

“The ones who are on their best behavior keep coming”: H-2A farmworkers in Idaho

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Abstract

H-2A farmworkers in the United States live in a state of liminality, navigating systemic precarity as they move between their home countries and employment in the U.S. While the H-2A program offers benefits such as legal passage across the bor-

der, a guaranteed minimum wage, housing, and transportation, the program also presents significant challenges. Some scholars claim the H-2A program is akin to modern-day slavery and argue temporary agricultural workers experience unfreedom in their labor. In this paper, we share data related to H-2A farmworkers collected during a 2022 study on pesticide risk and exposure in Idaho.

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Drawing upon interview and survey data, we explore the precarity inherent in the H-2A program, and consider logistical, financial, and socio-emotional challenges facing H-2A workers, highlighting the experiences of a small group of farmworkers in Idaho. Through the analysis of this data, we find evidence that H-2A farmworkers in Idaho experience liminality, precarity, and unfreedom. This paper is a timely call for additional research on H-2A farmworker experiences. We highlight specific issues, concerns, and trends that warrant additional study.

Keywords

farmworkers, H-2A visa, precarity, liminality, unfreedom, Idaho

Introduction

The H-2A visa program has expanded exponentially since the early 2000s. In 2022, there were over 300,000 H-2A farmworkers in the United States (USDA ERS, 2022).¹ But the program is not without criticism. H-2A farmworkers live and work in an uncertain space. They must navigate their work and personal lives in a state of “precarious legal status” (Weiler et al., 2020, p. 144) and “permanent liminality” (Sangaramoorthy, 2019, p. 559). As temporary workers, they spend up to eight months living and working in the United States, returning to their home country each winter. Most H-2A workers come from one of four countries: 93% from Mexico, 3% from South Africa, 2% from Jamaica, and 1% from Guatemala (Martin, 2022). There are very few women working in the H-2A program; 97% of nearly 300,000 H-2A workers are men from Mexico between the ages of 20 and 29 (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2020; data from fiscal year 2018).

Participating in the H-2A program offers several benefits. Farmworkers have legal and safe passage to their employment sites, avoiding the dangerous and sometimes deadly crossing of the U.S.–Mexico border without documentation. They are also guaranteed a minimum wage, housing, sched-

uled trips for groceries, and transportation to and from their home country. H-2A farmworkers can earn up to 10 times the amount they might earn in their home country (Binford & McLaughlin, 2021, p. 267). Many use their earnings to provide financial support to their families through remittances (Costa & Martin, 2018). Perhaps most importantly, individual farmworkers have an opportunity to return to the same farm in future years.

Farm owners and operators also benefit from the H-2A program. They rely on labor recruiters abroad to find employees, saving time and money. Additionally, they do not have to worry about their employees being deported. Many farm owners and operators have expressed frustration about an inadequate labor pool for farm work, and thus some view the H-2A program as way to secure a reliable seasonal workforce. Notably, the growth of the H-2A program parallels a time of rising deportation rates of undocumented farmworkers (Weiler et al., 2020, p. 144).

Despite these benefits, H-2A farmworkers face significant logistical, financial, and socio-emotional challenges. For instance, while the program technically requires a minimum wage, reports indicate that some workers are paid on a piece-rate basis for crop work (Centro de los Derechos Migrante [CDM], 2020). Labor contractors may impose debts during the recruitment process in worker’s home countries (Binford, 2022; CDM, 2020). Housing conditions can be substandard or isolated (Keim-Malpass et al., 2015). Spending up to eight months away from their family can strain relationships with spouses and children (Schmalzbauer, 2015). People who sustain injuries or have accidents—if their cases are reported—risk being sent back to their home countries before the season ends (Farmworker Justice, 2024). H-2A farmworkers can experience social isolation, struggle to find culturally appropriate food, and live with the constant fear they may not be invited back to work the following year at their employer’s discretion (Moorefield 2019).

A 2020 report by the CDM issued a scathing

¹ Throughout this paper we refer to people who work with an H-2A Visa as “H-2A farmworkers.” We note that scholarly and mainstream literature is problematic in the ways in which “farmworker” typically invokes the idea of unskilled labor. We argue *farmworkers are farmers and they are skilled*. However, in this paper we use the term farmworker in order to engage with relevant literature.

review of the H-2A program, finding that “the program is rife with systemic violations of workers legal rights” (p. 4). Similarly, Farmworker Justice (2024), states “violations of the rights of U.S. workers and guest workers by H-2A program employers are rampant and systemic.” Scholars and farmworker advocates have likened the H-2A program to a system rooted in slavery (Guerra, 2004; Gefert, 2002). This lineage is particularly evident for scholars who study the H-2A program (Johnson, 2022, p. 763). Temporary agricultural work has been described as indentured servitude (Ashby, 2008; Costa, 2022; Ashby, 2008), modern-day slavery (United Farm Worker Foundation, 2022)n.d.), transient servitude (Vogel, 2007), debt-bondage (LeBaron, 2014), modern-day servitude (Guerra, 2004), and “economic coercion” and “government sanctioned human trafficking” (CDM, 2020).

