



CALIFORNIA

## Hard lives in California's fields: 'The American dream eats us alive'

Farmworkers harvest melons at a California farm. "Life is hard here," one worker said. "But it's good because you can make money."



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Photography by Robert Gauthier

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- Undocumented farmworkers have formed the backbone of California agriculture for more than a century, yet they face mounting fears of ICE raids under the Trump administration.
- Workers spend six-day weeks picking fruit in scorching heat, a job many Americans aren't willing to do.
- Aging workers labor 'until the body gives out,' driven by dreams that their children — some college-educated — will escape lives spent harvesting crops.

The American squatted in the dirt, struggling to free the cantaloupe from its prickly stem, almost toppling over.

On either side, men bent at the waist, clearing fruit with one quick sweep of the knife and moving on to the next. The American fell further behind.

The men laughed as she stumbled about, ever more sunburned. But there was no mocking in their laughter. They knew what it was like to be American, if only because their children are.

Many of the workers had emigrated from the same agricultural town in Sinaloa. They had worked on their parents' farms, before crossing illegally into the U.S. They teased one another, complained about overbearing mothers-in-law and celebrated milestones, like a daughter's quinceañera.

In the three months of harvest that brought them together, they endured six-day workweeks, picking mini watermelons and cantaloupes in summer temperatures that sometimes topped 100 degrees. One day's work at the peak of the season could yield 12,000 watermelons for just one crew.



A farmworker starts the day around 6:30 a.m., cutting vines to free watermelons the next crew will pick up.

I stood in this cantaloupe field in rural California, among seemingly endless lines of fruit waiting to be plucked on a Tuesday this fall. I was the only American-born picker

here.



Esteban Rodriguez, who has worked around 40 seasons or so, gently took a knife from my hand.

“I’ll cut them and hand them to you,” he offered, a compromise that would keep me from bending over every few feet.

As Trump has directed ICE and Border Patrol to [nab more undocumented immigrants](#), dramatic images have mostly focused on raids in cities. America’s agricultural fields have, perhaps surprisingly given prior immigration enforcement there, taken a back seat.

There have been agricultural raids, including in Oxnard, where video captured immigration authorities chasing a farmworker across a strawberry field, and at a cannabis farm in Camarillo where a fieldworker plunged from a roof to his death trying to evade capture. But President Trump has also [acknowledged pressure](#) from farmers, who say his aggressive immigration crackdown is taking away longtime workers.

Besides, the president told CNBC in August: “These people do it naturally.” He signaled that he was open to finding a way for agricultural workers to do the jobs legally.

1. Some of the farmworkers harvesting this field lack papers, but some obtained legal status under the amnesty bill signed by President Reagan in 1986. 2. A farmworker directs Times Staff Writer Brittny Mejia, who joined the crew to harvest watermelons and, the following week, cantaloupe.

That did not blot out the fear in many fields that raids could happen at any moment. But a far stronger feeling pervaded fields such as this one: That for now, as in the past, one simply had to work because everything counted on it.

A man in his 60s, his eyebrows and hair going white, who planned to work until his body gave out and wondered how much longer he had. An undocumented mother worried more for her son, a college graduate whose deportation protection feels under threat. A woman on a tourist visa working illegally to earn enough to hold her over when she returns to Mexico — until the next harvest brings her north again.

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CALIFORNIA

**California's child farmworkers: Exhausted, underpaid and toiling in toxic fields**

Nov. 20, 2025

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To capture the current climate on farms, a photographer and I joined this crew as they harvested mini watermelons and cantaloupes. Although some of the workers have legal status, The Times agreed not to name the farm or where it's located.

After three days of muscle-aching work — not even full days — I learned the skill that goes into harvesting fruit we take for granted in grocery stores, the sacrifices families make and the lengths people go to so they can work in an industry in which some Americans don't last beyond a week.

As the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, I never felt more American.

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Farmworkers take a lunch break from harvesting watermelons. In the first two hours of work that day, they filled 350 boxes with 2,300 melons.

