

# Perspectives: Hispanic Dairy Employees

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During February–May 2004, Tom Maloney, Department of Applied Economics and Management, and David Grusenmeyer, PRO-DAIRY, Cornell University, conducted a survey of Hispanic dairy farm employees. The survey was conducted by personal interviews with individual employees on New York dairy farms. A brief employer survey was also conducted for each of the interviewed employees. The survey purpose was to determine Hispanic dairy employee perceptions of their work and their perceived needs from both their employer and the community. The results of the survey are intended to provide dairy employers with insights regarding how to supervise and reward their employees. In addition, it provides information to organizations, communities and individuals who wish to learn more about the

dynamics of Hispanic workers on New York dairy farms.

The survey was funded by a grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets and supported by NEDPA (Northeast Dairy Producers Association), New York Farm Bureau and New York State Migrant Education. This survey is one of the largest and most complete compilations of information on fulltime Hispanic dairy employees anywhere in the United States.

## Demographics

The 111 Hispanic employees surveyed were from 60 different farms in 17 counties distributed fairly evenly across New York State. Herd sizes represented in the survey sample ranged from 50 to 3,200 cows and was distributed as shown in Table 1.

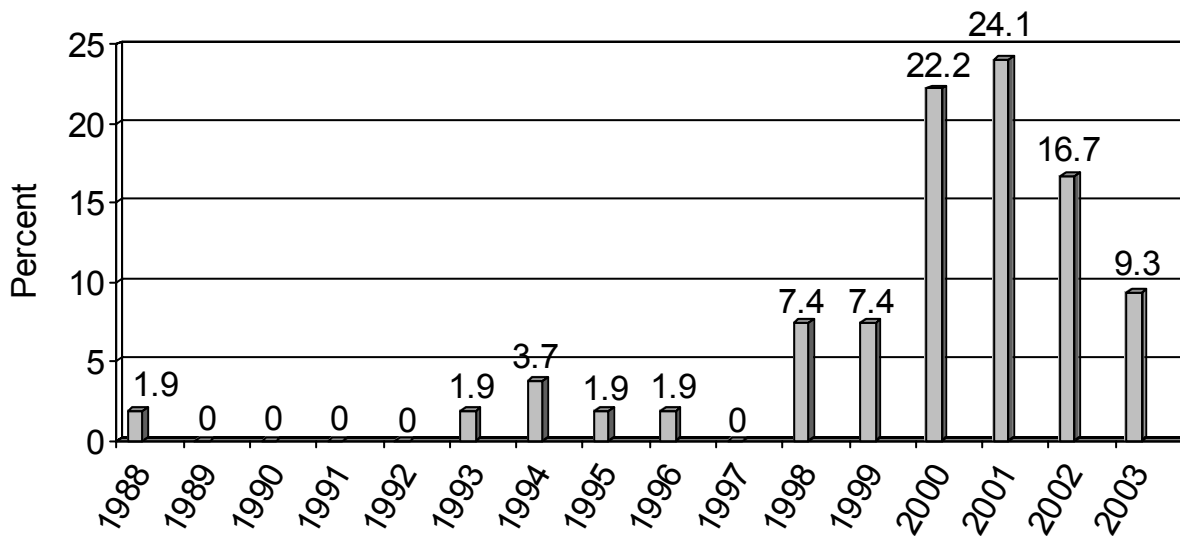
Table 1. Distribution of surveyed herds by size

Number of Cows	Percent of Farms in Sample
100 or less	3.3%
101-400	43.3%
401- 1,000	36.7%
1,001 or more	16.7%

Three-fourths of the surveyed workers were Mexican and about one-fourth Guatemalan. They are typically young, 84% under age 30 and 39% under 21. Only 3% of those surveyed have no formal education. About half (51%) have attended at least some primary school but went no further than primary school education. One-fourth (25%) completed secondary school, including 2% who attended or graduated from a university.

As the graph in figure 1 shows, survey data support the perception in New York that the utilization of Hispanic dairy employees has exploded in the new millennium. Of the surveyed employers, 75% hired their first Hispanic employee since January 2000. Data for 2004 are not displayed in the graph because a full calendar year is not represented.

