

H-2A Agricultural Workers – Commercial Fishermen

Summary

H-2A workers are authorized to work in the U.S. agriculture industry (i.e., farming and fishing) under temporary, nonimmigrant status. The program was started to bridge the gap between the demand for and shortage of agricultural workers. H-2A employees are tax-paying workers who have lawful admission into the U.S. for a contractual period (e.g., 9 months) and are guaranteed certain hours, wages, housing benefits, and travel costs. From research conducted with H-2A workers in the Gulf of Mexico, **we found that workers had difficulty accessing healthcare in the U.S. and had a heightened risk for workplace injury.**

Background



After this was taken a shrimp cage fell, split his head, and he started seizing. He did not seek medical attention.

- Fishermen are an understudied population with a **fatality rate nearly 30x higher** than the national average, including **hazardous working conditions, strenuous labor, long work hours, and harsh weather.**
- Fishermen harvest over 283 million pounds of shrimp valued at nearly \$531 million, with Gulf of Mexico generating 76% of the national total.
- Total number of fishermen vary between 40,000 and 115,000. Regardless of the official number, this is undoubtedly an underestimate given the **vast number of vulnerable populations in the industry, including im/migrant workers.**

"All jobs have risks...this one is just a lot more, but this is the type of jobs the majority of immigrants have to get. That's just the way it is."-H-2A Worker

What the Evidence Says

Worker Health

Many fishermen 1) do not have personal health insurance and 2) use emergency healthcare services but not primary healthcare. Their lack of health care options varied, but included lack of coverage, little time to make appointments between trips, financial and language barriers, and lost, stolen, or incorrect citizenship documents.

"I lost all my teeth in a crash. My nose was cut open and everything in my mouth. I didn't want to call the Coast Guard. The boss wanted me to return to land but I need the money, I needed to work, so I put up with it at sea with pills for pain and infection to handle the trip." -H-2A Worker

Workplace Injury

- Workers described traumatic experiences, like falling overboard or watching another crewmate fall overboard.
- Non-fatal work-related injury is a leading cause of suicide, opioid misuse, and overdose death, with **higher opioid use in those with heavy physical jobs, more precarious work, and limited health care benefits.**
- Social and economic factors, such as language barriers and incentives to work while ill, contribute to increased health and safety risk. As an example, workers reported that **an absence of sick leave benefits** influenced their choice to delay medical care or work while sick.

Potential Policy Solutions

- Improved access to mental and physical healthcare services
- Paid sick leave benefits
- Visas that do not obligate workers to a specific employer

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References available upon request