Despite the critiques and concerns outline above, there is a lack of ethnographic data on H-2A farmworkers (Binford & McLaughlin, 2021). In this paper we discuss the work and life experiences of 15 H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. While our findings are limited to this small sample, we present this research as emerging and timely. The work and life experiences of H-2A workers in the United States urgently needs increased attention. Approximately 17% of the U.S. agricultural workforce holds H-2A visas (Farm Bureau, 2024), and the program is expected to continue expanding, becoming a fixed institution in U.S. agriculture (Minkoff-Zern et al., 2022). Further, if the mass deportations pledged by the new Trump administration are enacted, the agricultural industry may become even more reliant on H-2A farmworkers in the coming years.

Precarity, Unfreedom, and Liminality

Weiler et al. (2020) discussed precarity among temporary guest farmworkers with the H-2A program. They argue the program “function[s] by legally constructing groups of racialized workers as unfree, precarious and deportable” (Weiler et al., 2020, p. 157). The precarity primarily stems from farmworkers’ inability to switch employers. Be-

cause of this, “the petitioning employer ... holds all the bargaining power” (CDM, 2020, p. 4.) In other words, because the employer has sole discretion on whether to bring the worker back in future years, H-2A farmworkers are not able to negotiate issues such as training for pesticide handling, personal protective gear, and assigned work tasks.

Debt bondage is a form of modern-day slavery (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). According to some studies, hundreds of thousands of H-2A workers are in debt, owing as much as \$27,000² (Cheng, 2025; Verité, 2010, cited in LeBaron, 2014). These debts are typically owed to labor recruiters in Mexico, rather than to the farm owners or labor contractors who employ the workers. Indebted workers lack freedom (are “unfree”) as they are first and foremost obliged to pay the debt they owe recruiters (LeBaron, 2014). The CDM found that most farmworkers arrive at their job site already in debt from recruitment or travel expenses (2020, p. 43). Seventy percent of the H-2A workers interviewed reported receiving only partial reimbursement for travel costs (CDM, 2020, p. 19).

Labor unfreedom is further evident in the strict supervision of H-2A workers. Some supervisors conduct unannounced visits to workers’ housing, searching for alcohol or drugs. While the H-2A program has no formal rules regarding alcohol or drug use, employers have the right to test their employees for drugs at their discretion. H-2A farmworkers also experience unfreedom in their movement. For example, they rely on farm owners and operators for transportation to grocery stores. In rural areas, stores are not often within walking distance, and obtaining a driver’s license or accessing a private vehicle is difficult, if not impossible. The CDM reported that 34% of their participants “described restrictions on their movement, such as not being permitted to leave the employer-provided housing or worksite” (2020, p. 23).

Even at the recruitment stage, applicants face a lack of autonomy. When individuals sign up for the H-2A program, they commit to working for the employer who recruited them for the season. They cannot change employers without quitting, leaving the program, and returning to their home country

² All amounts in this article are in US\$.

(Binford & McLaughlin, 2021, p. 264). Although no public records are available on the number of H-2A workers who leave the farm where they were recruited to work, 32% of workers interviewed by CDM reported they were “not free to quit” (2020, p. 23).

Liminality is “institutionalized” into the lives of temporary workers (Sangaramoorthy, 2019). Liminality denotes a temporary state of being, typically marked by a rite of passage. Sangaramoorthy (2019) argued that some temporary guest laborers “can become trapped in the form of ‘permanent liminality’” (p. 559). Restrictions on mobility contribute to the liminality of H-2A workers. They do not have the right to switch employers, even if they face difficult or illegal working conditions. Instead, they must either endure these conditions or return to their home country. Additionally, if they fail to work fast or hard enough, they risk not being invited back the following season. In this way, employers exert “almost limitless power over their working and non-working lives” (Binford & McLaughlin, 2021, p. 270).

Lastly, a major critique of the H-2A program is a lack of oversight at all levels, from recruitment abroad to employment conditions and long-term health outcomes. There are not enough inspectors monitoring the program (Bales, 2008; Costa & Martin, 2023), and there is a pressing need for stronger regulation of labor contractors (LeBaron, 2014). Clearly there are costs and benefits to guest-worker programs. However, before researchers and policymakers can tackle the job of improving worker conditions, it is imperative to have more ethnographic data on the lived experiences of H-2A workers. In the next section we discuss the policy environment specific to the state of Idaho. We then highlight data we have collected on the lived experiences of farmworkers engaged with the H-2A program.

H-2A Program in Idaho

Idaho has the fifth-highest rate of agricultural labor violations in the country (Spacek, 2024). A farming operation in our study area was recently fined \$44,000 for workplace violations and was ordered to pay \$270,000 to H-2A farmworkers for overtime wages (Spacek, 2024). In 2022, the U.S.

