



The following piece is excerpted from *In the Strawberry Fields* by Eric Schlosser which originally appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1995. It has been shortened and adapted for this lesson.

Labor Conditions in Strawberry Fields

When the sun rises from behind the coastal range, crews of thirty assemble at the edges of huge fields and start picking strawberries, slowly making their way down the long furrows, hundreds of men and women bent over at the waist, grabbing fruit with both hands. In the early-morning light it looks like a scene out of the distant past, the last remnant of a vanishing way of life—and yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Twenty years ago there were about 800 acres of strawberries in the Santa Maria Valley; today there are about seven times that number. The strawberry is one of the most labor-intensive row crops. It is risky and expensive to grow. On the same land outside Guadalupe where family farms raised dairy cows not long ago, strawberry farms now employ thousands of migrant workers. Most of these migrants are undocumented immigrants¹ from Mexico, a fact that helps explain not only California's recent strawberry boom but also the quiet, unrelenting transformation of the state's rural landscape and communities.



Philip L. Martin is a professor of agricultural economics at the University of California at Davis and one of the nation's foremost authorities on farm-labor demographics. According to his estimates, during the 1920s there were some two million migrant farm workers in the United States. During the 1940s there were about one million. And during the early 1970s, when Cesar Chavez's labor-organizing drive among migrant workers was at its height, there were only about 200,000. Then the number began to climb. Today it is impossible to gauge the size of the migrant workforce with any precision, among other reasons because so much of it is composed of undocumented immigrants. Martin believes that 800,000 to 900,000 migrant farm workers are now employed in the United States. And not only are there far more migrants today but they are being paid far less. The hourly wages of some California farm workers, adjusted for inflation, have fallen 53 percent since 1985. Migrants are among the poorest workers in the United States. The average migrant worker is a twenty-eight-year-old male, born in Mexico, who earns about \$5,000 a year for twenty-five weeks of farm work. His life expectancy is forty-nine years.

¹In the original article, the author wrote the phrase "illegal immigrants." The Edible Schoolyard has changed every instance of that phrase to "undocumented immigrants" for a few reasons. First, the term "illegal" is misleading and implies criminality and guilt. Second, the phrase illegal is dehumanizing and is used to discriminate against immigrants and people of color.

Agriculture is still California's largest industry, and the fastest-growing and most profitable segment of California's farm economy—the cultivation of high-value specialty crops—has also become the one most dependent on the availability of cheap labor. Nearly every fruit and vegetable found in the diets of health-conscious, often high-minded eaters is still picked by hand: every head of lettuce, every bunch of grapes, every avocado, peach, and plum. As the demand for these foods has risen, so has the number of workers necessary to harvest them. Of the migrants in California today, anywhere from 30 percent to 60 percent, depending upon the crop, are undocumented immigrants. Their willingness to work long hours for low wages has helped California to sustain its agricultural production—despite the loss since 1964 of more than seven million acres of farmland. Fruit and vegetable growers in the state now rely on a thriving black market in labor—and without it more farms would disappear. Undocumented immigrants, widely reviled and depicted as welfare cheats, are in effect subsidizing the most important sector of the California economy.

The rise of the strawberry industry is in many ways emblematic of changes that swept California agriculture during the 1980s. The strawberry has become the focus of a California industry whose annual sales exceed half a billion dollars. American farmers now receive more money for fresh strawberries each year than for any other fresh fruit grown in the United States except apples. And strawberry pickers are not only the poorest migrants but also the ones most likely to be undocumented immigrants. During the recent strawberry harvest I spent weeks traveling through three regions in California where the fruit is commercially grown, meeting workers, farmers, academics, and farm-labor activists. My trip took me through the Santa Maria Valley, where rural poverty has recently become entrenched and where cruel sharecropping arrangements have trapped farm workers under mountains of debt; through the area around Watsonville and Salinas, where about half the state's strawberries are grown and where this year's heavy rains made many hard lives even harder; and through northern San Diego County, where the needs of farmers and real-estate developers increasingly conflict, and where a migrant workforce lives in Third World shanty towns within throwing distance of expensive suburban homes. In the strawberry fields of California, I believe, one may find answers to many of the pressing questions raised by immigration [reform advocates,] along with some ethical questions that are much more difficult to resolve.

References:

Schlosser, E. (November, 1995). *In the Strawberry Fields*. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/11/in-the-strawberry-fields/305754/>