

Migrant Farmworkers: Pursuing Security in an Unstable Labor Market



Based on Data from the
National Agricultural Workers
Survey (NAWS)

Research Report No. 5

U.S. Department of Labor
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy
Office of Program Economics
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Robert B. Reich, Secretary

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy
Leslie Loble, Acting Assistant Secretary
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S. agricultural producers depend on migrant farmworkers to meet the industry's highly seasonal labor demand. Migrants, most of whom migrate from other countries, comprise 42% of the farm labor force and are critical for harvesting and other short-term tasks. Without migrant farmworkers, many agricultural employers, particularly those in the fresh fruit, nut and vegetable industries, would not find enough workers to produce their crops.

Faced with agriculture's dependence on short-term jobs and the marginal compensation and few benefits such jobs offer, workers employ several strategies to make ends meet. For most workers in short-term farm jobs, migration is a key component of this strategy. Follow-the-crop migration allows workers to string together short-term jobs in different locations to extend their period of employment. Back-and-forth migration permits workers to live during the off-season in an inexpensive location, usually Mexico, or in an area that offers U.S. non-farm work.

The vast majority of migrant farmworkers were born abroad, most in Latin America. After passing through several migration stages, most migrants who remain in U.S. agriculture settle in one farm work location. This phenomenon has led to the "Latinization" of rural areas with labor-intensive agriculture. Another large group of migrants find relative stability by continuing to migrate between one location in Mexico and one farm area in the United States. In addition, large numbers of migrants leave U.S. farm work for other work in their home country or for U.S.-based, non-farm jobs. This continual outflow results in an unstable labor market that requires constant replenishment with new workers from abroad.

The continual outflow of workers is a consequence of the difficulties of making a living from U.S. farm work. Most migrant farmworkers live a marginal existence, even after they stop migrating and settle in one location. The majority of migrants and former migrants live in poverty, endure poor working conditions, and receive no government assistance. Thus, only those migrants with few alternatives stay in farm work. This leads to a maturing labor force composed mostly of workers with low levels of education and lacking English skills, whose improvements in working standards are continually undermined by new workers willing to work for less.

The poor living and working conditions of migrant and formerly migrant farmworkers are the result of farm labor practices that shift production costs to workers. In particular, the farm labor system relies heavily on temporary jobs, often uses the highly competitive subcontracting market for labor management, and frequently recruits workers in a way that results in a chronic oversupply of labor. Each of these practices reduces employer costs at the expense of worker earnings. As a result, migrant workers, their families and communities, rather than producers, tax-payers and consumers, bear the high costs of agriculture's endemic labor market instability.

The high outflow of farmworkers to non-farm work in the United States and the constant replenishment from abroad means that the agricultural labor market serves as an entry point for low-wage, low-skilled immigrants for the entire U.S. economy. To slow this influx of new entrants and stabilize the farm labor market requires diverting the costs of instability from the migrants back to the employers, taxpayers, and consumers who benefit from their labor.

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the lives of migrant farmworkers as they labor to produce crops in the United States. The findings are based on the U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS). As the first national farmworker survey to use methods appropriate for hard-to-survey populations, the NAWS is a unique source of information. While the NAWS does not focus on migrant farmworkers, its sampling method produces a random sample of U.S. migrant farmworkers engaged in seasonal agricultural services (SAS).¹ The NAWS collects three years of history for each sampled farmworker. This history captures every geographic move as well as the details of every work, out-of-country, and out-of-work period. Since 1988, the NAWS has sampled approximately 2,500 farmworkers a year. This report contains information on farmworkers sampled between January 1989 and June 1991.

A few clarifications are necessary before discussing the results of the study.

- There is no universally accepted way to define a migrant farmworker. Each federal program has a unique definition, set by law or regulation. Definitions used by service programs do not coincide with standard sociological definitions used in the analysis of survey information. To simplify and standardize data analysis, this report uses a single "program-neutral" definition of a migrant farmworker. The specific definition was carefully selected to conform with most existing definitions.