Figure 1. Calendar Year First Hispanic Worker Was Hired



**Workforce Stability & Retention**

A key concern of any employer is retention of good workers. Among surveyed employees, 44% said their tenure with the farm has been less than one year, 29% between one and two years, about 20% between two and four years and 7% have been with their current employer 4 years or more. Compared to the 44% who have been with their current employer less than one year, only about 30% actually began working in the United States during the 12 months prior to the survey, while about 24% have been working in the U.S.

for 4 years or more compared to the 7% who have been with their current employer 4 years or more. There are two issues evident here, one is worker retention on individual farms and second, workers returning to their home country.

On average, surveyed workers have had about three U.S. employers since they began working in this country. Nearly 28% have had only one U.S. employer, while about the same number (29%) have had four or more U.S. employers.

Table 2. Distribution of the Number of U.S. Employers

Number of Employers	% of Workers (N=105)
1	27.6
2	22.9
3	21.0
4	11.4
5	7.6
6+	9.5

Various aspects of this survey have implications on Hispanic employee retention on individual farms. These implications are discussed in the appropriate sections.

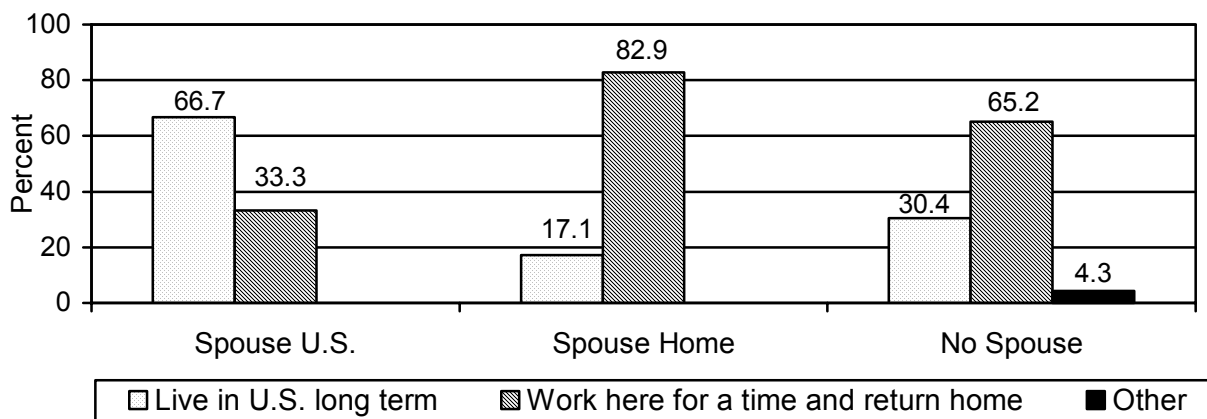
In trying to predict whether workers will remain working in the United States over some period of time, researchers have found that the most accurate predictor is not necessarily the workers' stated intent but rather the presence of nuclear family here in the United States with them. Among Hispanic employees on N.Y. dairy farms, some are here with brothers or cousins but few have wives or children here with them. Just over 44% of employees surveyed do not have a spouse, just over 39% have a spouse in their home country and only about 14% have a spouse with them here in the United States. When asked about children, 52% said they have children, while only 11% have children in the United States and slightly less than 5% had their children with them at the farm.

Where dairy workers have left and returned to their home countries, in some instances they are returning with their spouse and family. This may improve worker retention and workforce stability, however, it can be a challenge in communities where family services, most notably schools and social services, are not

equipped to handle non-English speakers or are unfamiliar with Hispanic culture. Employers may be seen as placing a disproportionate burden on the local education or social system. Cultural differences can also create social concerns. For example, in some Hispanic cultures and locations it is not uncommon for 14 and 15 year old girls to marry older boys and begin a family. Among social services agencies this is a problem in the context of U.S. culture and has created some complicated situation. Knowing this, it is better that employers think about their reaction and response to these possibilities rather than being taken by surprise.

When asked about their future plans, nearly seven in ten (68%) surveyed workers said they will work here for some period of time and eventually return to their home country. Only about three in ten said they plan to stay in the U.S. long-term. Consistent with the previously mentioned findings of other research the presence of a spouse with them here in the U.S. had a significant influence on their stated future plans. Nearly 67% of surveyed workers here with their spouse said they plan to remain in the U.S. long-term, compared with 17% for workers with a spouse in their home country and 30% for unmarried workers.

