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MSHS Supplement to the National Agricultural Worker's Survey Brief 2: Language & Literacy Backgrounds of MSHS-Eligible Parents

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Research Brief

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In recent years, the body of research focused on the experiences of children and families eligible for early care and education through Head Start programs has grown substantially.[1] Despite these advancements, however, few studies have examined Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS)[2] programs and the farmworker families they serve. MSHS programs provide child development services to migrant and seasonal families while parents engage in difficult and often dangerous agricultural work. Just like other Head Start programs, MSHS offers a variety of resources, including early education, medical and dental care, nutritional services, parental involvement activities, and mental health services.

In an effort to better understand the MSHS-eligible population and address the obstacles and barriers to accessing MSHS services that families face, the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families recently co-sponsored "Migrant and Seasonal Supplement to the National Agricultural Workers Survey – Report II," which presents data from the 2007-2011 National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS). The Supplement Report sorts through the larger NAWS sample, identifies MSHS-eligible families, and establishes regional and national estimates on a wide variety of descriptive information, including the childcare access, parent backgrounds, and family characteristics of MSHS-eligible households.

This research brief first confirms the eligibility requirements that the NAWS uses for identifying MSHS-eligible families, and then provides a general overview of the contents within the 2015 MSHS Supplement Report, with a spotlight on the language and literacy of parents from MSHS-eligible households. A companion brief examines the household complexity of MSHS-eligible families.

MSHS Eligibility and the NAWS

The MSHS Supplement Report estimates the population of MSHS-eligible families, who earn at least half of their income through agriculture work, have at least one child six years old or younger, and live below the federal poverty level.

The MSHS Supplement Report presents estimates of the national and regional populations of MSHS-eligible children and families by approximating the proportion of migrant and seasonal farmworkers who meet three MSHS eligibility requirements.

[1] Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2014). *Child and Family Development Research.* Washington, DC. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/dcfd_fy2014_annual_report.pdf

[2] Boss, Jennifer. "Migrant Head Start Services for Infants and Toddlers." Office of Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Early Head Start. Head Start Bulletin #69*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/for-families/Everyday%20Parenting/Parents%20as%20Teachers/edudev_art_00213_072505.html

The eligibility requirements are that farmworker families have (1) at least one child under the age of six, (2) more than 50 percent of their income earned from agricultural work, and (3) a total income below 100 percent of the federal poverty level for their household size. MSHS enrolls children from birth through age five, offering early education to low-income migrant and seasonal families until children reach the age of mandatory school attendance. MSHS defines farm work as "agricultural work that involves the production and harvesting of tree and field crop."[3] For the Supplement Report, the NAWS team uses several years of survey data on all farmworkers (2007-2011) to gather a large enough sub-sample of MSHS-eligible respondents, which supports an estimation of values for MSHS-eligible farmworkers nationally. Thus, the Supplement Report describes all MSHS-eligible farmworkers, including both those who have received MSHS services and those who have not.

The 2015 MSHS Supplement Report on MSHS-Eligible Families

In addition to enumerating national and regional populations, the Supplement Report describes characteristics of MSHS-eligible children and families and, for comparison purposes, migrant and seasonal families who have at least one child under age six and live above the poverty level. The report covers a variety of topics on childcare access, parent backgrounds, and family characteristics.

The Supplement Report describes the following on childcare: the frequency with which families utilize different types of childcare (e.g., parental care, relative care, or center-based care); their reasons for selecting that option; where children stay while parents work; the number of types of care that families utilize; which they use most often; their childcare preferences; and knowledge of, perceptions about, and barriers to accessing MSHS.

With regards to parents' backgrounds, the Supplement Report describes their language skills, in both English and Spanish. It covers parents' educational experiences (i.e., the highest grade that they have completed and whether they attend adult classes); the number of years that they have resided in the U.S. and their country of birth; and the number of employers that they have had in the past 12 months. The 2015 Supplement Report describes parents' health and health care access, including markers of mental health such as rates of depressive symptoms and parents' difficulty being away from family. Parent and child health insurance and parent injury history are also explored, and the report estimates the percentage of MSHS-eligible parents who are exposed to pesticides while at work.

Finally, family characteristics that the Supplement Report covers include the following: household complexity, which refers to the number of relatives and children who live within the economic household of respondents (including those who are not part of the respondent's immediate family); household income; families' receipt of social and educational services; and dwelling characteristics (e.g., number of bedrooms). In sum, the Supplement Report relies on parent reports to describe the childcare access, parent backgrounds, and family characteristics of MSHS-eligible families and higher-income migrant and seasonal families. In total, the Supplement Report offers rich demographic information on the families that MSHS programs seek to serve.

[3] Eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance in Head Start, Definitions, 45 CFR § 1305.2 (2007). Retrieved from: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1305/1305.2%20Definitions..htm.

Brief 2 Highlight: Language & Literacy Backgrounds of MSHS-Eligible Parents

In an effort to describe the unique strengths and challenges of MSHS-eligible families, the Supplement Report offers parents' reports of their own dominant language as well as their Spanish reading ability, English speaking ability, and English reading ability.

MSHS-Eligible Parents' Dominant Language

The majority of migrant and seasonal families have Spanish as their dominant language.

