

# Research & Policy Brief Series

## Perceptions of Undocumented Farmworkers in New York State

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### What is the Issue?

New York State (NYS) is a national leader in agriculture, and the sector contributes substantially to the state's prosperity. According to the NYS Office of the Comptroller, nearly a quarter of NYS's total land area is dedicated to agricultural production, supplying regional and national markets with dairy, fruits, vegetables, and floriculture, among other products.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, NYS ranked first nationally for cottage cheese, sour cream, and yogurt production, and second for apples, maple syrup, snap beans, and cabbage production,<sup>2</sup> contributing nearly \$2.4 billion dollars to the state's GDP.<sup>3</sup> This scale of production and impact depends heavily on a qualified and reliable agricultural labor force.

Immigrant workers, particularly undocumented immigrant workers, have contributed significantly to the agricultural industry in the United States,<sup>4</sup> and NYS is no exception. According to the NYS Agriculture Commissioner, half of the state's farmworkers are undocumented immigrants.<sup>5</sup> While the politics surrounding immigration have become highly contentious in recent years, efforts to curb immigration, along with immigration enforcement practices in rural areas, could adversely impact workers as well as agricultural businesses, production, and prices. A national-level study reported that a 50% reduction of immigrant workers could result in the closure of more than 3,500 dairy farms and a 30% increase in milk prices, while the total elimination of immigrant labor could increase milk prices by 90 percent.<sup>6</sup> A 2017 industry report estimated that without undocumented farmworkers, NYS's agricultural output would decrease at least 24% (more than \$1.37 billion) and an estimated 23,490 jobs would be eliminated, including jobs held by U.S. citizens.<sup>7</sup> NYS's premier dairy industry is particularly dependent on undocumented farmworkers, given that its demand for year-round labor cannot be filled through the H-2A federal temporary guest worker program for agriculture.

Public opinion on immigration-related issues can influence public policy. The data and analysis contained in this brief provides NYS policymakers with the latest research on their constituents' opinions and perceptions of the impact of undocumented workers in their own communities.

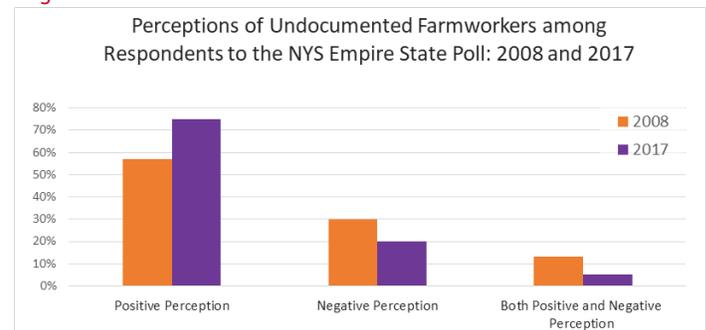
### The Empire State Poll: Surveying NYS residents

In 2008 and 2017 the Cornell Farmworker Program (CFP)<sup>8</sup> commissioned questions on the annual Empire State Poll (ESP)<sup>9</sup>, a telephone survey of a random sample of 800 households across NYS, half upstate, half downstate. In 2008 the CFP commissioned an additional 300 surveys, an oversample, in rural areas (for a total of 1,100 responses in 2008). CFP survey questions focused on respondents' opinions of undocumented farmworkers and their community impacts. Survey interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish according to the preference of the respondent, and collected demographic information about respondents.

### Positive or Negative? Impacts on Communities

In both 2008 and 2017, respondents to the ESP survey were asked "In your opinion, how do undocumented farmworkers impact local communities?" In 2017, 75% of respondents described the impact as positive, a significant increase from nine years prior. In 2008, only a slight majority (56%) of respondents used positive phrases to depict the impact that undocumented farmworkers had on the local community. While 30% of respondents held negative perceptions in 2008, this figure dropped to 20% in 2017. In addition, fewer respondents held mixed perceptions (citing both positive and negative) in the more recent survey than in the past (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



<sup>1</sup> Office of the New York State Comptroller, September 2018, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/economic/agriculture-report-2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Office of the New York State Comptroller, September 2018, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/economic/agriculture-report-2018.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Office of the New York State Comptroller, September 2018, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/economic/agriculture-report-2018.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Labor's latest (2013-2014) National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), foreign-born hired crop workers accounted for 73% of all farmworkers, up from 60% in 1989, and unauthorized hired crop workers accounted for 47% of all farmworkers, a ratio that has fluctuated around 50% since 1999-2000. See <https://www.doleta.gov/news/> and <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor/#legalstatus>

<sup>5</sup> See statement by New York Agriculture Commissioner David Ball, May 2018: <https://www.syracuse.com/news/2018/05/half-of-new-yorks-farm-labor-force-is-here-illegally-what-happens-as-ice-cracks.html>

<sup>6</sup> Texas A&M Agrilife Research, 2015: <https://www.nmpf.org/wp-content/uploads/immigration-survey-090915.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Farm Credit East, March 2017, <https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/pdfs/the-farm-labor-issue-ny.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/programs/farmworker/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://sri.cornell.edu/sri/polls/esp.cfm>