Department of Labor (U.S. DOL) found multiple violations at an Idaho potato farm. Violations included failing to provide the guaranteed number of hours stated in their contracts, paying wages below the legally required rate, and failing to reimburse workers for travel to the farm, as well as failure to meet minimum housing standards. As a result, the DOL awarded \$159,256 of unpaid wages to farmworkers and issued over \$25,000 in fines (DOL, 2022). In a separate investigation, two additional Idaho employers were found to have multiple violations and required to pay over \$20,000 in back wages. Further, employers did not reimburse workers for transportation, did not pay sufficient wages, and did not meet minimum housing standards (DOL, 2019). In yet another example, in 2024, an Idaho labor contractor was sentenced to prison for exploiting H-2A farmworkers and charging them made-up fees (U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Idaho, 2024).

In June of 2024, the DOL passed a new rule titled Improving Protections for Workers in Temporary Agricultural Employment in the United States. The rule, passed at the federal level, prohibits employers from intimidating temporary employees against collective action or reporting workplace violations. Importantly, the rule protects H-2A farmworkers from employer retaliation and allows them to bring a representative to meetings about work and living conditions. It also mandates the use of seat belts in all work-related vehicles (Spacek, 2024).

Immediately after the rule was passed, Idaho joined 16 other states in a lawsuit against the DOL. The states won the lawsuit. While the rule remains in effect in most states, it did not go into effect in Idaho or the other 16 participating states. The same summer the lawsuit succeeded in denying farmworker protections, six H-2A farmworkers in eastern Idaho died in a vehicle accident while traveling to work (Esquivel 2024). These examples of H-2A experiences in Idaho highlight a lack of protection, in addition to evidence of exploitation and safety concerns. In the following sections, we present data on the experiences of farmworkers connected to the H-2A program. Kline (2024) argued in favor of research that reflects the range of experiences among H-2A farmworkers, noting that “rel-

atively little attention has been paid to what workers who are not in crisis say about their conditions of work on and off the job” (2024, p. 238). In the following section, we offer insights into the experiences of H-2A farmworkers in southwestern Idaho.

Methods

In this paper, we primarily draw upon ethnographic research from an interdisciplinary research project conducted in the summer of 2022 (Hyland et al., 2024). We also incorporate observational data we have gathered since 2015. In our years working with farmworkers, we did not set out to study H-2A farmworkers; rather, issues related to the guest-worker program have continuously emerged in our research. Our most recent iteration of data collection with farmworkers, in 2022, centered on a developing a better understanding of Latinx farmworkers’ perspectives on pesticide risk and exposure, compliance with workplace protection standards, and perceptions of pesticide risk (Hyland et al., 2024). The mixed methods project included a survey, semi-structured interviews, conducted in English or Spanish, as well as biomonitoring of pesticides in urine. Our inclusion criteria included identifying as Latino or Latina and working in agriculture in Idaho during the current season. Sixty-two farmworkers (30 men and 32 women) were recruited to the study through convenience sampling, in collaboration with community-based organizations and housing authorities, and at community events and HeadStart meetings. Surveys were administered in the location preferred by the respondent—typically at a community center or occasionally in the residence of the participant. Fifteen of the study participants identified as working with an H-2A visa. We completed 18 semi-structured interviews. Two of the 18 participants identified as working on an H-2A visa. All study procedures were approved by the Boise State University Institutional Review Board. All participants were compensated for their participation with a gift card to a local supermarket. While the aim of the larger study was not to compare H-2A and non-H-2A workers, we nonetheless gained insights into the lived experiences of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. Due to the size of our study

sample and the qualitative approach, the results here may not be generalizable. Nonetheless, the research provides observations and insights into an understudied population that is increasingly central to global food production.

In the following section of this paper, we highlight interview and survey findings related to H-2A farmworker experiences. We offer brief summaries and analysis of two interviews that were conducted with H-2A visa holders. We bring in additional interview data from other study participants to gain insights into how the program impacts non-H-2A farmworkers. We also report out a subset of survey responses to review in this paper that relate to the concepts of liminality, precarity, and unfreedom. Our goals in reporting these limited findings are twofold: a) to provide a description of H-2A workers’ experiences in Idaho, and 2) to better understand potential vulnerabilities of H-2A workers within the context of liminality, precarity, and unfreedom.

Interviews

The overarching aim of the interviews was to learn about farmworker experiences in Idaho. We asked questions about how long workers had been working in agriculture and what types of farming activities they engage in, as well as questions about pesticide exposure and perceptions of pesticide risk. In the following section, we provide a snapshot of the experiences of the two H-2A farmworkers in the form of short vignettes. Our goal in this section is to provide insight into their lived experiences as of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. We also include interview data from two non-H-2A farmworkers who raised concerns about the program. Finally, we share an anecdote from a farm owner that illustrates the ways in which employers might act in ways that increase experiences of liminality, precarity, and unfreedom. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the participant. All interviews were translated (when applicable), and transcribed.

Hector

Hector (pseudonym) is an H-2A visa holder from Mexico who has worked in Idaho for two years. In Idaho, he works laying pipes for irrigation, weed-

ing, and planting. In Mexico, he works as a plumber and an electrician. Working in agriculture is new for Hector. He enrolled in the H-2A program in 2021 because he earns “20 times more” in the United States than he did in Mexico. He does not want to work in agriculture for the rest of his life; his dream job would be in construction or in real estate, buying and selling homes.

