

From Field to Fork: The Economic Impact of Immigrants on Texas' Food Industry



From farms to restaurants, immigrant workers are essential to the state's \$6.5 billion agricultural export system.

Texas is one of the nation's leading agricultural producers, exporting billions of dollars in goods each year. From farms and ranches to processing plants, warehouses, and restaurants, the state's food system depends on a large and interconnected workforce. Immigrants play a critical role at every stage of this system.

The Food Sector Is a Major Economic Driver in Texas

Agriculture is a major driver of the Texas economy. The state's farms and ranches generate jobs across the agriculture industry and beyond, including food processing workers, truckers, warehouse workers, and others. In 2024, agriculture, food processing, and food services generated \$102.6 billion in economic output in Texas.¹ Immigrants play an outsized role in keeping this economic engine running.

The state exports \$6.5 billion worth of agricultural commodities annually and is responsible for a sizable share of the nation's agricultural exports.²

TEXAS' AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS

Agricultural Commodity	Texas' Share of the Nation's Exports	Texas' Annual Export Value
Cotton	22.7%	\$1.1 billion
Beef and Veal	12.2%	\$1.3 billion
Hides and Skins	10.0%	\$861.4 million
Broiler Meat	8.2%	\$348.9 million
Dairy	7.8%	\$642.2 million
Other Livestock	6.9%	\$299 million
Other Oilseeds and Products	6.3%	\$128.4 million
Rice	5.3%	\$130.5 million
Other Poultry Products	4.8%	\$115.7 million
Other Plant Products	4.7%	\$1.0 billion
Grain Products, Processed	3.5%	\$172.4 million
Feeds & Other Feed Grains	3.4%	\$379.1 million
Wheat	3.2%	\$187.5 million
Corn	1.8%	\$246.6 million
Total	3.9%	\$6.5 billion

Immigrants Are Vital to the Agriculture Industry in Texas

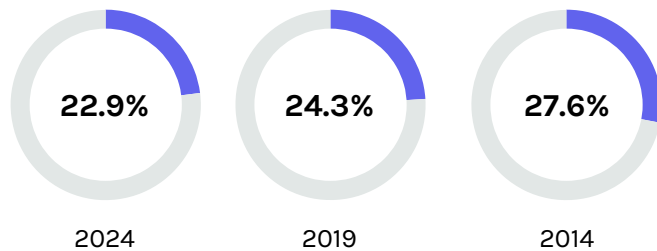
Immigrants play a critical role in Texas' agricultural workforce, supporting the production chain across farms, ranches, and related operations. They are disproportionately represented in the sector and are more likely to be of working age, helping sustain a physically demanding industry. Their contributions are especially important as the agriculture workforce ages and labor shortages persist.

IMMIGRANTS IN TEXAS

	2014	2019	2024
Immigrant Population	4.5 million	4.9 million	5.8 million
Immigrant Share of Population	16.7%	17.1%	18.4%
Immigrant Agricultural Workers	28,400	24,500	23,700
Immigrant Share of Agricultural Workforce	27.6%	24.3%	22.9%

Immigrants are overrepresented in the state's agriculture industry. In 2024, there were 23,700 immigrant workers in agriculture, comprising 22.9 percent of the agricultural workforce, down from 24.3 percent in 2019 and 27.6 percent in 2014.³

Immigrant share of Texas' agricultural workforce:



In 2022, Texas farmers tended to

22,546 acres

of non-citrus fruits, many of which require **hand-labor** for harvesting and processing.

Mechanized harvesting, which relies on machines such as tractors, combines, and specialized harvesters rather than hand labor, remains unavailable or unsuitable for many labor-intensive crops, particularly soft fruits, such as strawberries.⁴ In 2022, Texas farmers tended to 22,546 acres of non-citrus fruits, many of which require hand-labor for harvesting and processing.⁵ Even when mechanization is feasible, the labor hours needed to produce Texas' top crops present immense labor demands, often exceeding the average of 2.9 labor hours per acre across major agricultural products.⁶ For example, potatoes and hay are among Texas' top crops and require 13.9 and 3.1 labor hours on average, respectively.⁷ In 2025, alone, Texas farmers harvested 5.1 million acres of hay and 14,600 acres of potatoes.⁸ When coupled with labor shortages, these labor demands underscore the central role immigrant workers play in sustaining Texas' agricultural output.

