

## A Golden Age: California's Aging Immigrant Workforce and its Implications for Safety Net Policy

### INTRODUCTION

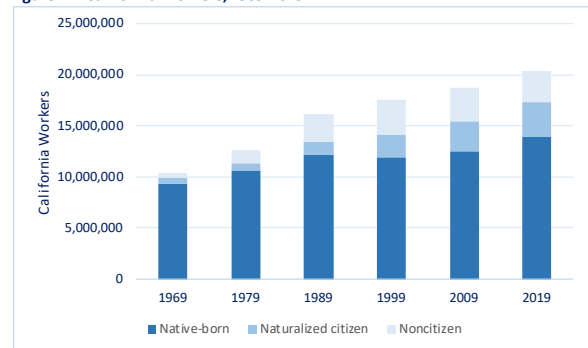
California's workforce is aging, much like that of the rest of the nation and the advanced industrialized world (Myers 2013). An increasing number of persons are reaching retirement age while fewer are reaching adulthood—posing unprecedented social and economic challenges in the modern era.

This brief tracks changes across several recent decades, drawing upon US Census Bureau Decennial Census and American Community Survey data to examine the implications of aging among California's noncitizen and undocumented workforce lacking access to the social and economic safety net. These developments are particularly pronounced in industries in which noncitizen workers concentrate (niche industries), particularly farm work.

### CALIFORNIA LABOR MARKET GROWTH

The total number of California workers (those earning wages from an employer) has grown across the past half-century. In 1969, California workers numbered 10,391,000 (see figure 1.1). This increased to 12,637,140 by 1979, owing to demographic trends such as baby boomers aging into the labor market and the beginning of a historic wave of migration from Mexico to the US. By 1989, the California labor market increased to 16,122,000 workers.

Figure 1.1 California Workers, 1969-2019



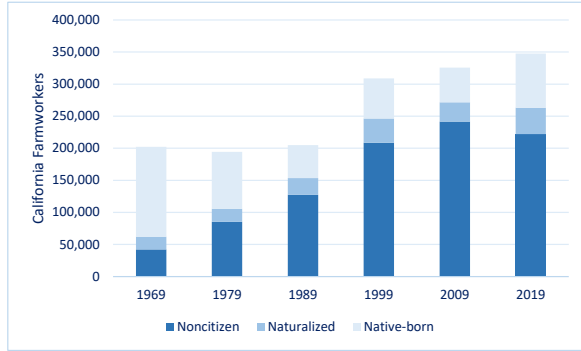
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

Sustained migration from Mexico continued to increase the size of the California labor market at the turn of the twenty-first century. In 1999, California workers numbered 17,510,486, and by 2009 that figure increased to 18,736,740. However, by 2007 Mexican migration to the US began to shrink while many migrants moved to states with a lower cost of living or returned home (Budiman 2020).

By 2019, the California workforce had increased to 20,340,418, though by this time native-born workers began aging into retirement as immigrants played a key role in sustaining labor market growth.

California farm work, a major point of entry and settlement for many Mexican migrants in the late twentieth century, increased in number of jobs from 1979 to 2019. In 1969, a majority of California's 202,100 farm-workers were native-born (see figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 California Farmworkers by Citizenship, 1969-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

However, that soon shifted. By 1979, a majority of California's 194,220 farmworkers were foreign-born.

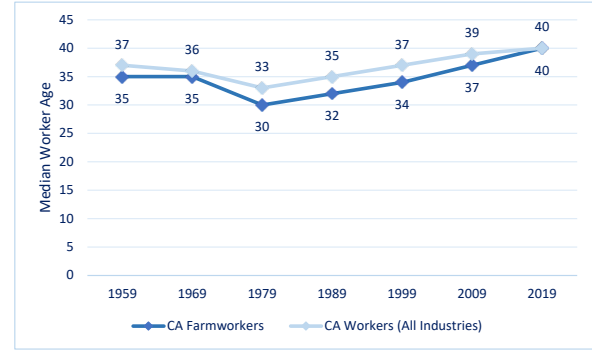
As Mexican migration increased in the 1980s and 1990s, so too did California's farmworkers, from 194,220 in 1979, to 204,745 in 1989, to 308,982 by 1999. As migration from Mexico slowed in the mid-2000s, however, the number of California farmworkers increased only modestly, to 325,608 in 2009 and 347,661 by 2019. The decade between 2009 and 2019 saw the first decline in California's immigrant farm workforce in the modern era.