For the purposes of this report, migrant farmworkers are those who travel more than 75 miles to obtain a job in U.S. agriculture. The definition does not require migrants to cross specific geographic boundaries. Nevertheless, virtually all those considered migrants in this paper cross school district lines and, thus, meet the migration criterion set by Migrant Education. Furthermore, while the 75-mile rule does not require that the farmworker spend the night away from home, it is unlikely that workers who travel this distance do not change residences, at least temporarily. Thus, those farmworkers who qualify as migrants under the 75-mile rule also qualify under the migration criteria set by Migrant Health, Migrant Head Start, and by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Finally, it appears that the 75-mile rule does not err by excluding farmworkers who would otherwise be considered migrants by program definitions. NAWS data suggest that the overwhelming majority of farmworkers who do not qualify as migrants under the 75-mile rule do not cross school district boundaries and do not

¹ The USDA defines SAS work quite broadly to include the vast majority of nursery products, field crops, including cash grains, and all fruits and vegetables. Beef, poultry, fish, and other livestock production are excluded; thus, this report does not cover migrants from these industries. According to unpublished data from the USDA's Quarterly Agricultural Labor Survey (QALS), livestock workers make up one-third (36%) of all farmworkers, yet they probably have a significantly smaller proportion of migrants than crop workers. The NAWS is currently sampling livestock workers on an experimental basis.

move their residences. Those farmworkers who did not travel the required 75 miles during the year are considered settled farmworkers.

- There is no universally accepted estimate of U.S. farmworkers. This paper uses the Commission on Agricultural Workers' estimate of 2.5 million farmworkers² (Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1993a) as a benchmark. By this estimate, the NAWS represents 1,600,000 farmworkers who do SAS work. As a convenience, the report presents statistical figures in two ways: (1) the absolute number of workers (estimated), and (2) the percent of workers calculated from the NAWS sample. To measure the estimated number of farmworkers in subgroups, the proportion (or percent) of each group obtained from the NAWS sample was multiplied by the estimated size of the annual SAS farm labor force (1.6 million). Thus, the NAWS finding that 42% of SAS farmworkers are migrants implies that the absolute number of migrant SAS workers in the United States is 670,000.³

² Analysis of data from the U.S. Census of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Quarterly Agricultural Labor Survey (QALS), the Hired Farm Work Force, and the NAWS suggests this is a conservative estimate.

³ Although this paper reports exclusively on SAS farmworkers, for the ease of presentation and because most migrants are crop workers, the term "SAS" is dropped from the text. Thus, throughout this report the phrase "farmworker" means a "SAS farmworker."

CHAPTER 1

THE ROLE OF MIGRANT LABOR IN U.S. AGRICULTURE

The demand for labor in U.S. agricultural production fluctuates widely during the year. The United States employs 70% more farmworkers in September than in January. To meet this variable demand, agricultural producers depend on large numbers of seasonal workers to do short-term jobs during key production periods. Migrant workers, most of whom migrate from other countries, do over half these short-term jobs and comprise 42% of the farm labor force (see Figure 1). Under current conditions, employers in many areas are unable to find enough local workers to tend, harvest, and pack their crops.

