



Farm Workers in Mexico's Export Produce Agriculture:

*Baja California Regional Report
Summary*

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This regional study provides an assessment of living and working conditions for farm workers in Baja California, Mexico, resulting from official database analyses, our own worker survey and direct fieldwork. The study focuses on San Quintín, recently known as the “Coastal Region”¹ of Baja California. The regional study explains current conditions as an outcome of social processes taking place over five decades of regional change triggered, among other factors, by the completion of the Transpeninsular Highway and the development of an agricultural export economy.

Working Conditions

According to official sources, Baja California farm workers are the highest – paid in Mexico. In the 2020 population census, monthly income is \$7,680 pesos or 384 dollars per month. In terms of job benefits, the single most important and expensive one is social security (IMSS), which is paid together with savings into the housing fund (INFONAVIT). In the census, 35% of the farm workers report being affiliated to social security. This percentage would be the highest in Mexico. Nevertheless, the Social Security Institute reports over 37,000 affiliated agricultural workers in 2020 in San Quintín, out of a total number of 43,000 workers in the census. If this were the case, then 87% of the farm workers are affiliated to social security in San Quintín.

The study includes maps detailing where Baja California ranks in terms of labor violations in agriculture. In spite of having the highest wages in Mexico, Baja California is not the lowest in terms of percentage of workers paid below the minimum wage. This is so because the minimum wage is higher along the border with the US. Baja California is the highest in terms of compliance with Social Security affiliation, as said earlier. Most of the state shows the lowest percentages of underage workers, except for Ensenada. This same municipality shows a very high percentage of underage workers among its indigenous workers.

¹ The agricultural region in the southern portion of Baja California used to be referred to as “San Quintín”, comprising a strip of roughly 100 miles of dispersed and compact settlements and farmlands. Nevertheless, agriculture has expanded, and today this agricultural region is referred to as “Coastal Region” which includes the Maneadero Valley in Southern Ensenada to the North, and the entire municipality of San Quintín to the South. In fact, this agricultural region now includes significant portions of the northern half of Baja California Sur.

We also carried out a worker survey. We surveyed “Coastal Region” firms belonging to Baja California’s Agricultural Council, which represents the vast majority of the exporters, most of the state’s agricultural production, and most of the employment. Our team first selected the firms, and then we selected the workers to be interviewed in each one. Only one firm declined to cooperate. Our survey represents the firms affiliated to the Council, which itself accounts for most production and employment. The council represents an upper tier of firms, in terms of their employment conditions. We interviewed 963 workers in firms employing 19,000 workers, or 36% of the total farm workers in the state.

Output from our 2021 survey in Baja California can be compared to the results of the survey we carried out in 2019 and 2020 in the other four main exporting states.² According to our survey, Baja farm workers are two years older than workers in the rest of Mexico’s agriculture; they have lower schooling, and they are more frequently indigenous. Also, the labor force in Baja California is slightly more male than in the rest of Mexico’s export agriculture. The schooling average is brought down by older, settled immigrants who arrived in the past from Mexico’s south. The workforce is rejuvenated by a constant influx of young, mostly male, slightly higher-schooling workers arriving, temporarily or permanently, every year. Sixty percent of temporary migrant workers speak an indigenous language. Twenty-eight percent of the male workers have experience working in the U.S., mostly in agriculture.

In our survey, monthly wages in May 2021 were 11,000 pesos or \$550 dollars per month for men, and 10,000 or \$500 dollars for women. Women’s income is 53% above the wages earned by berry workers in other exporting states, and men’s wages surpassed the wages of male berry workers in other export states by 47%.

Table 1. Monthly Wages, Baja California 2021 and ENJOREX 2019 - 2020

Sex	Baja California 2021	2019-20 Berries	2019 - 20 Vegetables	2020 Avocado	2019-20 Precarious ³
Women	10,082	6,601	5,680	7,175	5,093
Men	11,291	7,755	7,011	8565	5,606
Gender Gap	10.7	14.9	19	16	9

Source: ENJOREX Baja California 2021; random sample, ENJOREX 2019-20 (Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Sinaloa and Baja California); avocado worker sample, 2020; analytical precarious worker sample, 2019-2020. 2019 – 20 wages were adjusted to March 2019. Wages for 2020 and 2021 are nominal.

² Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Sinaloa.

³ Our study includes a non-random, snowball sample of 575 farm workers selected “bottom-up” by the teams headed by Luz Emilia Bretón and Omar Stabridis in 2019 and 2020. This sample was collected in San Luis Potosí, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Sinaloa. We did not include a sample of precarious workers in San Quintín in 2021 due to the pandemic, since there was a risk of infection in these workers’ homes.