In his first year with the H-2A program, he worked as a pesticide applicator. He was not given a choice in the matter; he was simply assigned to spray pesticides. He described his experience during his first year:

This is my second year, but we just started the season so I haven’t done much, but last year, I started with watering. I was an irrigator. So, putting the pipes with the water manually, and the, from there, I applied pesticides. I would fill the backpack with pesticides and I would spray around the fields. And also, with the truck as well, but that’s where we would spray our whole bodies.

The interpreter clarified: “You would wash off with water? Or, what do you mean?” Hector explained, “No, when we would apply it, it [pesticide] would spray us.”

Hector had no formal training for his work as a pesticide applicator (though federal regulations require training). His training solely consisted of watching the same video as the other farmworkers, including those who did not directly handle pesticides. His employer in his first year did not provide personal protective equipment (PPE). Instead, the tractor driver, a fellow employee, gave him gloves and a paper mask for PPE. He was only given one mask per week, and he believes the tractor driver was purchasing the masks out of pocket (meaning the employer did not offer PPE). He wore the same sweatshirt for all types of work, and he did not change his clothes after applying pesticides. Another challenge Hector experienced was inconsistent access to water at work. Sometimes he would carry a bottle of water to wash his hands after applying pesticides and before eating.

Hector was asked how he was informed about pesticide application in the field. He explained:

They don’t let us know like that. I remember we were harvesting and a little plane passed by, very close by, fumigating another field next to us. So, I don’t know if it’s something that won’t hurt us or if they don’t care. I don’t know. And they say that when they put chemicals on a field, they put a sign up or something like that. When they put that sign up, they don’t have us go in there, but the sprayers, the tractors pass close by and that doesn’t—that’s what happens, they don’t let us know that much. They don’t care that much about letting us know.

Hector talked about experiencing more vulnerability in his first year with the H-2A program: “Well, since I was new last year, I didn’t know to ask for more things, and I asked my supervisor in that area for more things [such as PPE], and it was like he didn’t want to.” Hector is now working his second year in Idaho, and he feels more comfortable asking for items like PPE.

Hector expressed a lack of agency regarding his personal pesticide exposure. He was not paid extra to be a pesticide applicator (typically pesticide applicators are paid more than other field workers), but he did complete the task as assigned. He explained, “Applying pesticides wasn’t my role ... [but] they had me do it and that was it.” He described this situation last year in more detail:

I was with a coworker who that was his role, so since I was with him, I didn’t even know that I was going to do that, but they just told us, “You have to fumigate these fields.” They didn’t tell me beforehand.

This lack of agency can be considered a form of unfreedom. In addition to the lack of choice described above, Hector had conflicting feelings about his role as a pesticide applicator. Hector explained that spraying is less physically demanding than other types of farm labor. However, he does not like being exposed to pesticides during application, and he would prefer to “do something else” if possible. When asked what would improve his working conditions, he mentioned he would like more comfortable equipment and more breaks.

Like many farmworkers in the region, Hector worked in both Idaho and Oregon. He reported that he received breaks while working on hot days in Oregon, but not in Idaho. The inability to opt out of work in Idaho is another example of unfreedom. It is also fair to categorize working conditions in Idaho as more precarious than working conditions in Oregon, as the labor laws and their enforcement are more stringent in Oregon.

When asked, “Who is responsible to ensure that pesticides do not cause harm?” Hector replied that the ultimate responsibility for farmworkers’ protection from pesticides is the farm owners. However, he articulates clearly how farm owners might prioritize productivity and yield over farmworker safety. He explained, “Yes, I think it’s part of science. It’s applied science to produce more—so, the advantage is [producing] more. So, it has that advantage, but a disadvantage could be that sometimes they minimize the risk for the benefits.” His primary concern about pesticide exposure is getting cancer later in life. He explained that pesticides “can cause cancer in some moment, and not necessarily immediately but many years after.”

Overall, Hector wishes H-2A supervisors could be more empathetic to the needs of farmworkers:

Well, more empathy on behalf of the supervisors because first, last year, since it was my first year, I said, “How is it possible that they are spraying us in the face?” But then, the tractors also get the chemicals as well, so you say maybe it’s not that bad. But they should tell us, “No, listen guys, they’re spraying here but don’t worry, it’s not bad.” Something like that. But they didn’t tell us anything. So maybe just being more empathetic.

Juan

Juan (pseudonym) is working in his first year with the H-2A program. He decided to join the program to avoid the danger of crossing the border without documentation, and so that he would be able to return home at the end of the season. In his words, he wanted “to cross legally; seven months here, and then we leave for four months until the next season.” Juan perfectly captured the liminality of

temporary labor, “Coming back [to Mexico] you see the family again, when it’s time to farm you come back here [to Idaho].” Juan has two friends in Mexico who have worked as H-2A farmworkers for the past five years, and they recommended he try the program.