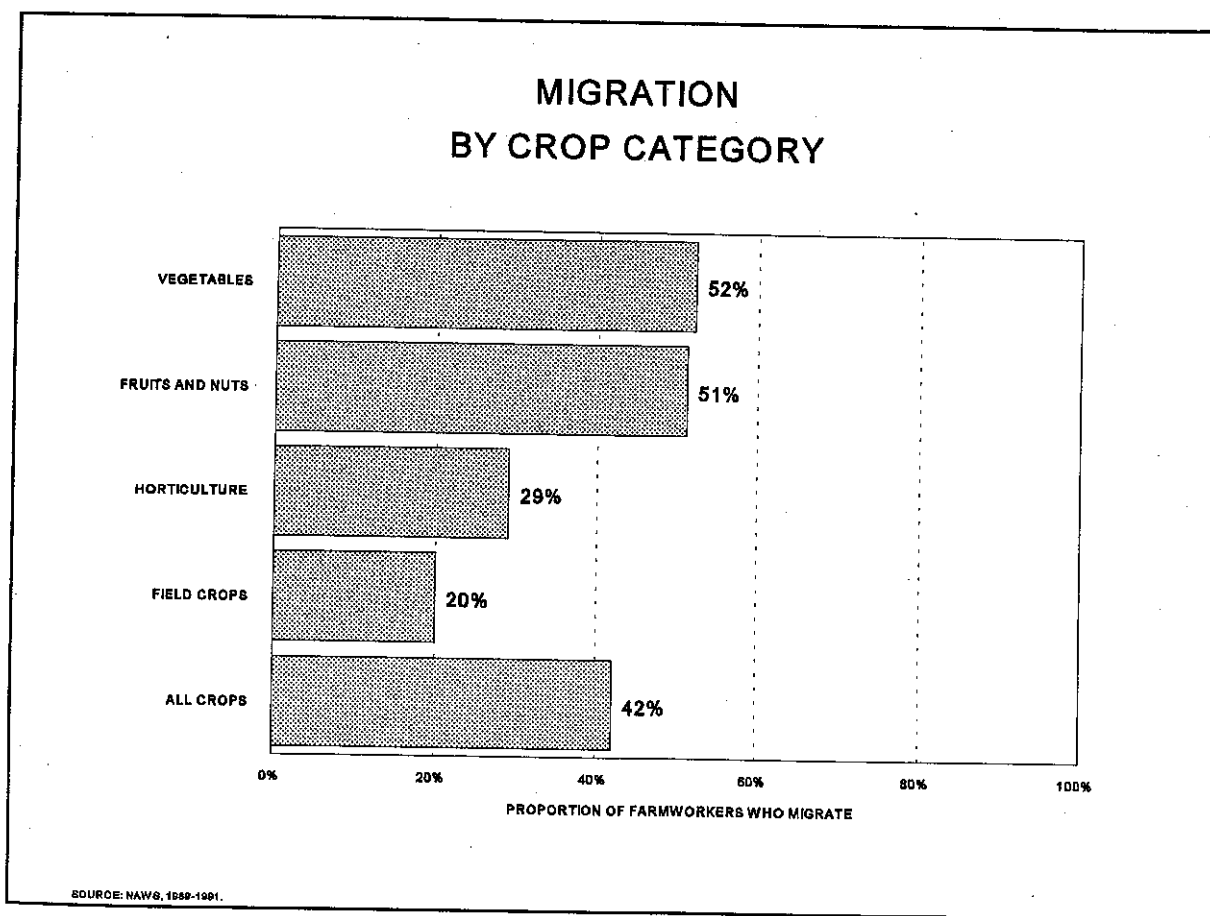


Figure 1. Most vegetable, fruit and nut workers are migrants.

The Role of Migrant Farmworkers in Fruit, Nut and Vegetable Production

Crops with a wide variation in labor needs throughout the year and with low levels of mechanization are especially dependent on migrant labor. The fresh fruit, nut and vegetable industries rely on tasks done by the human hand, particularly during harvest. Three out of four (78%) migrant farmworkers work in these crops as compared to only half (52%) the settled and local labor force. Consequently, migrants comprise a large share of the fruit and nut (51%) and vegetable (52%) labor forces. Migrants are also a significant minority of the farmworkers in horticulture (29%) and in the largely mechanized field crop industry (20%). Because these industries hire few workers relative to other agricultural industries, they use only a small proportion of migrants. Horticulture producers hire 13% and field crop producers hire 5% of all migrants. Fruit and nut producers, on the other hand, hire 34% and 44% of migrants, respectively. The remaining 4% of migrants work for producers of miscellaneous crops (see Figure 2).