Immigrant workers are more concentrated in frontline agricultural occupations, while U.S.-born workers are more frequently represented in management roles. In Texas, 47.8 percent of immigrant agricultural workers are employed as miscellaneous agricultural workers, compared to 26.9 percent of the U.S.-born workers. Meanwhile, 16.1 percent of immigrant workers in the industry hold the positions of agricultural managers, compared to 38.5 percent of the U.S.-born workers.

Immigrants are underrepresented as business owners in the state's agriculture industry. In 2023, 10.9 percent of the 690 agricultural business owners in Texas were immigrants, well below their 22.9 percent share of the state's agriculture workforce.⁹

Demographic Characteristics of Immigrant Agricultural Workers in Texas

In the agricultural workforce, 93.0 percent of immigrants and 84.5 percent of U.S.-born workers were between the ages of 16 and 64. Only 7.0 percent of immigrant workers were aged 65 or older, compared with 15.5 percent of U.S.-born workers, underscoring the role immigrants will continue to play as older workers leave the workforce.

- At least three-quarters of agricultural workers in Texas are male: 80.1 percent of immigrant workers and 76.9 percent of U.S.-born workers.
- Immigrant agricultural workers in Texas are less likely to have a high school diploma than immigrants overall in the state. While 56.5 percent of immigrant agricultural workers lack a high school diploma, only 30.8 percent of immigrants in the state overall did not graduate high school. However, this is still much higher than the share of U.S.-born residents: 12.5 percent of U.S.-born agricultural workers and 7.8 percent of U.S.-born residents overall did not have a high-school diploma.
- About 80.8 percent of immigrants working in agriculture in Texas are Hispanic, followed by non-Hispanic white workers (10.0 percent) and workers of other races (9.2 percent).
- Mexican-born workers make up 71.6 percent of immigrant agricultural workers, substantially higher than their 42.0 percent share of the overall immigrant population in Texas.
- More than two-fifths of the immigrant agricultural workers in the state (44.9 percent) reported they did not speak English well.
- More than four out of five (86.2 percent) of foreign-born agricultural workers in Texas had arrived in the United States more than five years prior. Only 13.8 percent had arrived within the preceding five years.


Immigrants Sustain Texas' Food Sector

Beyond farms and ranches, immigrants are essential across the broader food supply chain—including food processing, transportation, warehousing, retail, and restaurants. These interconnected industries rely on immigrant labor to move food from production to consumers. Immigrants are present at every stage, helping maintain the scale and efficiency of Texas' food system.

Across the food sector,

400,500

immigrant workers make up nearly one-quarter (24.9%) of the workforce.



IMMIGRANTS IN TEXAS' FOOD SECTOR

Industry	Number of Immigrant Workers	Immigrant Share of Workforce
Agriculture	23,700	22.9%
Food Processing	53,000	33.8%
Food Wholesale Trade	20,100	25.5%
Food Retail Trade	61,900	18.6%
Food Services	241,800	25.7%
Total	400,500	24.9%

About 53,000 immigrants are employed in food processing, making up one in three workers (33.8 percent) of all workers in the industry. This includes 16,000 immigrants who make up 39.3 percent of workers in the meatpacking industry. These workers play a vital role in these labor-intensive industries with persistent worker shortages.¹⁰

Immigrants support the movement of food through supply chains, from farms to stores and restaurants. About **25.5%** of workers in wholesale food industries are immigrants. Meanwhile, **18.6%** of food retail workers are immigrants, helping ensure access to food in grocery stores and other retail outlets.

More than one in four food service workers (25.7 percent) are immigrants, highlighting how the state's restaurants, cafes, delis, and food trucks rely on immigrants to staff key frontline positions across the state.

In Texas' food sector, immigrant workers fill key roles across transportation, warehousing, and food preparation. These occupations connect each stage of the food system.