At the time of our interview, Juan had been working in Idaho just two and a half months and had only worked in two crops: hops and onions. In Mexico, he had worked as a carpenter for the past 15 years, but he makes more money now working in agriculture in Idaho. He reported that he enjoys the work so far and is fascinated with how productive the onion fields are. He says the heat is uncomfortable, but he knows it will only get hotter as the season goes on. His primary farming tasks are weeding by hand and laying irrigation pipes. Like Hector, Juan works in both Idaho and Oregon.

One of the challenges Juan faces in Idaho is a lack of cooking experience. In Mexico, his wife does all the food preparation. Juan described how in Mexico, his wife takes care of all the food preparation, but in Idaho, “here you have to fend for yourself.” This switch in gender roles, referred to as “gender fluidity” (Schmalzbauer, 2015), is a difficult process to navigate and is an important component of the socio-emotional difficulties facing farmworkers.

While Juan is not currently working as a pesticide applicator, he is still affected by pesticide exposure. When asked how he is notified that pesticides have been sprayed, he emphasized the important role of the bus driver who transports them to work sites:

The driver is the one who moves us around and tells us, “Today we can’t work because they put pesticides,” or if there a lot of mud in the field, can’t work like because we get muddy or the crop is damaged. He is one who keeps us informed whether we can work or not, the driver.

We found a similarity in that Hector receives his PPE from a tractor driver. Neither of our interview respondents report receiving information directly from their employers. This is another

example of liminality and precarity—as H-2A workers, they are not permanent employees, and they rely on bus drivers and labor contractors for information and supplies rather than farm owners.

Juan told us that he had not seen a posted sign or any other notification about pesticide application, though this is required by law. In terms of pesticide training and safety, he watched approximately three hours of videos about pesticide safety when he signed his contract at the company office in Idaho. He said that he would like more information about pesticide risk and exposure. For Juan, responsibility for pesticide safety lies with the company who employs him (the farm owner/operator). He also discussed how the company benefits the most from the use of pesticides, as it increases their yield.

Reflecting on his first couple of months with the program, he explained, “It is very hard work. The first few days it is tiring. And then you get used to getting up early and preparing your own food.” Juan tells us he would like to come back next year, but he fully understands his return is not his decision; it is the company’s decision whether to invite him back. When asked if he would like to return next year, Juan explained, “If I’m invited, yes. It’s the company’s decision, they decide who comes. The ones who are on their best behavior keep coming.” Juan’s lack of autonomy regarding whether he returns to work in Idaho exemplifies the concept of labor unfreedom and illustrates precarity in his work and personal life. His best chance at receiving a return invitation is to practice “good behavior.”

Together, these two vignettes illustrate the challenges of living in a precarious and liminal state. Both men are new to working in agriculture, and both joined for economic advancement. Hector spoke at some length about the absence of “care” from his employer, while Juan shared the challenges of caring for himself, especially related to food preparation. Now in his second year, Hector has grown in his ability to advocate for himself, but Juan, in his first year with the program, feels the opportunity to return to work the next year is completely up to his employer, which limits his self-advocacy.

Non-H-2A Farmworkers

In addition to the two farmworkers discussed above, other non-H-2A farmworkers in our study made references to the program during their interviews. They expressed fears about not having enough work in the future as more contract laborers (H-2A visa holders) arrive in Idaho. One participant, Clara, lamented:

We’re not going to have work. There isn’t any work for us, and all of the ranches are bringing contractors [H-2A visa holders], so there isn’t work for us. I don’t know what’s going to happen because there isn’t work for us in the companies.

Clara also highlighted gender dynamics at play:

Since there are jobs that are difficult, and nowadays, us women are doing hard jobs that are for men. And what is happening is—like when I went to work in [location], I saw that it’s raining a lot, and everyone who is contracted is working in the rain. It’s raining, and they have to work because they have a signed contract. And we, if all of us who are here, if it’s raining and we go to work, we stop. The boss takes us out. They can’t work like that because it’s raining, and contractors have to work. We have our car.

Clara also discussed the heavy workload for H-2A farmworkers, explaining,

But the people who are here as well are tired. There isn’t any break. And the contractors have to do it. When they come, they come wanting to work. They don’t care if they’re working double shifts day and night.

Another participant, Marco, expressed concerns that the H-2A program may result in him having less work and lower pay. Marco alleged that H-2A farmworkers earn \$16 per hour, but local farmworkers only earn \$14 per hour. He said,

I just hope that one day the salary of farm workers increases one day because the only

worry I have is that is affecting many farm workers is that they're bringing a lot of contracted laborers from Mexico, so it's affecting the amount of work.

Continuing his discussion of wage disparities, Marco explained:

Those who are contracted earn more. They give them a place to live. They don't pay for housing. They provide transportation. I always say—well, I have talked to the contractors when they say the farmers don't want to pay more—I say, it doesn't make sense to me for them to pay to bring people from outside and pay for their housing, pay for transporting them, and they don't want to pay us a dollar more because they don't have the money. How is that, that they do have money for that?