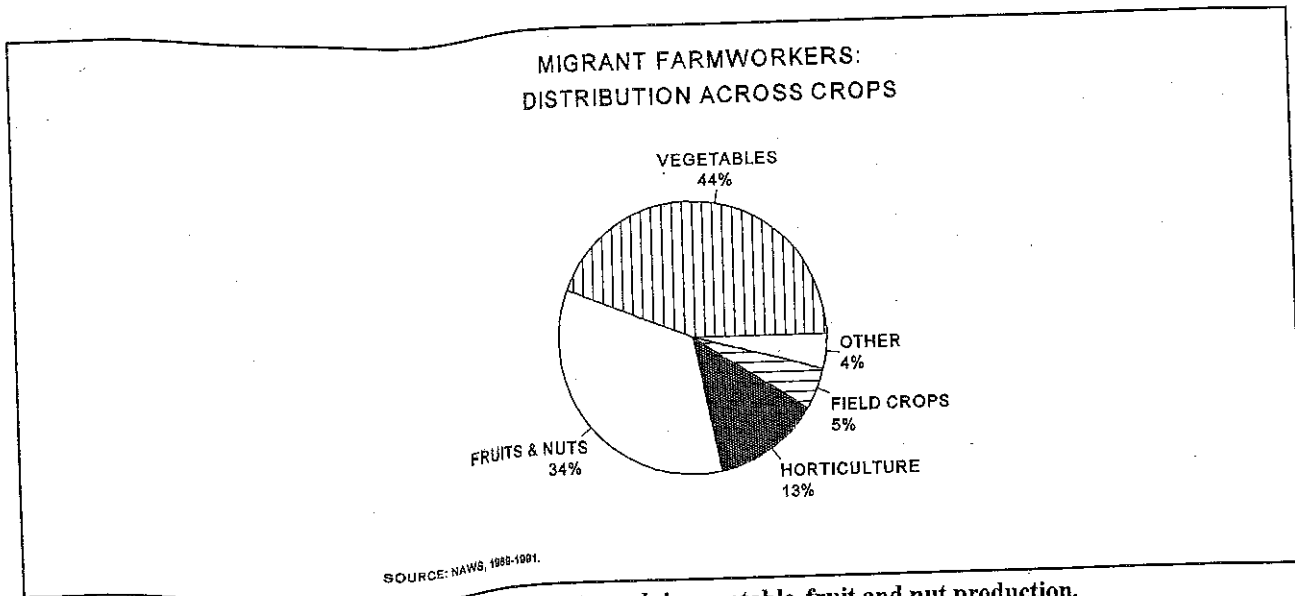


Figure 2. Most migrants work in vegetable, fruit and nut production.

The Role of Migrant Farmworkers in Regional Agricultural Production

Regions with labor intensive production and wide fluctuations in labor demand are the most dependent on migrant farmworkers. A large portion of production in the Northeast, the Northwest, and the Southeast is fruits, nuts and vegetables. Thus, migrants comprise over half (59%, 55%, and

52%, respectively) the farmworkers in these parts of the country (see Figure 3).⁴ Although much of the western production consists of fruits, nuts, and vegetables, an important portion of the harvest is for the processing market. Many field tasks in the processed fruit, nut, and vegetable industries are mechanized, thus lowering the relative demand for migrant labor. As a result, in the West, migrant workers comprise less than one-half (47%) of the work force, a number similar to the national average. In the Midwest and the Central Plains, areas heavily engaged in mechanized grain production, migrants account for only one-quarter (25% and 27%, respectively) of all farmworkers.