By the time I arrived at the farm in September, crews were in the final weeks of the harvest.

Months earlier, in March, farmworkers had used a machine to drop each little plant, grown in a greenhouse, into the moistened soil. After about 70 days, the harvest arrived and it was time to find workers.

This year, one of the crews that had served the farm for 10 years didn't show. They were from out of state and the owner suspected they feared getting on the road due to the raids. Under Trump, it's [hard for workers to tell how safe they will be](#) in different places.

“Trump came out saying we've got to do something for the farmers — farmworkers. And then the next day [Homeland Security Secretary] Kristi Noem says, no we're going to deport them all,” said the owner of the farm, a Trump supporter, who has been confused by the mixed messaging. “We don't know what to think. Who's going to make the final decision?”

“I want people to know how important farmworkers are to us and everything. But today, there's people who say, 'I don't care, deport them,’” he said. “This is not a time to stand up and say we're pro-immigrant ... because they'll send ICE at us.”

On the farm, everyone has to fill out forms that require documents showing they're authorized to work.

"They may come with somebody else's documents that are valid. To us, we're not going to dispute that, we're not going to say, 'This isn't yours.' We don't know," the owner said. "The worker themselves, of course he's not getting the benefit of everything. He can't get unemployment, he's not getting the Social Security benefits. But he's happy to do it, because he's happy to get his paycheck."

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**Lax oversight, few inspections leave child farmworkers exposed to toxic pesticides**

Nov. 20, 2025

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Americans rarely show up looking for work, the owner said. The ones who do are usually children of immigrants.

It's not always steady work. After a field is picked clean, workers have to find their next job, sometimes hundreds of miles away or more.

Some farmworkers, he said, may have "five different jobs in a year with five different farmers and maybe even five different crops."

"Americans, I think they would not like that, to go from one job to another to another," he said.

The last time non-Latino white Americans had come to work there, the owner said, was around five years ago. They worked a week picking melons, got their \$600 paycheck and never returned.

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Farmworkers heave watermelons onto a flatbed where other workers place them inside boxes.

“Are you going to bring *la migra* down on us?” a farmworker charged with stacking the boxes joked from his position on a flatbed.

“We’re all good kids here,” another said, prompting a laugh from the workers.

It was not yet 7 a.m. on my first day in a field of mini watermelons, the green fruit stretched out as far as the eye could see. I wore a long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans and a gray hat I had purchased the night before. My skin was tinged white from SPF 70 sunscreen.

The crew members, led by longtime foreman Raul, wore jeans, sneakers, steel-toed boots and bandannas. At the head of their operation was the tractor driver, who pulled a flatbed hitched to the harvest machine.

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CALIFORNIA

**A day in the strawberry fields seems like forever**

May 3, 2013

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Seeing I was confused and trying to find a place for myself in this operation, 62-year-old Esteban called me over to his row, “so I could get some exercise.” He warned me that just the other day a woman on a different crew had overheated from the sun,

fainted and had to go to the hospital.

“Even if it’s hot and you’re not thirsty, you need to drink water so your body will stay hydrated,” he said. “The sun is dangerous.”

Like the men on the line, I pulled on white cotton gloves and, as the machine inched forward, began lifting watermelons from the ground, up onto the table above me where the packers waited. The melons had already been freed from the vine by the cutters, farmworkers well-versed in when the fruit is ripe.

That day, I was lucky for a lot of reasons. For one, they had already made passes of this field and so I went several feet without having to bend down to pick up fruit. And temperatures were in the low 80s, nothing like summer days. My biggest complaint for the first hour?

“This is boring,” I told Esteban.

He burst out laughing.

“You’re just not used to it,” he said. “If you had no choice, you would be.”

Like the experienced farmworkers, Mejia wore white cotton gloves to harvest the fruit.