A Farm-Owner Perspective

During the time we were conducting research for our pesticide study, we met with a local farmer as part of a separate project. This farmer mentioned that local farm owners and operators are increasingly reliant on H-2A farmworkers. The farm owner shared with us a startling story. Another local farmer, who currently employs H-2A workers from Mexico, has been contemplating hiring H-2A farmworkers from Jamaica in future years. The reason: the Mexican H-2A workers he employs are beginning to build relationships with the local Latinx population through their shared language and culture. Latinx populations are the largest minority in rural Idaho, and the populations are growing. The farm owner hypothesized that Jamaican workers would not have a shared language and culture with the local population. We highlight this anecdote to illustrate how farm owners and operators might be strategizing ways to keep their workforce isolated and compliant. This anecdote aligns with the themes highlighted in this paper. Isolation, whether that is geographic, linguistic, or cultural, keeps guest workers in a liminal state. Isolation also contributes to precarity as it limits temporary guest workers from accessing social safety networks. Future research should include interviews with farm owners and operators

to assess to what extent compliance and control motivates H-2A hiring.

Survey Findings

In this section, we provide a snapshot of select survey findings. Other survey findings have been discussed in (Hyland, Hernandez et al, 2024, Hyland, Meierotto et al, 2024). Survey data were collected verbally, with members of the research team recording responses on tablets. The survey was conducted in either English or Spanish, according to the preference of the respondent. Survey data were collected at a variety of locations, again per the preference of the respondents, and included farmworkers' homes, community parks, and community centers. The 15 individuals working with an H-2A visa represented 24% of our total participants. This percentage is higher than the approximately 9% of agricultural workers in Idaho working on H-2A visas. This higher percentage is likely due to our snowball sampling procedure. Note that all H-2A farmworkers in the study identified as male. All the individuals working with an H-2A visa in our study were born in Mexico (in the overarching study, one person was born in the United States, two were born in Guatemala, and 59 were born in Mexico). There were three pesticide applicators working with H-2A visas (out of 12 pesticide applicators total in the study).

For this paper, we have selected a subset of the original survey questions on pesticide exposure and risk that a) provide insight into the lived experiences of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho and b) highlight occasions when responses indicate differences between H-2A farmworkers and non-H-2A farmworkers. These differences are not statistically significant. Rather, they are shared in the paper because they are descriptive and offer potential pathways for future research.

We begin with some descriptive data about H-2A farmworkers' motivations and experiences. We then analyze several survey questions relevant to the themes of this paper. While the sample size was limited, it nonetheless offers insight into the experiences of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. While our original study did not set out to compare H-2A perspectives with non-H-2A perspectives, during data analysis we found that some of the differing

perspectives are relevant to the consideration of precarity, liminality, and unfreedom among H-2A farmworkers.

Motivation

In one of our survey questions, we asked respondents, “What are your reasons for working on an H-2A visa? Please indicate all that apply.” Overall, reasons for working on an H-2A visa are varied. Economic motivations have the highest percentages. (The responses “wanted to work in the U.S.,” “the job pays well,” and “the ability to send home remittances” were affirmed by over 80% of respondents.) Factors related to their hometown had the lowest rates of response—just 40% of participants reported they could not find work in their hometown or their home country. Interestingly, just over half of respondents planned to migrate to the United States in the future, and 74% reported that they like that the work is seasonal. Future research could focus on the extent to which H-2A farmworkers might prefer the liminal status as a guest workers.

Satisfaction with Employment

We asked all respondents to rank their satisfaction with their current job. We created a five-point Likert question in which respondents were given the option to strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements: “I find real enjoyment in my work,” “I definitely dislike my work,” and “I consider my job to be very central to my life.” Table 3 shows how both groups of workers (H-2A and non-H-2A) have low rates of “dislike” of their work, and both groups feel that farm work is a central part of their lives. However, we do see a difference in feelings of enjoyment of the

work. Previous research has indicated that farmworkers in Idaho enjoy working outside, enjoy working with family, and enjoy the process of growing crops (Curl et al., 2021). One potential explanatory factor for the difference in enjoyment between the two groups could be that since H-2A workers do not all come from agricultural backgrounds, they don’t feel the same sense of enjoyment. Another possible explanatory factor could be the lack of social and familial connections among H-2A workers. Many farmworkers enjoy working with friends and family and see it as a continuation of family tradition (Curl et al., 2021). Participants in the 2021 study were second- and third-generation farmworkers who lived permanently in rural Idaho. The H-2A workers in this study may not have felt the same intergenerational and community connections. Future research could explore what aspects of the H-2A program boost or limit feelings of well-being. Table 1 reveals reasons why people seek work with an H-2A visa. Table 2 highlights similarities and differences in job satisfaction among H-2A workers and non-H-2A workers.

Pesticides and Risk

In the overarching study, 12 respondents reported applying pesticides. Out of those, only four had received training related to pesticide application within the last year. Four out of 12 pesticide applicators in the entire study had never received any training, which is required for pesticide application.