Figure 2. Future Plans by Marital Status



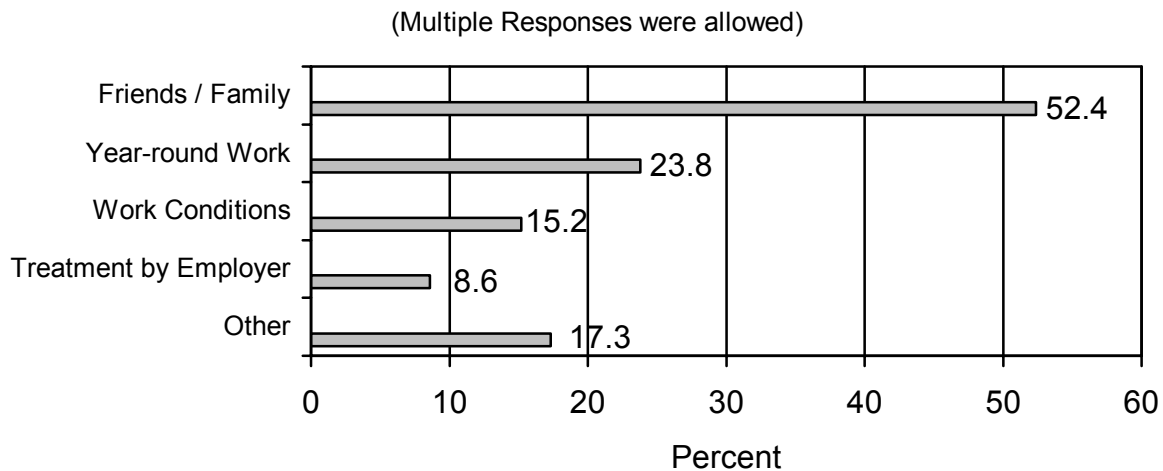
### Why Did They Come?

Workers were asked why they came to this particular farm and were offered several possible responses. The choices were, because of: wages, friends or family, the availability of year-round work, the working conditions, the treatment by the employer, or they were permitted to offer other reasons. Each employee was permitted to cite multiple reasons.

More than one-half (52%) of the workers said friends and/or family was the primary reason for coming to the farm. This is not surprising since

Hispanic workers come from collectivist cultures where family and friends are very important and providing support and assistance in a variety of ways is expected. Having year-round work that avoids the migrant lifestyle is also attractive to the Hispanic employees surveyed. About 24% of surveyed employees were attracted by wages and about 15% by working conditions. In general, Hispanic employees regard dairy work as more desirable work and easier than the labor intense, hand harvest field work they are accustomed to.

Figure 3. Distribution of Reasons for Coming to Work on This Farm



*“Other” reasons cited by Hispanic employees include:*

- Heard the boss was good and they treat people well
- There was no work at the previous farm and they needed a job
- Labor contractor
- Wanted more work hours

It is important for farm owners and managers to realize that networks of family and friends are important in Hispanic culture both in terms of recruiting employees, as well as retaining them.

Building and maintaining a reputation as a fair and honest person and being known as a person who cares about your employees will go a long way toward assuring a supply of good employees and aid in retaining the employees you have.