As Table 1 illustrates, the majority of MSHS-eligible families (88 percent) speak Spanish as their dominant language. Virtually all MSHS-eligible families who speak Spanish as their dominant language (96 percent) also report speaking Spanish 'well'.[4]

Table 1: Dominant Language of Farmworker

Dominant Language of Farmworker	Household Income Level		
	≤100% of poverty level (MSHS-eligible)	101-130% of poverty level	131-200% of poverty level
English	9%	9%[a]	15%
Spanish	88%	90%	84%
Indigenous[c]	2%[a]	-[b]	≤1%[a]
Creole	-[b]	-[b]	-[b]
Other[d]	-[b]	-[b]	-[b]
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table N = 1,733, there are missing values for 3 respondents. The chi-square test of independence did not indicate a significant relationship between dominant language and income group.
[a] Estimate has relative standard errors between 31 and 50 percent, and should be interpreted with caution.
[b] Estimates with relative standard errors greater than 50 percent are not shown.
[c] Indigenous languages include Aguacateca, Akateko, Amuzgo, Chinanteco, Ixil, Kanjobal, Mam, Maya, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Otomi, Tarasco, Tlapaneco, Triqui, Zapotec, and Zoque.
[d] Various other languages were mentioned, but were reported by too few respondents to support statistical analysis on their own. "Other" languages included Amharic, Cambodian, Creole, Ewe, French, German, Illocano, Khmer, Karen, Mandarin, Moldavan, Punjabi, Russian, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese.

[4] The Supplement Report also notes that 2 percent of MSHS-eligible families have an indigenous language as do a negligible percentage of families earning 101-130 percent of the poverty level and less than 1 percent of families earning 131-200 percent of the poverty level. (The report emphasizes that these estimates have a relative standard error of 31-50 percent, and thus should be interpreted with caution.)

MSHS-Eligible Parents' Spanish Reading Ability

The majority of migrant and seasonal families who speak Spanish are able to read Spanish 'well'.

The majority of migrant and seasonal farmworkers who speak Spanish also read Spanish. Table 2 shows that 70 percent of MSHS-eligible families who speak Spanish read Spanish 'well', as compared with 77-80 percent of higher-income migrant and seasonal parents who speak Spanish. Nearly all Spanish-speaking MSHS-eligible parents reported being able to read at least 'a little' Spanish.

Table 2: Farmworkers' Ability to Read Spanish

How well do you read Spanish?	Household Income Level		
	≤100% of poverty level (MSHS-eligible)	101-130% of poverty level	131-200% of poverty level
Not at all	2%[a]	-[b]	1%[a]
A little	7%	5%[a]	6%
Somewhat	20%	14%	15%
Well	70%	80%	77%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table N = 1,625 farmworkers who reported they speak Spanish. The chi-square test of independence did not indicate a significant relationship between ability to read Spanish and income group.
[a] Estimate has relative standard errors between 31 and 50 percent, and should be interpreted with caution.
[b] Estimates with relative standard errors greater than 50 percent are not shown.

MSHS-Eligible Parents' English Speaking Ability

Nearly half of MSHS-eligible families speak no English.

In terms of English speaking ability, approximately 46 percent of MSHS-eligible respondents speak no English at all (as opposed to speaking 'a little', 'somewhat', or 'well'), relative to 31 and 26 percent of respondents from households earning 101-130 percent and 131-200 percent of the poverty level, respectively (Table 3). The Supplement Report suggests that a minority of migrant and seasonal households with young children (9 to 15 percent) speak English as their dominant language (Table 1).

Table 3: Farmworkers' Ability to Speak English

How well do you speak English?	Household Income Level		
	≤100% of poverty level (MSHS-eligible)	101-130% of poverty level	131-200% of poverty level
Not at all	46%	31%	26%
A little	31%	43%	39%
Somewhat	7%	12%	16%
Well	15%	13%	20%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table N = 1,729, there are missing values for 7 respondents. The chi-square test of independence did not indicate a significant relationship between ability to speak English and income group.

MSHS-Eligible Families' English Reading Ability

Over half of MSHS-eligible parents are unable to read any English.

As Table 4 shows, with regards to English literacy, 59 percent of MSHS-eligible parents reported not being able to read any English (rather than being able to read 'a little', 'somewhat', or 'well'), as compared with 42 and 35 percent of parents earning 101-130 percent and 131-200 percent of the poverty line, respectively.

Table 4: Farmworkers' Ability to Read English

How well do you read English?	Household Income Level		
	≤100% of poverty level (MSHS-eligible)	101-130% of poverty level	131-200% of poverty level
Not at all	59%	42%	35%
A little	22%	38%	34%
Somewhat	4%	8%	12%
Well	15%	13%	18%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table N = 1,725, there are missing values for 11 respondents. The chi-square test of independence did not indicate a significant relationship between ability to read English and income group.

Implications for Programs

In sum, with regards to language and literacy, the Supplement Report suggests that parents from MSHS-eligible households are generally Spanish speakers. The majority reported that Spanish is their dominant language and that they are able to read Spanish 'well'. Less than one-fifth of migrant and seasonal households reported being able to read and speak English 'well', and only 9 percent of MSHS-eligible families identified English as their dominant language.

These findings demonstrate that the families whom MSHS programs serve have particular language and literacy strengths within their native languages, but challenges in the context

of an English-only environment. Understanding MSHS-eligible families' household situations can inform considerations of family needs, risks and resources. For example, given that MSHS-eligible parents are likely to struggle with English, connecting families with English-language services may be one approach to strengthening their overall skills for educational engagement with their children. Perhaps language barriers hinder parents' ability to submit necessary paper-work or understand eligibility requirements. While it is no substitute for having conversations with families to better recognize their specific needs and experiences, the information that the MSHS Supplement Report presents may identify some areas of focus that programs can use to enhance their capacity to serve communities.

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