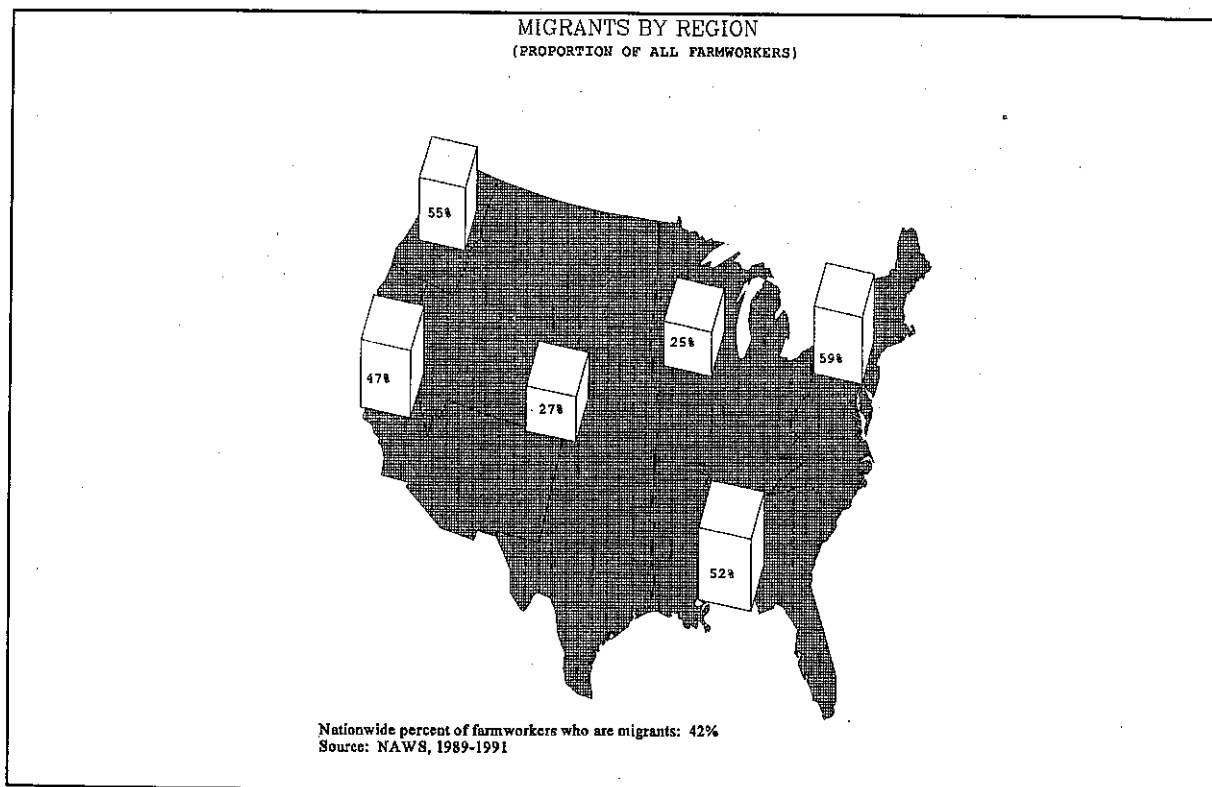


Figure 3. Migrants account for over half the farmworkers in the Northeast, Northwest and Southeast.

⁴ States in each region are: **Central Plains** - Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wyoming; **Midwest** - Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Tennessee, Wisconsin; **Northeast** - Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia; **Northwest** - Oregon, Washington; **Southeast** - Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina; **West** - Arizona, California, New Mexico.

The Role of Migrant Farmworkers in Meeting Peak Season Labor Demand

While migrants work on farms during all seasons, their presence is crucial to meet peak season labor demand. U.S. farm employment declines to an estimated low of 640,000 workers in January, climbs to 1.0 million in May, and peaks at 1.1 million in September.⁵ From there, it falls quickly back to its winter low and the cycle begins again.⁶

As the number of farmworkers increases throughout the year, so does agriculture's reliance on migrants. In January, 410,000 settled farmworkers and 230,000 migrants work in U.S. agriculture (see Figure 4). Sixty percent (140,000) of the migrants employed in January come from outside the United States. By peak employment in September, the farm labor force grows to 600,000 settled and 470,000 migrant farmworkers. Seven out of ten (70%) migrants working in September, amounting to 330,000 individuals, migrate from outside the United States. Migrants account for most of the increase in the peak season labor force. At peak, the number of migrants doubles relative to the low point, while the number of settled and local workers increases by only one-third. The percentage of migrants in the labor force rises from 35% in winter to 45% during peak employment.

