

# *Report reveals U.S. farmworkers suffer stolen wages and safety issues*

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San Diego, December 16 (RHC)-- According to a new report, U.S. farmworkers are struggling with some of the lowest wages in the country and suffer "an above-average rate of workplace injuries."

The U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division conducted more than 31,000 investigations on U.S. farms between fiscal years 2000 and 2019 and levied \$63m in civil penalties for workplace violations, according to an analysis published by the progressive-leaning think-tank Economic Policy Institute.

Farm employers in the United States have withheld \$76 million in wages from 154,000 workers over the past 20 years, a new analysis of federal data has found, and wage theft and workplace safety issues in the agricultural sector are likely much, much worse.

But those violations are likely just a fraction of the problem, says EPI, because the Labor Department only investigates about 100 of the US's 107,000 farm employers every month – which means there is just a 1.1 percent chance that any one of them will be investigated in any given year.

Many more violations are likely never reported because the "majority of farmworkers lack an immigration status or have a precarious, temporary status, making them fearful of retaliation and deportation", Daniel Costa, EPI's director of immigration law and policy research and one of the report's authors, told Al Jazeera.

That means "the violations that do get reported and investigated – which these data represent – are likely to be credible," Costa explained. "But that also means that the violations that are investigated and detected are probably just the tip of the iceberg."

There is also less money and staff to investigate violations than ever before. The Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division's budget has been slashed, and there is roughly only one investigator for every 175,000 workers, says EPI. In 2019, there were just 780 investigators, fewer than nearly 50 years ago.

In general, U.S. farmworkers struggle with some of the lowest wages in the country and suffer "an above-average rate of workplace injuries", the report found – issues that have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

Farms that rely on farm labor contractors are a textbook example of a 'fissured' workplace, where the relationship between the worker and the lead employer is fissured, or broken, via the use of a temp agency or subcontractor.

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