MOST COMMON OCCUPATIONS FOR IMMIGRANTS IN THE FOOD SECTOR, BY INDUSTRY

Industry	Occupation	Number of Immigrant Workers	Share of Immigrant Workers in Each Industry
Agriculture	Miscellaneous Agricultural Workers	11,300	47.8%
Agriculture	Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Agricultural Managers	3,800	16.1%
Food Services	Cooks	76,600	31.7%
Food Services	Waiters and Waitresses	38,500	15.9%
Food Services	Food Service Managers	23,700	9.8%
Food Services	Food Preparation Workers	13,500	5.6%
Food Services	Cashiers	13,100	5.4%
Retail	Cashiers	15,300	24.6%
Retail	First-line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	10,100	16.3%
Retail	Stockers and Order Fillers	6,800	11.0%
Retail	Hand Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers	2,900	4.6%
Retail	Food Preparation Workers	2,700	3.3%
Manufacturing	Packaging and Filling Machine Operators and Tenders	7,600	14.3%
Manufacturing	Hand Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers	4,700	8.9%
Manufacturing	Butchers and Other Meat, Poultry, and Fish Processing Workers	3,900	7.4%
Manufacturing	Food Processing Workers, All Other	3,600	6.8%
Wholesale	Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing	3,100	15.3%

Nearly half of all immigrant food workers (47.7 percent) came from Mexico, followed by El Salvador (6.0 percent), Guatemala (4.9 percent), Honduras (3.6 percent), and Venezuela (3.5 percent).

TOP COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN IN FOOD SECTOR INDUSTRIES

Industry	Birthplace	Number of Immigrant Workers	Share of Immigrant Workers
Agriculture	Mexico	17,000	71.6%
Food Processing	Mexico	27,600	52.1%
Wholesale Trade	Mexico	9,600	47.9%
Retail Trade	Mexico	23,800	38.5%
Retail Trade	El Salvador	6,500	10.5%
Retail Trade	India	4,100	6.6%
Food Services	Mexico	113,000	46.7%
Food Services	Guatemala	14,700	6.1%
Food Services	El Salvador	13,500	5.6%
Food Services	Honduras	11,700	4.9%
Food Services	Venezuela	8,900	3.7%

Immigration Status of Food Workers in Texas

Immigrant workers in Texas' food sector hold a wide range of immigration statuses. About one-fifth (22.3 percent) of these workers, or 89,400 people, are naturalized citizens . About 13,200 (3.3 percent) workers entered the country as refugees.

In the state's agriculture industry alone, **5,300 workers** or one-fifth of the immigrant workforce (22.3%), are naturalized citizens.



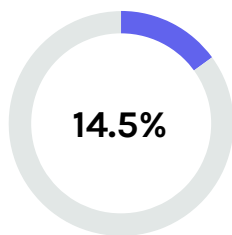
As demand for farm labor has grown, employers have increasingly utilized the H-2A visa program to temporarily hire foreign workers for agricultural jobs. H-2A visas issued to Texas businesses more than tripled between 2017 and 2022, rising from 3,733 to 11,655.¹¹ Nationally, H-2A visa issuance increased by 64.7 percent over the same period, from 224,965 to 370,628.¹²

Top positions with the largest number of certified H-2A workers were:

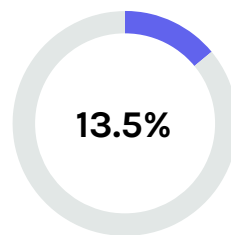
1. Farm labor contractors and crew leaders
2. Support activities for crop production
3. Greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture production

Texas employers also employ temporary foreign workers through the H-2B program¹³ to fill seasonal jobs for which they could not find local labor. Of the 22,516 H-2B visas issued for non-agricultural labor in Texas in 2024, many went to workers in the food industry, including 1,057 fishing and hunting workers, 881 food processing workers, and 336 fast food and counter workers.¹⁴

Despite the increase in the H-2A and H-2B workers, the state continues to face significant labor shortages in the food sector.¹⁵ Undocumented immigrants play an important role in helping meet ongoing labor demands.



About 233,100 immigrants, or 14.5% of Texas' food workers, were undocumented immigrants, including **20,100 DACA-eligible individuals.**



In the agriculture industry alone, 14,000 immigrants, or 13.5% of Texas' agriculture workforce, were undocumented immigrants.

UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS IN TEXAS' FOOD SECTOR

Industry	Undocumented Immigrant Share of Workforce	Undocumented Immigrant Share of Immigrant Workforce
Agriculture	13.5%	58.9%
Food Processing	19.6%	57.9%
Food Wholesale Trade	13.2%	51.8%
Food Retail Trade	8.5%	45.6%
Food Services	15.9%	62.0%
Total	14.5%	58.2%

The state's reliance on workers with a range of immigration statuses, including undocumented workers, across the food industry means that shifts in immigration policy acutely affect workforce stability and the continuity of food production and distribution.