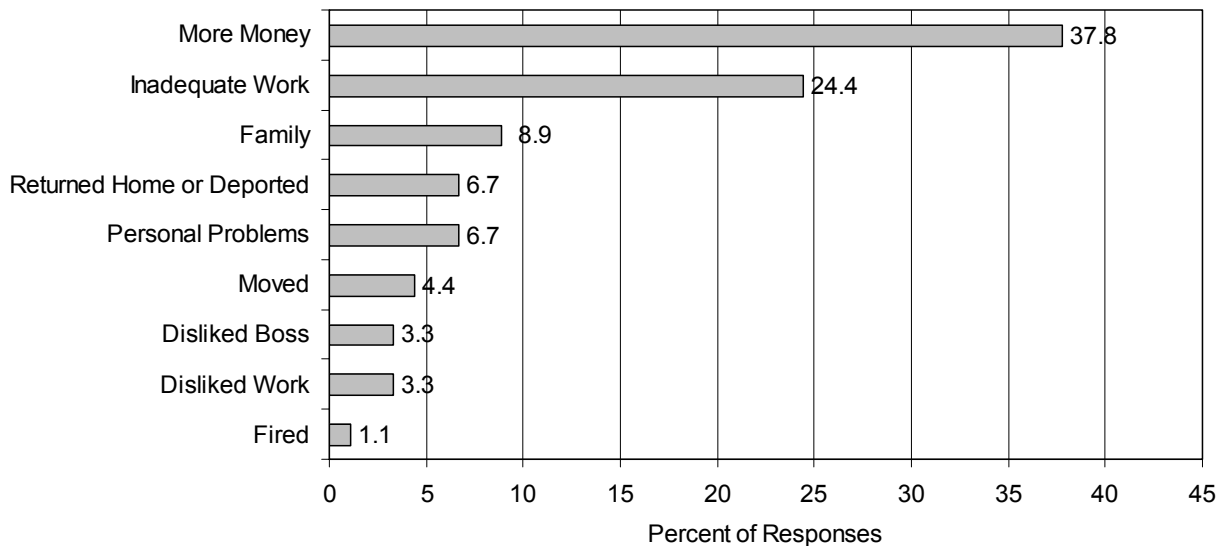
### Why did they leave previous employment?

In addition to why they came to their current job, employees were also asked why they left their previous job. Of the surveyed employees, 68%, or almost seven out of ten, came from non-dairy employment and for 28% of the surveyed employees the job they left was in their home country. Employees were not presented with any pre-defined reasons and were allowed to cite more than one reason for leaving their last employment. The most common reason cited, 38% of responses, was that they came to their

current job for more money. The survey data do not differentiate whether they came from Mexico to this job for more money, came from a non-dairy job in the United States, or came from previous dairy employment in the U.S. The second most common response, about 24%, was that there was not adequate work in their previous employment. Most employees in this category were coming from seasonal or temporary jobs that ended. Some cited their

previous farm closing; others said they were looking for more steady work. These two responses being far and away the most common responses for leaving a job highlight the desire of most Hispanic employees to want to work and earn as much money as possible while they are in the United States. Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of these and other stated reasons for the surveyed workers to leave their previous employment.

Figure 4. Distribution for Why Employees Left Their Previous Employment (Multiple responses were allowed)



Hispanic employees are potentially a highly mobile workforce. From the perspective of employee retention, these data suggest that employers should be certain that they are paying competitive wages and that they have adequate year-round work and hours available for their employees.