Esteban had left his parents’ farm in Sinaloa in northern Mexico at 17 and came here,

like everyone else, searching for the fabled American dream. He worked the land, as he'd done back home, earning enough to later support five children, but enduring the hardship that came with being undocumented.

There were years, in the 1980s, when *la migra* was a familiar sight, chasing and tackling workers who had no criminal record but were in the country illegally. Esteban himself was caught and deported, although he said he escaped more times than he was captured. Back then, he said, the border was less secure and workers were often back in the fields by the next day.

It wasn't until after President Reagan's amnesty came in 1986 — the last major comprehensive immigration reform — that Esteban had a pathway to legal status. The other men on the line, in their 50s and 60s, had similarly gotten amnesty after years toiling in the fields.

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**Voices**

**Arellano: Former bracero doesn't want the program to return. 'People will be treated like slaves'**

Oct. 10, 2025

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But these men are part of an aging workforce, with a 64% increase in California farmworkers ages 55 to 64, between 2009 and 2019, according to a UC Merced Community and Labor Center report. In the following decade, the report warned, there'd be “a wave of retiring farmworkers unlike any other in the state's modern history.”

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1. The farm owner says few American-born people apply for harvesting jobs and those that do don't last long. 2. Farmworkers had picked most of the watermelons in a field days earlier, but returned to harvest the remaining fruit once it was ripe.

Esteban kept working out of necessity. How long did he plan to keep going?

“*Hasta el cuerpo aguante,*” he said. Until his body gives out.

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By the time we broke for lunch, around two hours after we started, we had already

covered nearly 1,000 feet and filled 350 boxes. We'd picked up 2,300 watermelons.

"You can put that you picked up 500," Raul told me. (It was probably closer to 100.)

Inside a trailer, the farmworkers spread out on wooden benches. A couple of men flipped tortillas by hand on a small grill. Others chugged soda to give them energy.

"*Quieres taquitos? Andale,*" they said, offering food to one another, including me.

Rosario, the foreman's wife, had woken up at 4:30 a.m., as she always does, to make the couple a lunch of homemade tortillas, green beans and refried beans. (That was nothing, she told me. She once made breakfast for 10 farmworkers before going to the hospital to have her youngest son.)

The men watched videos on their phones and teased one another about their love lives. Even I was teased, with Raul saying I was already as red as the crew would get in the peak of summer.

"Do a lot of Americans come here to work?" I asked.

"More so Mexican Americans. American Americans, no," he said. He called out their two newest crew members, who sat quietly in a corner, asking if they were American-born.

One was the child of Mexican immigrants but born here; the other, 23-year-old Angel, was born in Mexico, but his mom brought him over illegally when he was 12.

They'd been working with the crew for only three weeks, after answering a Facebook post seeking help with the harvest. That morning, the workers had teased them for not showing up early to help, but Angel had wanted to sleep in.

During the harvest season, workers spend six days on the job with only one day off.

Angel has [worked in the fields](#) since the eighth grade, after his mom bought him a Social Security card and an identification card for \$150. The ID has his picture on it, but the name of someone he doesn't know. That's the name that comes on his checks and whom he signs in as when he works.

"That's how mostly everybody in the field works," Angel said. "Even if you work under a fake social, they still take the taxes away. It's not like you're not paying taxes for your stuff."

After half an hour, the workers packed up their food and headed into the field once more.

"Back to the American dream," a farmworker joked.

*"El sueño Americano nos consume,"* Raul said. "The American dream eats us alive."

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A tractor hauls a load of melons. During the peak of the season, one crew could harvest 12,000 watermelons in one day.

This time, Raul directed me up onto the harvest machine to learn how to sort and pack the fruit. Each box they filled contained different sizes of watermelons, but the one stores wanted most was a six.

As I lifted watermelons from the table, I tried to eyeball them and guess their size. Mirian, the Honduran woman teaching me, shot me down most of the time.

She began working in the fields after arriving from Honduras six years ago, fleeing crime and gangs there. She's raising a 5-year-old son who often asks her to stay home with him instead of leaving him with a babysitter.