Table 1. Reasons for Working on an H-2A Visa

	Affirmative
I could not find work in my hometown	6/15 (40%)
I could not find work in my home country	6/15 (40%)
I get prestige in my family/community for doing this work	6/15 (40%)
I wanted to work in the United States	13/15 (87%)
The job pays well	13/15 (87%)
Family/friends recommended the program	10/15 (67%)
I like that the work is seasonal	11/15 (74%)
Working in the U.S. is safer than working in my home community	9/15 (60%)
I plan to migrate to the U.S. in the future	8/15 (53%)
I earn enough money to send remittances to my family in my home country	12/15 (80%)

One H-2A farmworker working as a pesticide applicator reported receiving training in the previous year, yet two H-2A workers applying pesticides reported having never received training. It is easy to see how training could slip through the cracks with temporary guest workers. H-2A workers do not have a mechanism through which to advocate for education and training. The inability to access pesticide education and training indicates precarity. Future research should look into responsibility for pesticide education and training for H-2A farmworkers, in particular in the 17 states that have rejected DOL protections.

The study also explored farmworkers' sense of risk and the ability to protect themselves from pesticides. Perceived pesticide risk and perceived sense of control over pesticide exposure is relevant to the concept of unfreedom. Previous studies have indicated that if a farmworker perceives they have control over pesticide exposure, then they are more likely to take an action, such as handwashing (Elmore & Arcury, 2001). We argue that not having a sense of control over one's risk of pesticide exposure (and not having the ability to mitigate those risks) can be considered another expression of precarity and unfreedom.

In another relevant study, researchers examined how perceived risk, perceived control, demographics, and risk perception correlate (Edelson et al., 2018). They found that demographics are significant in terms of risk per

ception among migrant farmworkers (Edelson et al., 2018, p. 71). In fact, they argued "farmworkers who might be most systemically marginalized ... have a heightened sense of risk perception" (Edelson et al., 2018, p. 79). In our study, H-2A farmworkers experienced more incidents of acute pesticide exposure than other study participants. H-2A farmworkers also reported having higher perceived control of possible harmful effects of pesticides compared with non-H-2A participants. Edelson et al. (2018) found that those who disclosed their visa status to their employer engaged in fewer protective strategies than farmworkers who did not disclose their visa status. One hypothesis provided to explain this finding is that those who work on a visa such as H-2A may place trust in their employer to mitigate pesticide risk (Edelson et al., 2018, p. 80). Table 3 notes differences in farmworkers' sense of risk and their ability to protect themselves from pesticide exposure.

Future research is needed on the rates of acute pesticide poisoning among H-2A farmworkers. Research could also explore whether H-2A farmworkers have a higher sense of control over their pesticide risk, and why this might be so.

Continuing on the theme of control, our findings suggest non-H-2A farmworkers have a slightly higher sense of autonomy and control, relative to H-2A farmworkers. Not having a sense of autonomy over one's exposure to pesticides is another indicator of precarity and unfreedom. Table 4

Table 2. Satisfaction with Current Job

	H-2A farmworkers	Non-H-2A farmworkers
I find enjoyment in my work (strongly or somewhat agree)	10/15 (67%)	39/47 (83%)
I dislike my work (strongly or somewhat agree)	2/15 (13%)	5/45 (11%)
My job is central to my life (strongly or somewhat agree)	14/15 (93%)	44/47 (94%)

Table 3. Sense of Risk and Ability to Protect Myself

	H-2A Farmworkers	Non-H-2A Farmworkers
Have experienced acute pesticide poisoning (agree)	4/14 (29%)	8/46 (17%)
There is not much you can do to protect yourself from pesticides (agree)	5/15 (33%)	15/47 (32%)
Do you believe you have control over possible harmful effects of pesticides (yes)	9/15 (60%)	21/47 (45%)

shows the high rates of perception that pesticides harm other farmworkers. Edelson et al. (2018) similarly found that farmworkers are more likely to perceive others as at risk of pesticide exposure but not view themselves as at risk.

Like our recommendation above, these survey responses indicate that further research is needed on the extent and quality of pesticide training and education among H-2A farmworkers. The survey had several questions about participants' access to health care if they were exposed to pesticides, or if they had any worries about their health and pesticide exposure. These findings highlight one of the presumed benefits of the H-2A programs—access to health care. While H-2A farmworkers are provided health care if they are injured or sick, they may be hesitant to report injuries or illness due to fears they might not be invited back (Arcury et al., 2015, p. 8). However, our survey data indicates H-2A workers are more worried about health effects of pesticides than non-H-2A farmworkers (Table 5). Worry could be emblematic of precarity—so we wonder whether H-2A workers experience uncertainty and a lack of control over potential health

impacts from pesticides at greater rates than some non-H-2A farmworkers.

Overall, the survey data offers insight into the motivations people have for joining the H-2A program, with financial opportunity as a primary motivation. We found that H-2A farmworkers in our study found less enjoyment in their work than the non-H-2A farmworkers did in their work. In terms of pesticides and risk, a greater proportion of H-2A workers in our sample had experienced pesticide exposure. At the same time, 60% of H-2A farmworkers felt they have control over possible harmful effects of pesticides. Clearly these findings are limited because of the small sample size and geographic scope of data collection. We hope that in presenting this data, we inspire further research into the experiences of H-2A farmworkers, and how their experiences differ from the experiences of other farmworkers.