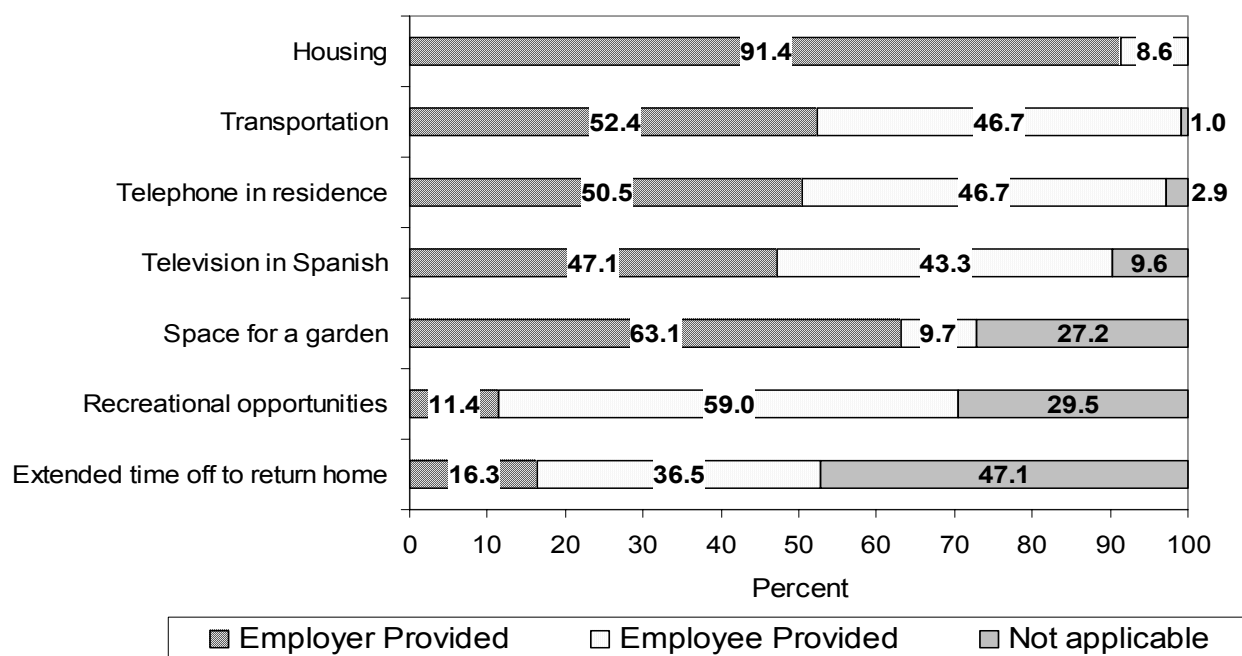
**Compensation**

The starting wage reported by employers for their Hispanic employees ranged from \$5.50 to \$10.00 per hour with a mean of \$6.87. Current wages for 102 employees for whom we have wage data supplied by the employer ranged from \$5.50 to \$11.50 with an average wage of \$7.51 (this includes new employees still at their starting wage). In addition to cash wages, from the employees' perspective, the total compensation package for over 91% of

employees included employer-provided housing including water, heat and electricity. About half the employees also had transportation, a telephone in their residence, and Spanish language television provided by their employer. Just over 63% of employees had garden space provided by their employer.

Other forms of compensation extended to employees include: milk quality or work performance bonuses, annual cash bonuses, extra weekend or holiday pay, some food, uniforms, clothing, boots, and payment of medical bills. The graph in figure 5 shows the distribution of benefits and services received in compensation packages, from the employees' perspective.

**Figure 5. Distribution of Services Provided to Worker** N=103-105 workers



In addition to paying into Social Security, only 1% of employers say they pay into a retirement account for their employees and none of the surveyed employees are contributing to an employee funded retirement. None of the surveyed employees received health insurance, however, in written comments several employers said they paid part or all of the employees' medical bills.

Many employers also provide training opportunities beyond basic introductory training for their Hispanic employees. Advanced training opportunities are seen as important and valuable to many Hispanic employees. One benefit of the job is that most (81%) of the employers say that job advancement opportunities are available for Hispanic employees.

Total compensation should be thought of more broadly than just cash wages; it is the total value of everything given to an employee in exchange for their work efforts. Having compensation packages documented with these survey data is

important since some people believe that dairy producers pay their immigrant employees below-minimum wage. For employers facing these accusations, one challenge is to fairly and accurately establish the dollar value of your total compensation package.

