

**CHAPTER 5**  
**FARM AND FOOD DISTRIBUTION EMPLOYMENT**

NANCY L. MCCOURT, KIRA PASCOE AND CHAR PEPPENGER

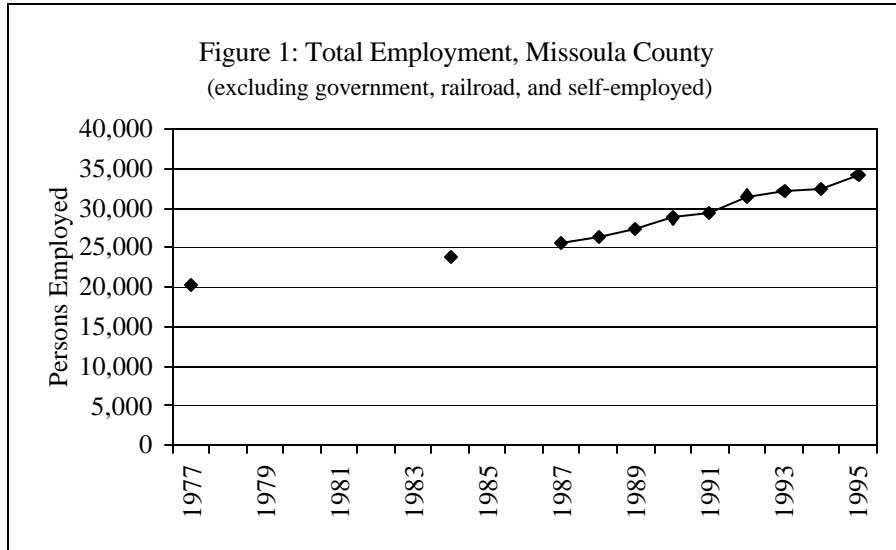
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**OVERVIEW**

Employment is often an indicator of the importance of a given economic activity in a community. This chapter looks at employment trends in agriculture (including for farmers and farm laborers) and in the food distribution system (including processors, wholesalers, retailers, and eating places). The vast majority of farm operators in Missoula County do not consider farming to be their principal occupation, suggesting that many operators farm or ranch for enjoyment and/or for supplemental income. Most farms in the county do not appear to need much hired labor, as farm labor employment (i.e., farm workers) account for a very small percentage of overall employment in the county. Many more Missoula County residents are employed in the food distribution system (about 13.6% of all County employment in 1995, the most recent statistics obtained). Of particular importance are jobs in food service establishments (e.g., restaurants), which employed over 3,100 people in 1995.

## TOTAL EMPLOYMENT

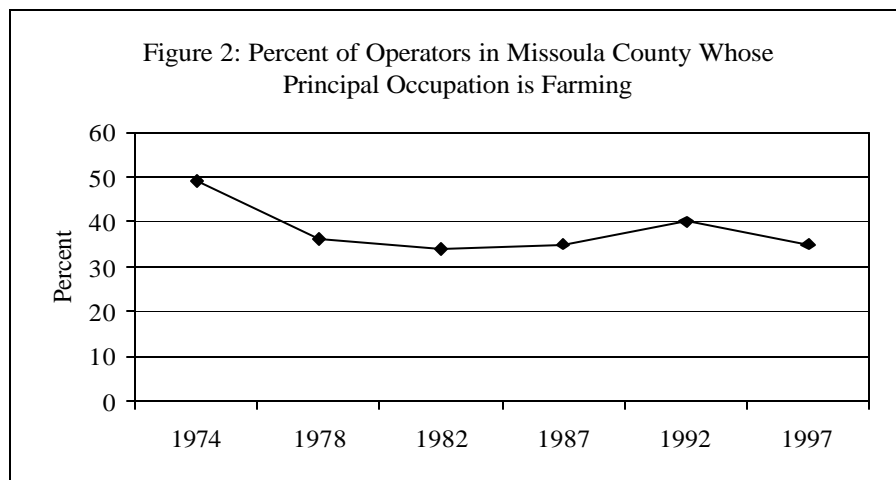
For purposes of creating context, Figure 1 shows Missoula County employment<sup>1</sup> trends (i.e., estimated number of jobs for all job sectors except government, railroad, and self-employed) between 1977 and 1995. The county experienced steady growth with employment increasing 69.8% over all job sectors.



