for the remainder of the year.³

Undocumented immigrants risk deportation.

Today's soaring rates of deportation split families apart. Frequently, children are left in the United States without



parents, and some are forced to enter the foster care system.⁶ Removing adult workers from the household depletes much-needed family and community resources.

Immigrants are making significant contributions to the United States.

Communities struggling with decades of population loss and economic decline are being revitalized by newcomers. Both manual laborers and small-business en-

trepreneurs are revitalizing neighborhoods and commercial corridors in parts of the Rust Belt such as Baltimore, Detroit, and southeastern Iowa.

- Immigrant-owned small businesses employ 4.7 million people and generate \$776 billion in income nationwide⁷.
- With immigration reform, immigrants could make even greater contributions to the United States.

The median income of households of farm workers is about...

...\$46,000 less than...

...the median income of households headed by U.S. citizens.

As a result, immigrant families headed by farm workers are almost **7 times** as likely as other Americans to face food insecurity. This means that at some point during the year, 1 in 2 farm-worker households has at least 1 member going hungry, compared to 1 in 7 households in the general population.

1 in 2 farm-worker households

1 in 7 general population households

Endnotes

¹ "Farm Workers and Immigration Policy Briefing Paper." Bread for the World Institute. December 2011. www.bread.org/library/farm-workers-and-immigration-policy

² "Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States." Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends. www.pewhispanic.org/2016/04/19/statistical-portrait-of-the-foreign-born-population-in-the-united-states-trends

³ "Farm Workers and Immigration Policy Briefing Paper." Bread for the World Institute. December 2011. www.bread.org/library/farm-workers-and-immigration-policy

⁴ "Unauthorized Immigrants in the U.S." Pew Hispanic Center. April 2009. www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf

⁵ "Migrant Farm Workers." Cornell University Cooperative. October 2015. <http://articles.extension.org/pages/9960/migrant-farm-workers-our-nations-invisible-population>

⁶ "Shattered Families." Applied Research Center. November 2011. www.raceforward.org/research/reports/shattered-families

⁷ "A Tale of Two Cities (and a Town): Immigrants in the Rust Belt." Bread for the World. 2013. www.bread.org/library/tale-two-cities-and-town-immigrants-rust-belt