## AGING WORKERS

The age of California workers first declined then increased across the late twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, owing to major demographic changes. In the 1970s, following the entry of many baby boomers and immigrants into the labor market, the median age of a California worker decreased.

In 1969, the median age for a California worker was thirty-six years, but by 1979 that figure declined to thirty-three years (see figure 2.1). The same pattern was also observed among farmworkers—though much more pronounced. In 1969, the median age of a California farmworker was

Figure 2.1 California Workers and Farmworkers Median Age, by Year



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1960-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

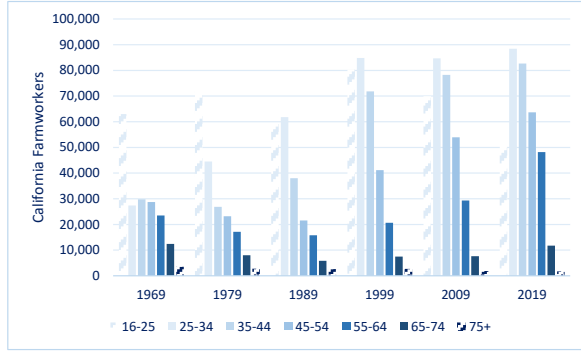
thirty-five years, but by 1979 that figure had decreased five years, to thirty years.

In the four decades that followed, from 1979 to 2019, the median age of a California worker increased seven years, from thirty-three to forty years (see figure 2.1). Again, among the state's farmworkers a much more pronounced pattern was observed. In 1979 the median California farmworker was thirty years old, but by 2019 the average age had increased ten years to forty years of age.

The most recent decade has witnessed a significant shift in the age distribution of California farmworkers. In 2019, California farmworkers aged 16-25 only numbered 51,235, while those aged 55-64 numbered 48,161 (see Appendix A, table 1). At no point between 1969 and 2019 did California have fewer farmworkers aged 16-25, or more farmworkers aged 25-64 (see figure 3.1). In fact, the 64% increase in California farmworkers aged 55-64, between 2009 and 2019, is unprecedented in the modern era.

While some farmworkers continue to work past the age of seventy-five, the above findings indicate that in the following decade we should expect a wave of retiring farmworkers unlike any other in the state's modern history.

Figure 3.1 California Farmworkers by Age, by Year



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

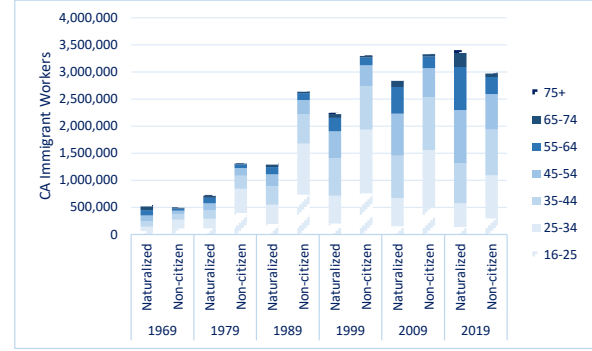
### AGING WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

Not all workers enjoy a safety net. Established in the 1930s as part of New Deal reforms, Unemployment Insurance and Social Security provide an economic safety net for American workers—yet only legal permanent residents have access to benefits from such programs. Undocumented workers are not eligible for Unemployment Insurance benefits or Social Security benefits.

The Pew Hispanic Center utilizes official statistics and census data to estimate that, nationally, 42% of US noncitizen immigrants are undocumented (Budiman 2020). While Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data do not ask about legal residence, they do provide estimates of the number of noncitizens. We apply the Pew Hispanic Center's national estimate, that 42% of noncitizen immigrants are undocumented, to the ACS' estimates of California noncitizens.

We estimate that in 2019 California's noncitizen workforce was 2,984,821, of which roughly 1,253,625 were undocumented (see Appendix A, table 2). Among noncitizen workers, 9,558 were 75 years of age or older, 67,960 were 65 to 74 years old, and another 316,539 were aged

Figure 4.1 Immigrant Workers by Citizenship and Age, 1969-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

55-64. We also estimate that undocumented workers aged 75 and over numbered 4,014, while 28,543 were aged 65-74, and 132,946 were aged 55-64.