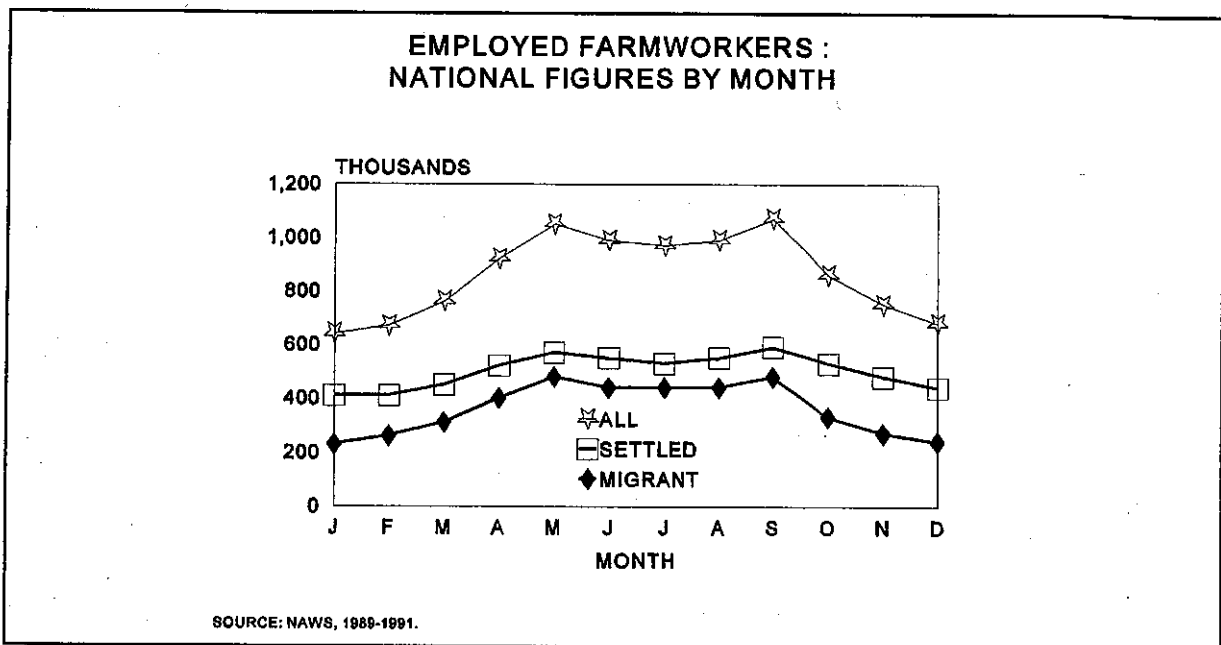


Figure 4. Labor demand in U.S. agriculture is highly seasonal, particularly demand for migrant farmworkers.

⁵ These numbers correspond to the number of farmworkers employed during a one-week period. In other words, the United States employs 640,000 farmworkers *per week* in January.

⁶ Since the NAWS is weighted using data from USDA's Quarterly Agricultural Labor Survey, there is a close correspondence between QALS levels of employment and the numbers reported here.

The Role of Migrant Farmworkers in Meeting Regional Peaks in Seasonal Labor Demand

Regional swings in agricultural labor demand are proportionally greater than national swings. Consequently, migrants play a more crucial role in meeting peak labor demand than suggested by national figures. If broken down according to seasonal patterns of labor demand, the United States can be divided into three agricultural regions: the North, the South, and California.⁷ While the North and South have summer and winter seasonal peaks, respectively, California does not have a pronounced short-lived peak. California experiences high labor demand for about half the year, mostly during the warmer months, and low labor demand for the other half (see Figure 5). The vast majority (70%) of migrants originates from international sending areas, such as the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America.⁸ A significant minority of migrants (23%) is based in California and in the South; some of these workers migrate to other regions during the year. All three U.S. regions are highly dependent on international, particularly Mexican-based, migrants.