## FARMING AS PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION<sup>2</sup>

### The trends.

The number of farm operators (a term for people employed as farmers) in Missoula County has steadily increased from 298 in 1974 to 482 in 1997. However, the percent of operators who reported their *principal occupation* as farming in the agricultural census has decreased from 49% in 1974 to 35% in 1997 (see Figure 2). It seems apparent that the majority of farm operators in the County now make most of their living from off-farm jobs or income.



The steady increase in total farm operators but decrease in percentage of operators who consider farming to be their principal occupation in Missoula County mirrors the trends for agriculture in the state of Montana as a whole. However, at the state level, a much greater percentage of farm operators consider farming their principal occupation (i.e., 65% in 1997).

### Why are these trends occurring?

The increase in farm operators but decrease in percent of those whose principal occupation is farming may be due to that fact that Missoula's population is increasing, and some people may work their land to generate a little extra income. Thus, it could be that a lot of the operators, especially those who are land owners and who do not consider farming their principal occupation, are working the land part-time. Further research is needed to determine exactly what accounts for these trends.

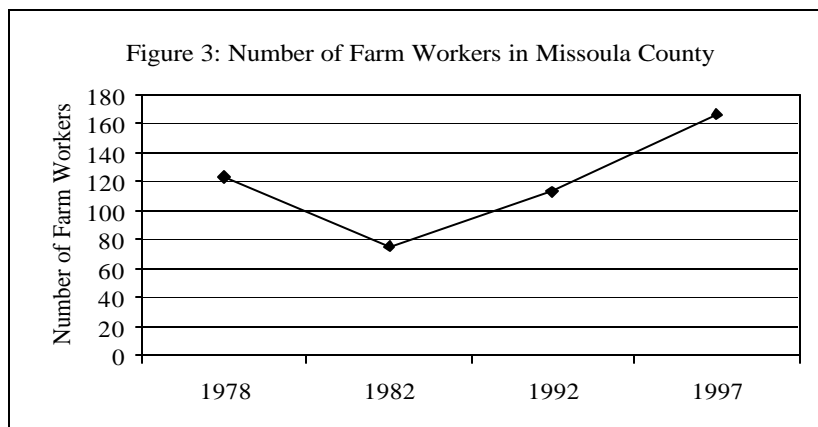
### Why is this important?

The farm operator employment trend is important because it shows that while there is increased employment for operators in Missoula County, the percent of full-time farm operators is decreasing. This suggests that it is not easy to make a living, full-time, from employment as a farm operator in Missoula County. Alternatively, the increased percentage of operators whose principal occupation is off the farm may indicate an increase in "hobby" farmers, who farm/ranch mainly for enjoyment or supplemental income. More research is needed to ascertain exactly what type of farming, and therefore what type of farm operator, is needed for sustainable food production in Missoula County.

## FARM LABOR EMPLOYMENT<sup>3</sup>

### The trends.

Farm labor employment data reflects farm laborers who work 150 or more days per year. Missoula County farm labor employment trends are shown in Figure 3. Missoula County experienced a sharp decline of 39% from 1978 to 1982 in farm labor jobs, which was a period when many farmers carried high debt loads making hiring labor more difficult. However farm labor employment has increased steadily since 1982, from 75 in 1982 to 166 in 1997, an increase of 121%.



**Why are these trends occurring?**

Although there has been a slight increase in the number of farm workers in the county in the last decade, it appears that most farms and ranches do not require much hired labor. This may be due to the nature of livestock and hay production (which are predominant in the county). Most likely, Missoula County farmers rely principally on household labor, occasional help from family and friends, and/or very short-term employment of hired hands (e.g., during haying).