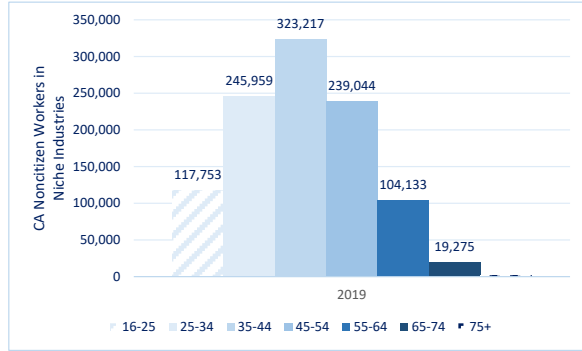
In no decade since Mexican mass migration began in the 1970s has California had fewer noncitizen workers aged 16-25 (see figure 4.1). In addition, in no decade since have there been more noncitizen workers aged 55-64, 65-74, or 75 and above.

In the following decade we should expect a wave of workers retiring with no safety net at numbers unlike any other in the state's modern history.

### NONCITIZEN NICHE INDUSTRIES

Noncitizen workers cluster in several different California industries. In 2019, ten industries in California had rates of noncitizen workers at or above 23% (see Appendix A, table 3). These included agriculture (59%); forestry, fishing, and hunting (53%); landscaping (50%); animal production and aquaculture (48%); animal slaughtering and processing (32%); construction (27%); building services (26%); traveler accommodation (24%); restaurants and food services (24%); warehousing and storage (23%).

Figure 4.2 California Noncitizen Workers in Top-10 Niche Industries, by Age, 2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS American Community Survey 2019 data

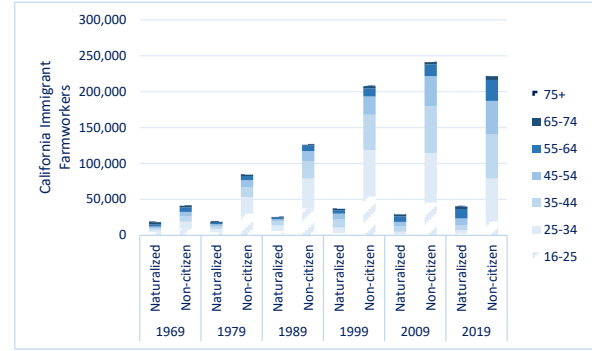
In all but one of California's top ten niche industries for noncitizen workers the median age of a worker was at or above the state median for a worker. This included animal slaughtering and processing (51); forestry, fishing and hunting (50); animal production and aquaculture (45); traveler accommodation (45); landscaping (42); building services (42); construction (41); warehousing (41); and agriculture (40). Restaurants/ food services was the only top ten niche industry for noncitizen workers with a median age (38) below the state median.

In California's top ten niche industries for noncitizen workers, there were 239,044 noncitizen workers aged 45-54, 104,133 aged 55-64, and 19,275 aged 65-74 (see figure 4.2). In contrast, there were only 117,753 noncitizen workers aged 16-25, indicating challenges for employers to retain workers in some of the state's niche industries for noncitizen workers in an era of aging migrants and stagnating migration.

### FARMWORKERS WITHOUT SAFETY NET

The effects of a shift towards larger numbers of noncitizen workers, and away from younger workers and towards an aging workforce, is particularly consequential for California farm work. Since the California

Figure 4.3 Immigrant Farmworkers by Citizenship and Age, 1969-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

farm workforce shifted towards being mostly immigrant in the 1970s, a large majority has become noncitizen—and, in recent years, much older.

In 2019, California noncitizen farmworkers outnumbered naturalized citizen farmworkers by a ratio of 5.4 to 1 (see Appendix A, table 4). And noncitizen farmworkers, however, an increasing number were older compared with previous decades. California noncitizen farmworkers aged 16-25 numbered only 19,351, the lowest figure since the historic wave of 1970s Mexican migration (see figure 4.3).