Conclusion and Future Research

The primary aim of this paper was to provide data on the experiences of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. We analyzed interview and survey data from a

Table 4. Perceptions of Pesticide Risk

	H-2A	Non-H-2A
I believe I can access information about pesticides (Yes)	11/15 (73%)	37/47 (79%)
I believe I would be listened to by my employer or supervisor if I had a concern about pesticides	11/15 (73%)	38/47 (81%)
My health is harmed by pesticides	8/14 (57%)	29/47 (62%)
Women are more likely to be harmed by pesticides than men	6/15 (40%)	14/47 (30%)
The health of other farmworkers is harmed by pesticides	12/15 (80%)	39/47 (83%)
The health of unborn children of farmworkers is harmed by pesticides.	10/15 (67%)	38/47 (81%)
Farmworkers' fertility is harmed by pesticides.	9/15 (60%)	38/47 (81%)

Table 5. Health Care and Worries about Pesticide Exposure

	H-2A	Non-H-2A
I can get medical care if I get sick from pesticides	14/15 (93% yes)	41/47 (87% yes)
To what degree are you worried about long-term health effects from being exposed to pesticides?	12/15 (80% very worried or somewhat worried)	33/46 (72% very worried or somewhat worried)
To what degree are you worried about poisoning from being exposed to pesticides?	11/15 (73% very worried or somewhat worried)	36/46 (78% very worried or somewhat worried)

larger study on perceptions of pesticide risk and exposure. We describe the current labor regulatory system, which reveals a lack of protection for H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. We conducted our analysis through the lenses of liminality, precarity, and unfreedom to highlight the limited choice and autonomy experienced by H-2A farmworkers.

H-2A farmworkers experience liminality, a state resulting from living a life divided between the United States and in their home country. This division leads to separation from family. Living on or near the farm where they work can result in isolation from the surrounding community, creating another liminal space. Additionally, H-2A farmworkers experience precarity. They fear not being asked to return in the following year and face risks related to pesticide exposure, and their H-2A status can affect their ability to access accurate information about protection from pesticide exposure. Lastly, we found that H-2A farmworkers experience unfreedom. Unfreedom manifests in their inability to change employers, fears of not being asked to return, and lack of information about and protection from pesticide exposure.

There are limitations to this work. First, the primary study from which we draw data did not aim to explore H-2A experiences; this theme emerged during data collection and analysis. Our study sample was small. Furthermore, there are few studies with which to compare our findings. Despite these limitations, we find the data offers a compelling snapshot of the experiences of a small group of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. The ability to compare their experiences with non-H-2A farmworkers provides insights into differences in the ways each group perceives pesticide risk and exposure, their motivations for working in agriculture, and their own sense of enjoyment of the work. We recognize that the category “non-H-2A farmworkers” encompasses a diverse group of people, and our intention is not to suggest that non-H-2A farmworkers have monolithic experiences and perspectives. Rather, we seek to highlight the experiences of H-2A farmworkers in Idaho. The interview vignettes highlight the day-to-day struggles of H-2A farmworkers, their motivation for joining the program, and their experiences with liminality, unfreedom, and precarity.

We also note how the concept of unfreedom is relevant to the research process. While we made every possible effort to minimize burdens or discomfort among our participants, it is worth considering to what extent H-2A farmworkers might be constrained as research participants due to their temporary and precarious status. We administered our surveys orally, with a member of the research team reading the questions to the participant from a questionnaire on a tablet, then marking the participant’s responses. We provided a separate space for each participant, and only one participant at a time completed the survey with a specific survey administrator. However, at times we had several farmworkers taking the survey simultaneously, in the same building, with different members of the research team. It is possible some participants may not have felt free to openly express concerns about pesticide risk and protection in a public space. If they voiced concerns or complaints, would they be invited to return next year? Even with all the privacy protections in place by our research teams, and ensured through IRB consent and anonymity protocols, precarious work status added an additional layer of complexity to data collection. While we assured all the participants that data would be anonymized and confidential, we don’t know to what extent (if at all) participants might have harbored fears about discussing any aspect of their employment experiences.

As this paper indicates, there are many questions about the living and working conditions of H-2A farmworkers. These questions and concerns are particularly pressing in a highly unregulated state such as Idaho but are also relevant to all guest-worker programs in the United States and globally. Further research is needed on H-2A farmworkers’ access to health care, quality housing, sufficient and culturally appropriate food, and other basic needs. One group of farmworkers that needs particular attention is women. Since the H-2A program primarily employs men, research is needed to understand program growth that may impact or alter the feminization of agriculture. Further, the socio-political reality we have entered in 2025 has likely exacerbated the precarity, liminality, and unfreedom for many farmworkers. Given calls for mass deportation promised by the

incoming administration, we wonder what impact mass deportation will have on guest worker programs like H-2A. Will the program expand significantly? How might this expansion help or harm farmworkers? There is also debate over the future of the H-2A program among conservative leadership. Project 2025, for example, calls for

changes to guest worker policies, including a reduction in H-2 visas (Pibida, 2024). Ethnographic research with H-2A farmworkers and their employers is urgently needed in the coming years, especially in the context of significant changes to immigration policy. 

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