

## Childcare Services for Agricultural Workers in 2021

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Childcare en San Quintin, Sinaloa. Author: Agustín Escobar.

One of the five services covered by the fees collected by Mexico's Social Security Institute (IMSS) corresponds to childcare centers. Until 2020, only mothers could apply for this service, but now working fathers also have a right to place their children there.

Demand for childcare services is growing rapidly among farm workers, given that every year the number of permanent farm workers enrolled in IMSS increases by 3.7%, and the number of casual workers rises by 10%. In addition, every year some of the workers who temporarily migrate to the fields decide to make their move permanent, bringing their children and increasing demand for the service. This service has historically been extremely insufficient, covering less than 10% of farm worker families' demand for child care. Nevertheless, those IMSS child care centers that do exist and operate enjoy a positive reputation. IMSS is planning to construct only one childcare center for farmworkers' children nationally – which is again blatantly insufficient - but it is offering a financial incentive to employers, unions, and social organizations to provide the service.

IMSS has a category of "farm worker childcare centers," which are distinct from the ordinary childcare centers it operates directly, and also from the commercial and community childcare centers that operate mostly in cities.

<sup>1</sup> With information from Dr. Vesta Richardson, Coordinator of the Childcare Service, Department of Comprehensive Childhood Development, IMSS.

There are a total of 169 childcare centers operated by IMSS, and 1269 that are operated by third parties in agreement with IMSS. Of these, only seven are operated by employers or cooperatives of field workers, one in Aguascalientes and six in Sinaloa. In our random sample of workers in export agriculture, only a minority have access to the service, as seen in the table.

<b>ACCESS TO CHILDCARE CENTERS AMONG AGRICULTURAL WORKERS (%)</b>		
	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
<b>IMSS childcare (formal access)</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>IMSS childcare (de facto access)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Commercial childcare (formal access)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Commercial childcare (de facto access)</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>14</b>

Source: ENJOREX 2019-20, random sample.

IMSS stopped large-scale construction of childcare centers in the 1990s. It is currently planning to construct two nationally. Only one will be devoted to farm workers’ children, as said above. It will be built in San Quintín.

In 2021, IMSS offered employers a reimbursement of \$4200 pesos (\$210 dollars) per child per month to farm worker childcare centers that comply with a series of requirements. The head of child care services at IMSS has also offered employers to pay them twice that for child care centers operating double shifts. This is essential, since traditional child care centers only operate for five hours, and farm workers work eight-hour shifts (or longer) and often travel great distances to and from the child care centers.

We have found a few common responses among women farm workers to the shortage of IMSS childcare centers. Some mothers make arrangements among themselves or with relatives, sometimes for cash and sometimes for free. Sometimes, older offspring (girls mostly) are left in charge. In other cases, as in Sinaloa, employers offer 10 times more child care capacity than IMSS. Finally, some women quit farm employment to take care of their children, or to take care of the children of other workers.

Although the IMSS subsidy appears attractive, we have interviewed employers who prefer to provide childcare services without the subsidy from IMSS. Thus, they are free to organize the service in whatever fashion they wish, with no bureaucratic supervision. They are still subject to supervision by state education secretariats, however.

For workers’ children, a service provided formally by IMSS would be best. This service is comprehensive, and addresses most aspects of childhood development. The outsourcing model is a solution for some employers, but not for all. In our opinion, it is necessary to find a way in which the two models can be expanded to achieve total coverage, with the quality required. Doing so will improve the welfare of the children and their parents’ employment stability and ability to work, which will help to increase family income.