Our data show that Social Security coverage is almost universal, but reports of other benefits differ from the rest of exporting states:

Table 2. Formal Affiliation to Job Benefits, Baja California 2021 and Random Sample 2019 – 2020 (%)

Sex	Baja California 2021						
	Year End Bonus	Paid Days Off	IMSS Health	Infonavit	Funeral Expenses	IMSS Child Care	Company Child Care
Women	80	36	98	26	12	2	3
Men	81	46	97	30	13	2	2
Random Sample, 2019 - 2020							
Women	82	47	96	32	4	11	30
Men	80	54	94	31	8	9	23

Fuente: ENJOREX Baja California 2021; muestra aleatoria ENJOREX 2019-20.

Formal access to year-end bonuses and INFONAVIT (housing fund savings) are on a par with other exporting states. A higher percentage report payment for funeral expenses, and lower portions report paid days off. The starkest contrast with workers in other exporting states is the extremely low percentage reporting access to child care, whether through social security or employers. We were told most day care centers had recently shut, after the government decided to cancel the program for subsidized child care centers. Virtually no workers had access to Social Security child care centers.

We also asked workers whether or not they had real access to benefits. Effective access rates are lower, as can be expected, and they compare to the rest of export areas as follows:

Table 3. Effective Access to Job Benefits, Baja California 2021 and ENJOREX 2019 – 2020 (%)

Sex	Baja California 2021						
	Year End Bonus	Paid Days Off	IMSS Health	Infonavit	Funerary Expenses	IMSS Child Care	Company Child Care
Women	77	30	96	16	2	0.5	1
Men	75	37	93	20	3	1	1
Random Sample, ENJOREX 2019 - 2020							
Women	75	35	86	14	2	5	23
Men	73	42	83	14	2	4	14

Source: ENJOREX Baja California 2021; random sample, ENJOREX 2019-20.

Experience of access to social security health care stands out for its near universality. We were surprised by these high rates of “real access” to health services, since our anthropological fieldwork found many significant accounts of inexistent or deficient medical services (see *Living conditions*). Other benefits are not much different from the rest of exporting areas, except for child care which, once again, is extremely low.

Thirty-one percent of the men, and 17 percent of the women, report sending remittances to their families. This includes close to half (48%) of temporary migrants, but also 13% of permanent immigrants, signaling that a significant portion of their immediate families still reside in Mexico's south.

Workers in Baja California work slightly shorter weeks than workers in other exporting states, 5.7 versus 6.2 days on average.

In the entire sample, there was only one underage worker, or 16 in the expanded population of 19,167.

In sum: formal workers in our survey in Baja California show the best working conditions in Mexico, except for child care, which is extremely low for a state with such high affiliation rates to social security. Purchasing power is not as high as it seems because 1) prices are higher along the border than in the rest of the country; and 2) public services are extremely deficient, which means workers must devote a significant portion of their time and income on services which are lower-priced or free elsewhere.

In spite of not collecting a survey of precarious or informal workers, Diana and Elisa did a large number of interviews and case studies on precarious or informal workers at the end of June and in July, when the pandemic had temporarily subsided. The contrast between the above workers and informal workers is sobering. Informal or "pay as you go" workers have no benefits, no job security, and can work much longer hours. A few informal employers reported keeping a small number of health clinic passes for their workers, but most informal workers must find medical treatment however they can. Formal and informal workers must solve their child care needs informally and at significant expense. The weekly earnings of informal workers are lower not only because their daily pay is lower, but also because they are not necessarily hired every day.

However, formal – informal segmentation of the labor force is complex. A few workers prefer informal jobs because they can follow the best-paying harvest jobs in Baja and elsewhere, and they can earn more than formal workers; some women prefer the flexibility of informal jobs, which allow them to be absent a few days every week; and finally, some have no formal job options because they lack official ID, they may be unable to pass a standard health check, or they are too old or too young. We found a few underage workers in informal jobs. Finally, we talked to two employers who described how their production can be exported, and at the same time they employ "pay as you go" workers.

Living Conditions

Numerous testimonies emphasized the extent to which living conditions have improved. Today, there are three kinds of living arrangements: Company housing, which normally reproduces the layout of a traditional community in Southern Mexico, and often includes a store, a clinic, a canteen, a square, and sometimes a day care center, a playing area or

field, and a school. Employers do not charge their workers for the housing. We visited five, and in all of them the operators reported some mechanism aimed at keeping store prices low. Company housing is available to workers who have been hired in their communities and transported at the company's expense. Due to COVID, occupancy rates, we were told, were lower than usual.