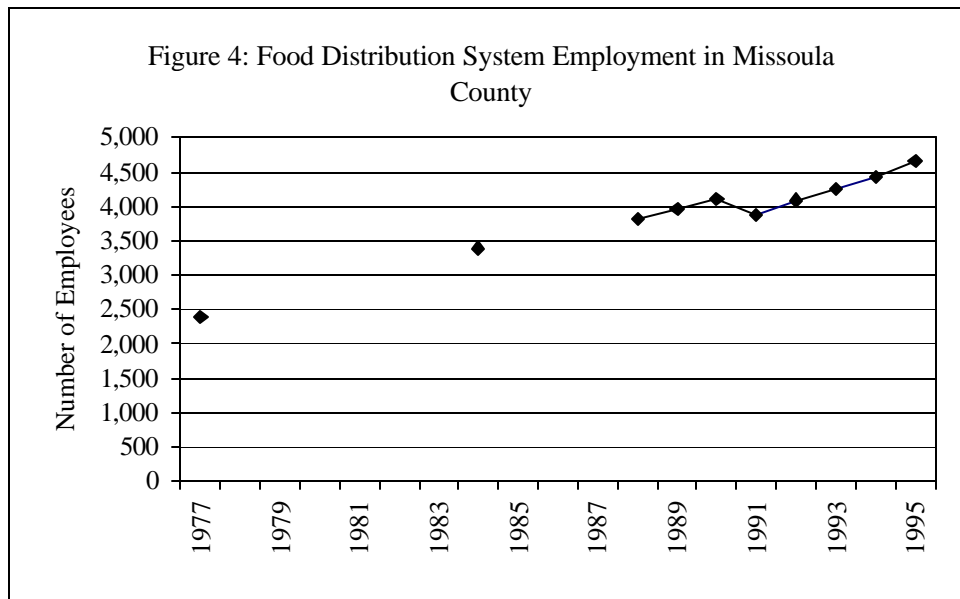
**Why is this important?**

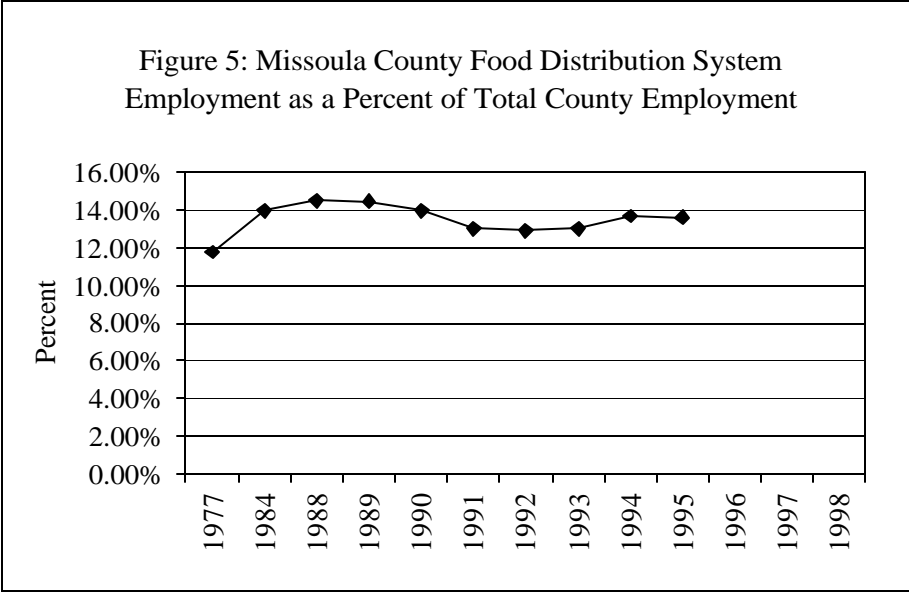
Missoula County farms are mostly small or “family farms,” that is, they are family owned and/or operated rather than organized on an industrial model, which relies much more heavily on hired labor. Not surprisingly, farm labor employment has accounted for a negligible percentage of overall county employment, between 0.3 and 0.5% depending on the year. A look at how farms are used for production and the corresponding need for farm labor on these farms may be helpful in clarifying county farm labor employment.