Spotlight:

Immigrant Workers in Houston's Food Sector

In 2024, agriculture and food service workers generated approximately

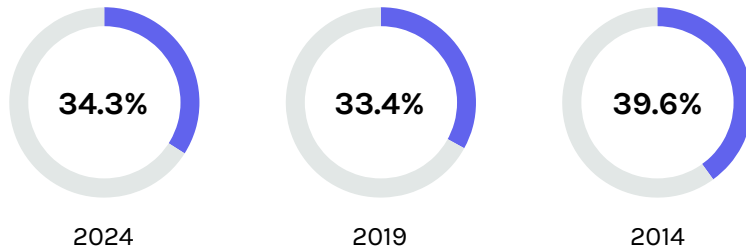
\$2.7M

in GDP in the Houston metropolitan area¹⁷ with immigrants strongly represented in food service, retail, and logistics occupations, helping sustain one of the state's largest regional economies.

In 2024, 2.0 million immigrants called Houston¹⁶ home, making up 25.4 percent of the metro area's total population. This share represents an increase from 2019, when 1.7 million immigrants comprised 23.3 percent of the metro area's population, and 2014, when 1.5 million immigrants comprised 22.8 percent of the population.

Immigrants are overrepresented in Houston's food sector, including agriculture, food processing, food trade, and food services. In 2024, there were 129,000 immigrants working in the food sector, comprising over a third (34.3 percent) of its workforce. This represents an increase since 2019, when 33.4 percent of the sector was comprised of immigrants, and a decrease since 2014, when 39.6 percent was.

Immigrant share of Houston's food sector:



In metro Houston, 29.5 percent of agriculture workers, 29.6 percent of retail food workers, and 35.9 percent of food service workers were immigrants. In particular, 54.5 percent of all cooks in the metro area were immigrants.

34.3%

of all workers in the Houston metro area's food sector in 2024 were immigrants.

35.9%

of all food service workers in the Houston metro area in 2024 were immigrants

54.5%

of all cooks in the Houston metro area are immigrants.

Demographics of Immigrant Food Workers in Houston

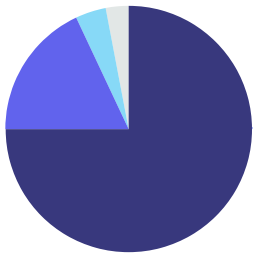
In 2023 in Houston's food sector workforce, 96.1 percent of immigrants and 95.7 percent of U.S.-born workers were between the ages of 16 and 64, while 3.9 percent of immigrants and 4.3 percent of U.S.-born workers were aged 65 and older.

Half of agricultural workers in Houston, Texas were male: 49.6 percent of immigrants and 53.9 percent of U.S.-born were men.

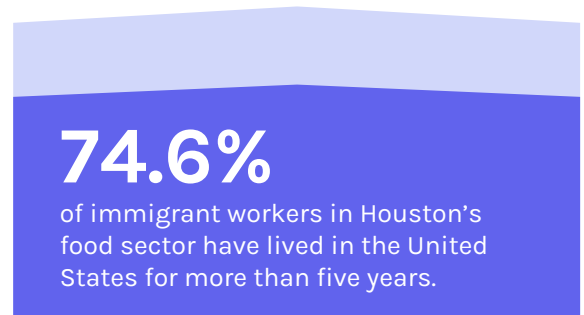
Immigrant food workers in Houston were far more likely to lack a high school diploma than U.S.-born residents in the United States (36.4 percent vs. 12.3 percent).

Mexican-born workers made up 31.1 percent of immigrant workers in Houston's food sector, followed by immigrants from El Salvador (12.0 percent).

Just over half (55.4 percent) of immigrant food workers in Houston were proficient in English, while 44.6 percent had limited English proficiency. The most common languages spoken at home by immigrant food workers with limited English proficiency in 2024 was Spanish (87.3 percent).



About **74.9%** of immigrants working in Houston's food sector are Hispanic, followed by Asian and Pacific Islander (**17.7%**), non-Hispanic white workers (**4.0%**) and workers of other races (3.4%).



Overall, immigrant workers are a vital part of Houston's food sector. They make up a large share of the workforce, filling essential roles across food production, processing, trade, and services. Shifts in immigration enforcement could strain the already-tight labor markets and disrupt the food supply systems. These impacts would extend beyond immigrant workers themselves, affecting businesses, consumers, and communities across metro Houston and the broader Texas economy.

ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "SAGDP2 Gross domestic product (GDP) by state," 2024, https://www.bea.gov/itable/regional-gdp-and-personal-income?_gl=1*1h54frs*_ga*MTgwMDAyODUuMTc3NTI0MTM1OQ.*_ga_J4698JNNFT*czE3NzUyNDQxMDc6bzkZzEkdDE3NzUyNDUxMzUkajM5JGwwJGgw.
2. U.S. Department of Agriculture, "U.S. agricultural exports, commodity detail by State: calendar years 2000-2024," 2026, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-agricultural-trade-data>.
3. Unless otherwise noted, the data comes from the American Immigration Council analysis of the 2024 American Community Survey.
4. Jie Guo et al., "Technology Progress in Mechanical Harvest of Fresh Market Strawberries," *Computers and Electronics in Agriculture* 226 (November 2024): 109468, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compag.2024.109468>; Peilin Li et al., "Review on Fruit Harvesting Method for Potential Use of Automatic Fruit Harvesting Systems," *Procedia Engineering*, PEEA 2011, vol. 23 (January 2011): 351-66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2011.11.2514>.
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service, "2022 Census of Agriculture: Texas State and County Data, table 37. Specified Fruits and Nuts by Acres: 2022 and 2017," https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Texas/st48_1_037_037.pdf; Peilin Li et al., "Review on Fruit Harvesting Method for Potential Use of Automatic Fruit Harvesting Systems," (2011), *Procedia Engineering*, PEEA 2011, vol. 23 (January 2011): 351-66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2011.11.2514>.
6. University of Minnesota Center for Farm Financial Management, "Labor Hour Estimates | Center for Farm Financial Management," <https://www.cffm.umn.edu/finpackkb/finpack-knowledge-base-general/labor-hour-estimates/>.
7. U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, "2022 Texas Agricultural Statistics," October 2022, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Texas/Publications/Annual_Statistical_Bulletin/tx-bulletin-2022-web-updatedlinks.pdf; University of Minnesota Center for Farm Financial Management, FINBIN, 2026, <https://finbin.umn.edu/>.
8. U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, "2025 State Agricultural Overview: Texas," 2025, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=TEXAS.
9. U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Business Survey, 2023, Table AB2300CSCBO, NAICS Sector 11 (Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting), Texas, accessed via data.census.gov, https://data.census.gov/table/ABSCBO2023.AB2300CSCBO?q=AB2300*&g=040XX00US48&codeset=naics-11&nkd=OWNCHAR~EH.
10. U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Farm Labor," 2025, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor>.
11. American Immigration Council, "The Expanding Role of H-2A Workers in U.S. Agriculture," June 11, 2024, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/report/h-2a-workers-us-agriculture/>.
12. See American Immigration Council, "The Expanding Role of H-2A Workers in U.S. Agriculture," June 2024.
13. In order for an employer to obtain an H-2B certification, the DOL must determine that there are not enough U.S. workers available to do the temporary job being petitioned for, and that employing H-2B workers will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of similar workers. Additionally, the need for the worker must be temporary. Certified jobs are not necessarily the jobs filled, though they do indicate a level of demand for temporary foreign-born workers in a particular occupation. More information on the H-2B process can be found here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/programs/h-2b>.
14. U.S. Department of Labor, "H-2B Disclosure Data FY 2024," <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/performance>. Within the fishing and hunting occupations, workers were primarily concentrated in fisheries, operating as deck hands and fishing workers.
15. See U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Farm Labor," 2025.
16. Unless otherwise specified, data comes from the 1-year sample of the American Community Survey (ACS) from 2024 and figures refers to the Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, Texas, Metropolitan Statistical Area
17. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "CAGDP2 Gross domestic product (GDP) by county," 2024, https://apps.bea.gov/itable/?ReqID=70&step=1&_gl=1*1*zhbz7v*_ga*MjAzNjZlODg3Mi4xNzciMTYxNzgx*_ga_J4698JNNFT*czE3NzUx-OTMONTckbzkZzEkdDE3NzUxOTM1NzAkajE3JGwwJGgw#eyJhcHBzPC16NzAsInN0ZXBzljpbMSwYOSwYNSwzMV0sImRh-dGEiOlthlrHymXlSWQilCIIMDEiXSxbik1ham9yXOFyZWEiLCI0IldfQ==.

Thank you to our partners:

