

Research Highlights

H-2A Workers' Preferences for Job Attributes: Evidence from an Experiment

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Overview

This study examines how H-2A agricultural guest workers value different job attributes beyond wages, providing new evidence relevant to labor policy and employer practices in U.S. agriculture. Using original survey data and an experimental design, the analysis estimates workers' willingness to accept trade-offs between wages and nonpecuniary job benefits.

Data and Methods

The study is based on in-person surveys conducted in 2022 with 154 H-2A workers employed in the Washington State apple industry. Participants completed a discrete choice experiment in which they evaluated hypothetical job offers varying by wage rate and nonwage attributes, including housing amenities, training opportunities, vacation options, and overtime pay rules. Worker preferences were analyzed using random utility theory and random-parameters logit models.

Key Findings

The most highly valued job attribute is the opportunity to return home for a short vacation during periods of low work intensity, underscoring the importance of family separation costs for H-2A workers. Training opportunities—particularly those combining English-language instruction with machinery operation—are the second most valued attribute. Housing amenities that improve living conditions are also strongly valued.

In contrast, overtime pay is the least valued benefit. Workers prefer the flexibility to work as many hours as agreed with their employer rather than being constrained by overtime thresholds, even when overtime pay is offered. This suggests that workers prioritize total earnings and job flexibility over formal wage premiums.

Implications

The results indicate substantial heterogeneity in preferences across worker tenure and education levels, highlighting the importance of tailoring recruitment and retention strategies. Overall, the findings suggest that policies and employer practices emphasizing opportunities for family visits, skill development, and improved housing conditions may be more effective for attracting and retaining H-2A workers than wage-based incentives alone.