"Life is hard here," the 24-year-old said. "But it's good because you can make money. There are no jobs in Honduras."

It took her only seconds to fill each box. If the watermelons were too tightly packed, she put pieces of cardboard between to keep them from bruising one another. If they were loose, she folded a carton in the shape of a heart to fill in the space.

"*Ánimo* Brittny, *ánimo*," Raul shouted, encouragingly. Keep it up!

I must have been looking worn out.

During lulls, Rosario showed off the green, red and white shirts she ordered for her and Raul for the crew's Mexican Independence Day celebration the following week. One of the women joked that her mother-in-law wanted to kill her.

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“Because you took away her son,” Raul said with a smile.

“Mother-in-laws shouldn’t be like that,” Rosario counseled. “I’d be happy they were taking care of my sons.”

“They haven’t taken one from you yet,” Raul teased.

That afternoon, once they’d packed up the machine, Angel and his friend got into their car.

“Are we done for the day?” asked Angel, who already had his Crocs on.

“No,” Raul said with a laugh.

They still had to fan out in the fields to pick up the other varieties of watermelon, but this time without the machine, which is used only for the smaller fruit. It was like a fire bucket brigade, with workers passing the melons down the line to be placed into large boxes on a flatbed, a process the owner called “pitching.”

As we worked, one of the farmworkers, Mimi, who wore two long-sleeved shirts and sunscreen to protect her skin, gave me a pink bandanna to shield my neck. Also from Sinaloa, she has been in the country illegally for 23 years.

She showed me a photo of her three children. Her older son, whom she brought from Mexico when he was 2 years old, has DACA and recently graduated from college with a degree in mechanical engineering. Her middle son is studying to be a pharmacy technician and her daughter, the youngest, had just turned 16 that day.

“They’re my motivation,” she said. “I’m so proud of them.”

Mimi follows the seasons to different crops around the state. Harvesting cherries, she said, is the hardest. She had to scale a ladder and carry the bucket around her neck.

Another farmworker, who declined to give her name, confided that she and her sons had come here on tourist visas and weren’t legally allowed to work. She used her niece’s documents.

Her family had come the last three years. They didn’t want to live here; they just

wanted to make money. Back home, she said a day's work in the fields would earn them only 250 pesos — about \$14.

By working here, her son had been able to build his house back in Mexico. The first year, he put in the floor. The next, the roof. Last year, he installed the windows and doors and added lights.

Both Mimi and the woman on the tourist visa feared what raids could bring. Already, they'd heard rumors of ICE activity nearby.

*“Si nos llega agarrar la migra, perdemos todo,”* the woman with the tourist visa said. “If immigration gets us, we'll lose everything.”

When Raul spotted me at day's end, pink bandanna tied around my neck, he laughed.

“You look like one of us,” he said. *“Ya se fue la reportera.”*

Now, the reporter is gone.

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On Mexican Independence Day in September, farmworkers decorated with papel picado and flags.

The next week, I returned to the fields for Mexican Independence Day.

The sweet smell of cantaloupe hung in the air as the crew decorated the machine with a half-Mexican, half-American flag and red, green and white papel picado with the words “*Viva Mexico.*” At lunch, they would celebrate with Sinaloa-style barbacoa.

Angel and his friend hadn’t returned.

I told the farmworkers how after only two days of work last week, my lower back and my forearms ached. How after each day’s end, I’d collapsed into bed fully clothed, grimy and exhausted. How, even days later, I was still tired.

They told me about heading straight from the field to pick up their children. Getting home and cooking dinner, bathing their children and cleaning. And then starting all over again the next day.

Temperatures rose into the 90s as the farmworkers continued their harvest.

That day, temperatures rose into the 90s. As the crew worked, shirts soaked through with sweat, Rosario played “*Inmigrantes Unidos,*” a song about the “gringos” desire to deport all the working people:

*If they knew what we have suffered to get ahead*

*Day after day we go out to work.*