### Job Functions and Training Needs

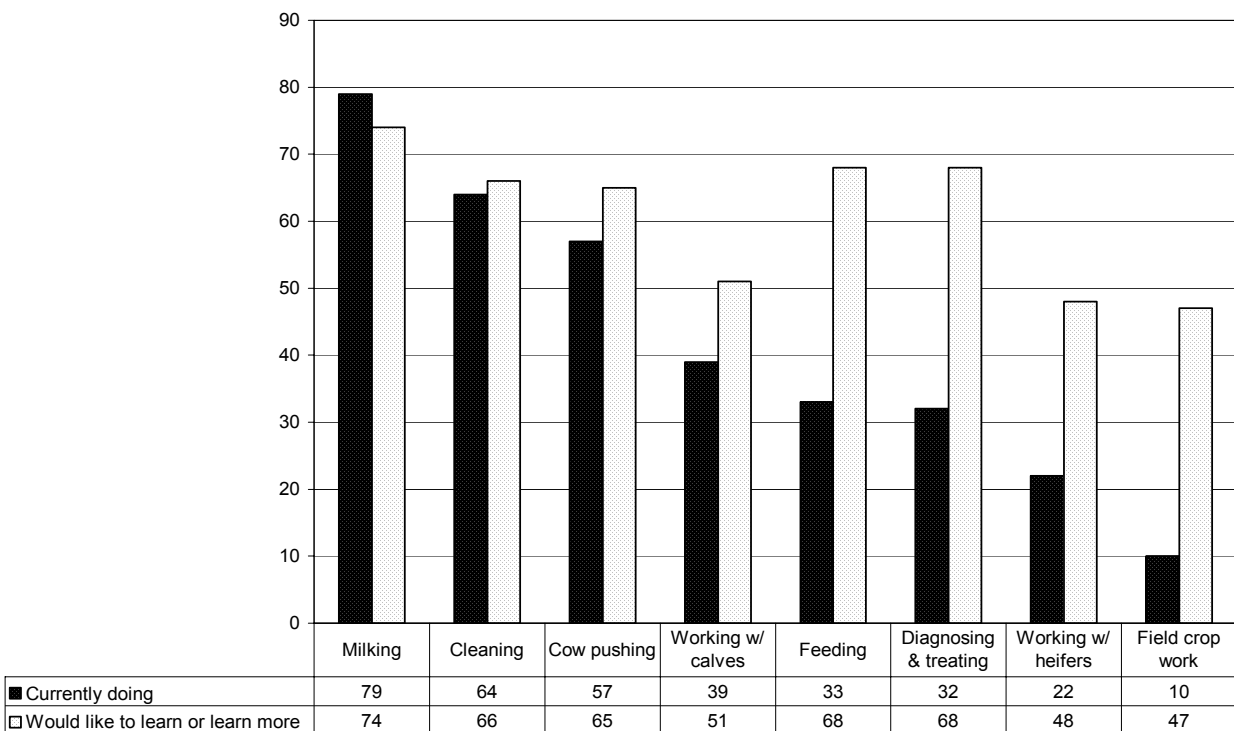
Workers were asked whether they had ever worked with dairy cows before coming to work at the farm they were on. Nearly six out of ten (58%) said they had some previous experience working with cows, but about four in ten, or 42%, had never worked with cows before. Further, only about one third (32%) of the surveyed workers said their last job prior to coming to this farm was also at a dairy farm.

By far most Hispanic employees interviewed did milking related work with the lactating herd as milkers and cow pushers along with doing barn cleaning tasks.

About one third of the Hispanic employees, as part or all of their job, did higher level tasks like feeding cows, diagnosing and treating health problems and/or working with calves and heifers. Managers have found that, while they believe it is worth the extra effort, promoting immigrant workers into higher level positions presents additional challenges with language barriers, training, and cultural differences. At the same time, as the chart in figure 6 shows, 74% of Hispanic employees said they want to learn, or learn more about milking. About 50% want to learn or learn more about working with calves

and heifers. About 68% would like to learn or learn more about feeding cows or diagnosing and treating cow health problems. Some 47% want to learn or learn more about field crop work. There is a distinct desire on the part of most Hispanic workers to learn new skills or improve existing skills. From a workforce-planning perspective, this means owners and managers must think first about how language and cultural barriers can be minimized or overcome so that these willing learners can be trained and developed to be successful in higher level position and with more responsibility.

Figure 6. Activities Performed  
(multiple responses allowed)



Employees were allowed to freely choose from a list the tasks they regularly performed and then separately select tasks they would like to learn to do, or learn more about if they were currently doing the task.

In terms of job enrichment and job satisfaction, and the relationship to employee retention and motivation, owners and managers should consider the need for advanced training. Moving Hispanic employees into production

management positions and giving them greater responsibility intensifies language barrier issues. However, the more progressive employers of Hispanic labor see the tremendous potential and are working to overcome the difficulties. Some

form of Spanish and English language training, as well as finding technical production management trainers who are fluent in Spanish is critical to success.

**More Information**

Additional data from this survey are still being analyzed and more implications for managing a Hispanic workforce will likely be discovered. For more information, or to obtain a final report of this survey contact David Grusenmeyer at 607-255-0756, [dcg10@cornell.edu](mailto:dcg10@cornell.edu) or Tom Maloney at 607-255-1628, [trm5@cornell.edu](mailto:trm5@cornell.edu).