Privately operated tenements offer rooms to single workers or families arriving on their own, without a contract. Sanitary and cooking infrastructure must be shared by more workers and is in worse condition than in company housing. Families often cook outdoors. These tenements represent the main housing option for workers arriving with no contacts, and often working informally. All the ones we visited were built of brick and mortar, sometimes with a tin roof. Lack of urban services means toilets are connected to simple latrines, and water must be collected by each family in their own water tanks. We heard testimonies of much worse tenements until recently.

Finally, when workers have had the chance to save, or when they form a family, many purchase a 3,300 to 6,600 sq. ft. lot. These lots are sold for \$1,500 to \$3,000 dollars. They are irregular, however, and the process leading to full ownership can take a decade or so, during which workers may sell, move, or abandon their property. Most lots are sold with no services whatsoever. In the older housing areas, most houses were solidly built, but we also interviewed many workers living in very substandard housing of their own making. INFONAVIT representatives say the main reason workers can't access their housing saving fund is because the lots most workers buy are irregular.

The following table describes housing quality for formal workers in Baja California and in other export areas.

Table 4. Housing Quality and Access to Services, Random Sample 2019 -20 and Baja California, 2021 (%)

	Piped Water	Cement Floor	Cement Roof	Cement Wall	Electricity	Sewage	Gas Stove	Refrigerator
ENJOREX 2019								
Total	91	95	75	90	99	90	N.D.	N.D.
Migration Status	ENJOREX Baja California 2021							
Native	83	76	23	56	95	59	93	79
Permanent Immigrant	71	76	21	52	94	59	91	63
Temporary Immigrant	87	69	28	58	97	55	80	33
Total	79	74	24	55	95	58	88	56

Source: ENJOREX 2019 in Escobar, Martin y Stabridis (2019, p. 145), and ENJOREX Baja California 2021.

As can be seen from the table, with the exception of electricity, the rest of the criteria defining housing quality are considerably worse in Baja California.

Except for the workers in company housing, the rest must pay for water, garbage collection and “local” transport at very high comparative prices. Our regional study details the costs involved.

The only available “second level” health clinic is Regional Hospital 69 in Vicente Guerrero. This is a 60-bed hospital open to all, and offering four or five medical specializations. There are another two IMSS family health clinics and another two community family health clinics, many small private doctor’s offices, and three religious-based clinics. Women workers report avoiding the regional hospital on account of mistreatment and frequent malpractice, and the regional study includes accounts of children and adults who were misdiagnosed and missed timely treatment for serious diseases. Lack of medical supplies is the norm.

Between six and eight child care centers have closed recently. The Social Security Institute is offering employers a per-capita subsidy of \$210 dollars per month per child, to employers building centers and offering the service. So far, there have been few takers.

Perspectives

There is no question most of the difficulties in workers’ working and – mostly - living conditions have a long history, and that, on the contrary, matters have improved considerably. Nevertheless, both for strategic reasons and on account of this government’s emphasis on social justice, San Quintín and other areas in Baja California require urgent and effective attention by all levels of government.

Here are some of the actions that, in our opinion, are required:

- 1) Social programs. This government’s cash transfer programs are the largest ever. Single mother families, and families with incomes below a certain threshold, must have access to social programs improving their level of living. Youths under 16 must receive individual scholarships to attend school and stay away from work.
- 2) Enforcement. While we agree with employers that IMSS enrolment is costly and ineffective, affording few services to the workers, it is also true that employers will avoid paying IMSS and INFONAVIT if they can. Firms and small employers must be incorporated into IMSS.
- 3) Supply chain management. Our work, and that of others, can guide Mexican and international buyers to beware when buying from certain suppliers in certain areas. They must require proof of compliance with labor law. The seal marking an enterprise is free from child labor can help, but firms should pass it every year.
- 4) Provision of services in exchange for contributions from workers and their employers. There is no question workers (and their employers) are being shortchanged in Baja California. IMSS must provide the services that are paid for.
- 5) INFONAVIT. Something similar happens to housing fund contributions. In theory, workers should be able to access loans using their savings (and their jobs) as collateral. But they can’t. First, land tenure must be legalized, and sale of irregular plots must end. Second, officials described a program by means of which workers

could get loans to build on the lots they occupy with their families. It must be implemented.

- 6) State and local governments must provide public services to these areas. The cost, especially for the provision of water, is likely to be high, but the recent municipalization of San Quintín could help, along with support from the state government.