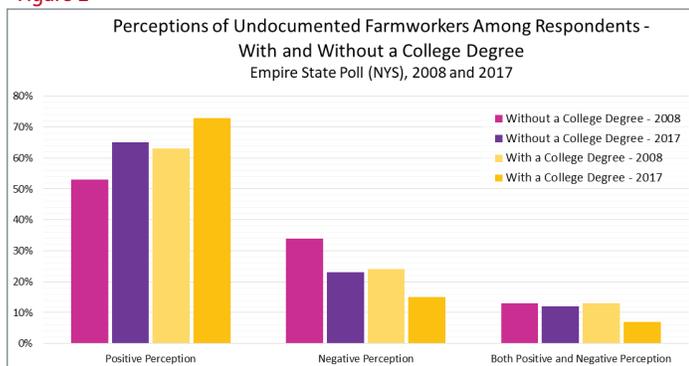
Responses to this survey question were open-ended, allowing respondents to explain why they felt either positive or negative about the impact of undocumented farmworkers on their local community. As an example, in 2017, more than half (52%) cited undocumented farmworkers' contributions to the agricultural economy, with most viewing these contributions as positive. Specifically, many respondents mentioned that farmworkers performed difficult jobs and that their work contributed to keeping food prices relatively low.

## Demographics and Opinions

Do perceptions of farmworkers vary according to respondents' demographic characteristics? Our analyses found that while education levels, political party and religious affiliation were related with these opinions of unauthorized farmworkers' impact in local communities, age, gender, income level, and rural/urban residence were not.

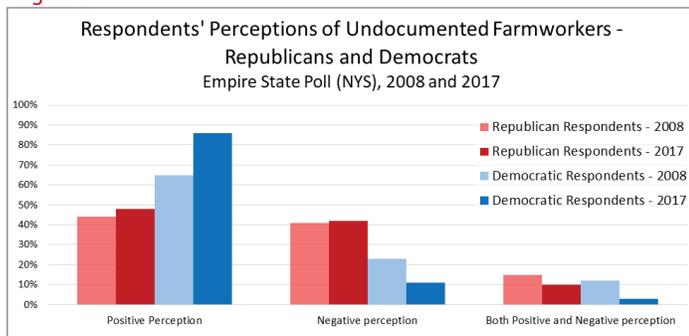
Respondents with a college degree held somewhat more positive views of undocumented farmworkers' impact on local communities than respondents with less education, in both 2008 and 2017, with the proportion of positive responses increasing for both groups over the nine year period (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



New Yorkers' perspectives also varied according to their political party affiliation. Respondents self-identifying as Democrats overwhelmingly cited positive opinions (86%) of undocumented immigrants' impact on their communities in 2017, while not quite half of Republicans (48%) felt the same.

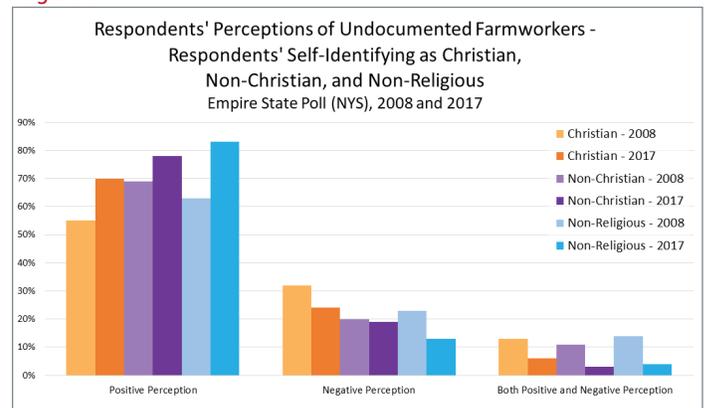
Figure 3



Although the proportion of Democratic respondents indicating positive opinions increased from 65% to 86% between 2008 and 2017, for those identifying as Republicans, the change in positive perspectives was very slight over this time period. Further, while Democratic respondents were less likely to hold negative views in 2017 than in 2008, there was relatively no change over the period among Republican respondents. Among both Republican and Democratic respondents, the proportion indicating a mix of both positive and negative opinions decreased (see Figure 3).

Religious affiliation was also related to New Yorkers' perceptions of undocumented farmworkers' impact. While the majority of respondents identifying as either "Christian" and "Non-Christian" held positive perceptions of undocumented farmworkers in both 2008 and 2017, the proportion of "non-Christians" holding positive views was higher than those held by "Christians" (69% vs. 55% in 2008 and 78% vs. 70% in 2017). Respondents indicating no religious affiliation were the most likely to hold positive views in 2017 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Our analyses indicate that a majority of New Yorkers have positive perceptions of undocumented farmworkers' impact on their local communities, showing an increasing trend over time (with some variation), even when demographic characteristics of the respondents are considered. The findings in this study may provide important guidance as NYS policy makers continue to debate new legislation which would significantly impact unauthorized farmworkers. Legislative debates include allowing immigrants, regardless of immigration status, to apply for driver's licenses (a bill was approved in the NYS Assembly on June 12, 2019, but may face opposition in the state Senate), immigration enforcement activities, the health and safety of workers at farm sites, as well as removing the exclusion of farmworkers from NYS labor laws. The positive views held by a majority of New Yorkers of undocumented farmworkers' impacts may provide support for these and other policy changes that would allow undocumented farmworkers to more fully participate and contribute to community life in New York State.