In the same time period, however, older age groups of California noncitizen farmworkers grew. In 2019, California noncitizen farmworkers aged 45-54 numbered 46,393; those aged 55-64 numbered 29,276; those aged 65-74 numbered 5,350; and those aged 75 and above numbered 258.

Assuming that at least 42% of noncitizen farmworkers are undocumented, up to 14,651 farmworkers lacking any form of economic safety net are currently at retirement age or will reach it within the next few years, with another 19,485 to soon follow.

## REFERENCES

Myers, Dowell. 2013. California's Diminishing Resource: Children. Special Report, Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. Los Angeles: USC Population Dynamics Research Group.

Budiman, Abby. 2020. Key Findings About U.S. Immigrants. Pew Research Center. August 2020. Retrieved online on February 21, 2023 at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>

## APPENDIX A. TABLES

**Table 1. California Farmworkers by Age, 1969-2019**

Age	1969	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019
16-25	63,000	71,800	59,089	80,374	69,940	51,235
25-34	27,400	44,500	61,812	84,820	84,667	88,440
35-44	29,800	26,860	37,997	71,833	78,219	82,646
45-54	28,700	23,160	21,562	41,137	53,929	63,665
55-64	23,500	17,140	15,816	20,638	29,323	48,161
65-74	12,400	8,020	5,855	7,492	7,666	11,783
75+	3,500	2,740	2,614	2,688	1,864	1,731

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

**Table 2. Immigrant Workers by Citizenship and Age, 1969-2019**

	1969		1979		1989		1999		2009		2019	
	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen
16-25	63,200	111,100	114,920	398,380	194,837	734,678	200,655	759,545	153,628	487,324	138,942	299,811
25-34	82,200	161,700	175,260	444,720	354,653	941,024	517,441	1,177,324	519,980	1,074,119	434,980	791,844
35-44	104,300	108,000	156,800	243,320	340,975	542,270	689,725	800,159	778,918	974,998	744,642	844,160
45-54	101,300	57,800	128,840	139,780	219,485	265,743	495,424	386,406	779,465	535,811	978,070	654,949
55-64	98,300	40,100	99,920	68,760	136,198	125,519	248,890	143,268	492,146	212,755	793,642	316,539
65-74	72,500	18,400	41,880	18,120	48,366	29,294	71,190	32,480	115,144	43,064	261,497	67,960
75+	20,900	5,300	14,540	4,620	17,926	7,428	23,398	8,614	24,215	6,736	53,303	9,558
	544,800	506,300	732,160	1,317,700	1,312,440	2,645,956	2,246,723	3,307,796	2,863,496	3,334,807	3,405,076	2,984,821

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS 1970-2000 Decennial Census data and American Community Survey 2009 and 2019 data

**Table 3. Top-Ten California Noncitizen Niche Industries**

Industry	Noncitizen	
	Noncitizen	Median Age
Agriculture	59%	40
Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	53%	50
Landscaping	50%	42
Animal production and aquaculture	48%	45
Animal slaughtering and processing	32%	51
Construction	27%	41
Building services	26%	42
Traveler accommodation	24%	45
Restaurants/ food services	24%	38
Warehousing and storage	23%	41

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS American Community Survey 2019 data

**Table 4. Immigrant Farmworkers by Citizenship and Age, 1969-2019**

	1969		1979		1989		1999		2009		2019	
	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen	Naturalized	Noncitizen
16-25	4,600	9,000	4,200	30,240	5,847	37,364	2,815	53,569	1,374	45,750	2,351	19,351
25-34	3,200	9,900	4,820	23,280	7,852	41,807	8,217	64,732	3,592	69,031	4,583	59,848
35-44	2,100	7,700	3,640	13,060	5,803	24,362	11,529	49,492	7,549	64,985	6,861	61,437
45-54	2,300	6,100	2,700	10,080	2,795	13,721	7,645	25,608	6,272	41,739	9,790	46,393
55-64	3,100	6,100	1,980	5,980	2,308	7,588	4,887	11,112	7,744	16,355	12,996	29,276
65-74	3,100	2,500	1,860	2,000	1,078	1,701	1,935	3,219	2,747	3,399	3,835	5,350
75+	700	600	860	640	567	760	703	756	805	392	770	258
Total	19,600	42,400	20,060	85,280	26,250	127,303	37,731	208,488	30,083	241,651	41,186	221,913

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.