

Can the Temporary Foreign Worker program be saved?

Canada says TFWs are the solution to filling jobs Canadians won't take. So why are workers and employers so dissatisfied?

Summary

Catherine Connelly's myth-busting analysis exposes the failings of Canada's TFW program, drawing on 100+ interviews with those who hire and those who work.



What is it?

A program that lets employers hire foreign workers to fill temporary jobs when qualified Canadians are not available.

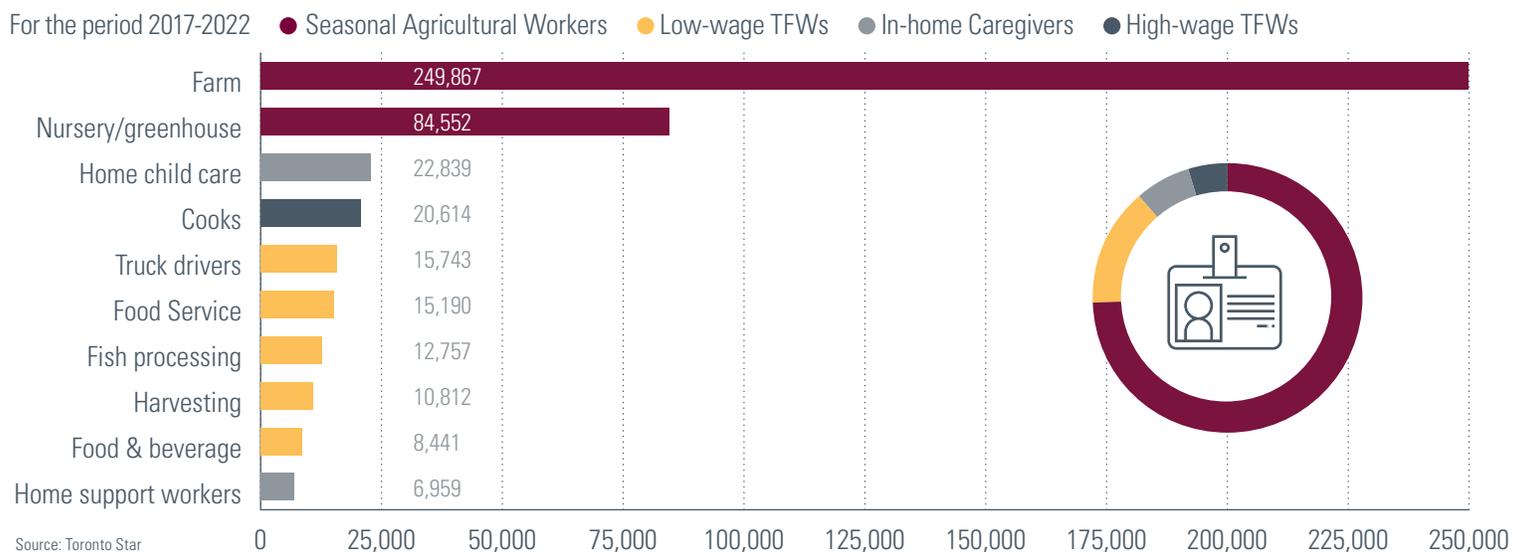


The Catch

TFWs have **closed work permits**, allowing them to work only for the employer who hired them.

Employers who want to hire a TFW must submit a **Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA)** proving no qualified Canadians are available to do the job.

What work do they perform?



How many TFWs are there in Canada?*

↑ 2022 job vacancies reach **\$1 million**, unemployment at record low

↑ **Number of TFWs** approved in Q2 2022 **almost DOUBLED** over Q2 2021

↑ **Number of TFWs** approved in Q3 2022 **almost TRIPLED** over Q3 2021

What do people say about the program?



Employers

- Costly
- Time-consuming
- Slow
- Excessive fees/unethical practices of hired agents
- Employers who flout guidelines or try to “jump the queue”



TFWs

- Wage theft/illegal fees
- Unsafe working conditions
- Substandard housing
- Threat of being fired/deported if they speak out
- Agents who charge illegal fees or force them to contract for lower pay or less benefits



“The [employer] said we’re running out of money, so when I give you your pay cheque take it to the bank, cash it, and bring back 50 per cent.”

– TFW in Alberta as relayed to a community support worker

“The owner [said] I have a good slave, I bring him from Morocco, just give him all the product for three stores, he will do it. He will not speak up.”

– Moroccan baker for a chain restaurant

“You ask for a mask, they say ‘buy your own’. I got too much sick, lost maybe twenty-five pounds.”

– Tobacco farm worker from Mexico

“I couldn’t be awake to catch her. She fell from the bed and they blamed me.”

– Philippine caregiver forced to sleep in same room as employer



Why are TFWs so exploited?

Closed work permits

With closed work permits, TFWs can’t leave their job and be hired by another Canadian employer. They stay with the employer who brought them to Canada, and hope they might one day achieve permanent residency.

How can we shift the balance?

Open work permits

Open work permits would provide **greater choice, flexibility and security** for both TFWs and those who employ them.

A level playing field for all with Canada as the ultimate winner.

For more information

Enduring Work: Experiences with Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program, by Catherine Connelly, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023.