**FOOD DISTRIBUTION<sup>4</sup> SYSTEM EMPLOYMENT**

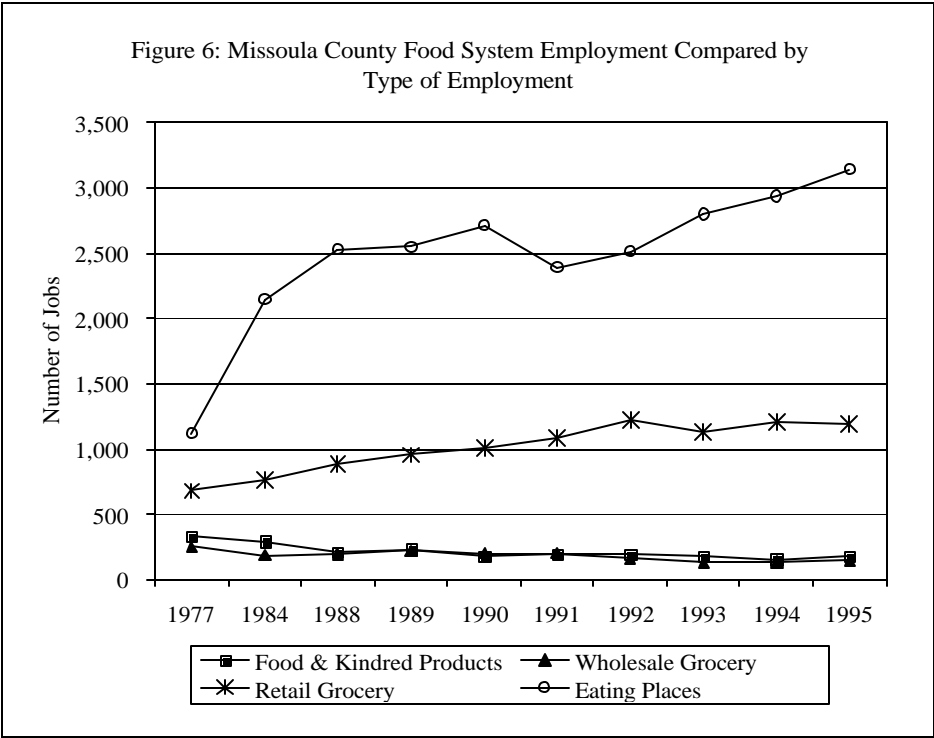
**The trends.**

The food distribution system describes how food gets to consumers, including processors, wholesalers, retailers, and eating places. Total Missoula County employment (all sectors) increased between 1988 and 1995 by 30% as was shown in Figure 1 (see also footnote 1). Combined food distribution system employment in Missoula County grew by 22% during that same time period (see Figure 4). Maintaining a fairly steady segment of overall county employment, food distribution system employment ranged from 12% to 14.5% of total county employment (all sectors) in the same years (see Figure 5).





However, a closer look at the data specific to each type of employment within the food distribution system may be more revealing (see Figure 6). Both Food & Kindred Products and Wholesale Grocery and Related Products experienced decreases in employment, 12% and 26% respectively, between 1988 and 1995. Meanwhile Retail Food Stores & Grocery increased employment by 35%; Eating Places increased employment by 24%. Thus, food distribution employment typically associated with the service sector (i.e. restaurants and retail food stores) increased while total jobs in the food manufacturing, processing and wholesale grocery sector experienced some loss in jobs.



### **Why are these trends occurring?**

The greatest growth in food system jobs has occurred in eating places. This trend makes sense because the number of food service establishments (e.g., restaurants) in Missoula County has grown considerably in recent decades, as described in Chapter Four. Likewise, the declining number of jobs in businesses that process food and kindred products (and to a certain extent wholesale grocers) reflects the reduction in the number of such establishments.

### **Why is this important?**

It appears Missoula County is experiencing an overall increase in jobs associated with retail service and sales of food, often minimum wage and entry level positions. At the same time there has been a decrease in jobs associated with higher paying food manufacturing and processing and wholesale grocery industries. Further investigation into the possible impact of the decreased food manufacturing and processing and wholesale grocery jobs on markets for local farmers and in turn on the need for hired farm labor is recommended.

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<sup>1</sup> **Total Employment** (as reported in U.S. Census, County Business Patterns): An estimated number of jobs, full-time plus part-time, by place of work, excluding most government, railroad, and self-employed persons. Full-time and part-time are counted at equal weight. Employees, sole proprietors, and active partners are included, but unpaid family workers and volunteers are not.

<sup>2</sup> *Terms that may be helpful in this section:*

**Farm Operator:** According to the agricultural census, the term "operator" designates a person who operates a farm, either doing the work or making day to day decisions about the farm. The operator can be the owner, a member of the owner's household, a hired manager, tenant or share cropper. A person is considered the operator only for the land which is retained for his/her own operation. For partnerships, only one partner is counted as the operator. The number of "farms" in the county is not always equal to the number of "farm operators" in a given census year.

**Farm:** Any place that had, or would normally have had over \$1000 or more in agricultural product sales during the census year.

<sup>3</sup> **Farm Labor Employment:** The number of workers engaged in the direct production of agricultural commodities, either livestock or crops; whether as a sole proprietor, partner or hired laborer, working 150+ days in the given year.

<sup>4</sup> The food distribution system describes how food gets to us. In U.S. Census terms, this includes Food & Kindred Products, Wholesale Grocery and Related Products, Retail Food Stores & Grocery, and Eating Places. Food and Kindred Products is a wholesale category encompassing establishments that manufacture or process foods and beverages for human consumption, and certain related products, such as manufactured ice, chewing gum, vegetable and animal fats and oils, and prepared feeds for animals and fowl.