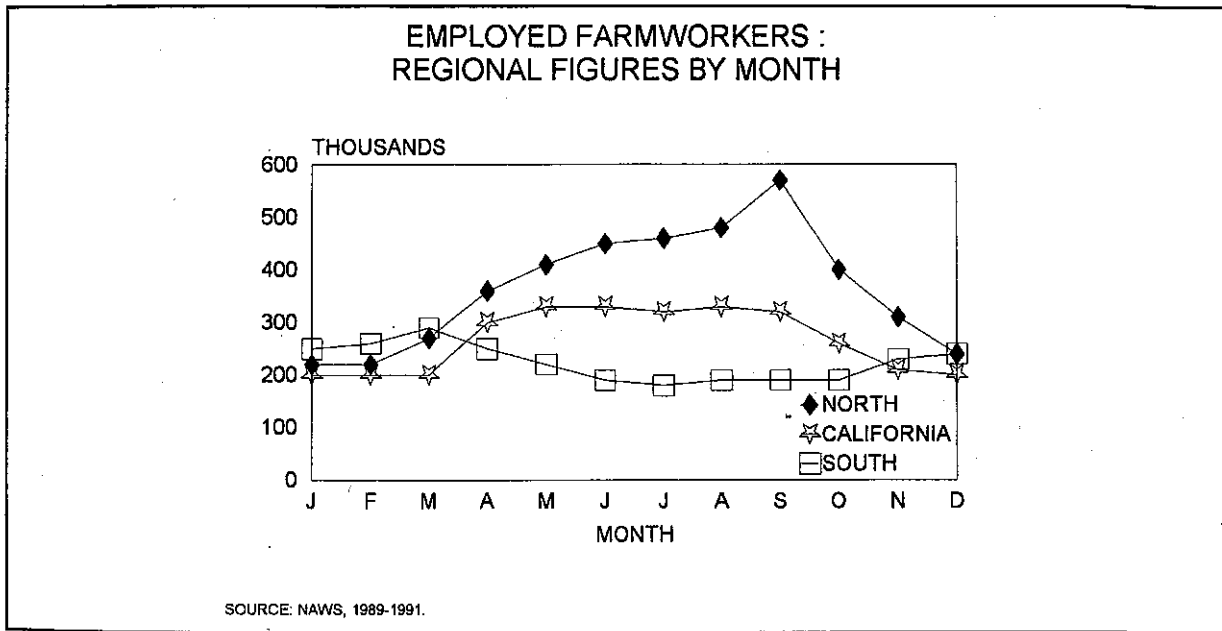


Figure 5. The North and, to a lesser degree, California have seasonal patterns in farm labor demand that complement the South's patterns.

⁷ The North combines the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Tennessee, Wisconsin); the Northeast (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia); and the Northwest (Oregon, Washington). The South combines the Central Plains (Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wyoming); the Southeast (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina); and the West, excluding California (Arizona, New Mexico).

⁸ Migrants based in Puerto Rico are considered international migrants.

The North experiences sharp swings in labor demand, leading to a dramatic increase in the use of migrants during peak season. The North draws migrants from the South and from other countries. Total employment in January is 190,000 in the North and consists mostly (85%) of settled workers. By September, the northern labor force has tripled to 570,000 workers, 250,000 (43%) of whom are migrants. Of the migrants in the North in September, 5% come from California, 13% from within the region, 16% from the South, and 66% from outside the United States. Owing mostly to migration from Latin America and the South, the number of migrants in the North increases almost tenfold during the year. Similarly, the percentage of migrants in the labor force rises from 16% to 43%.

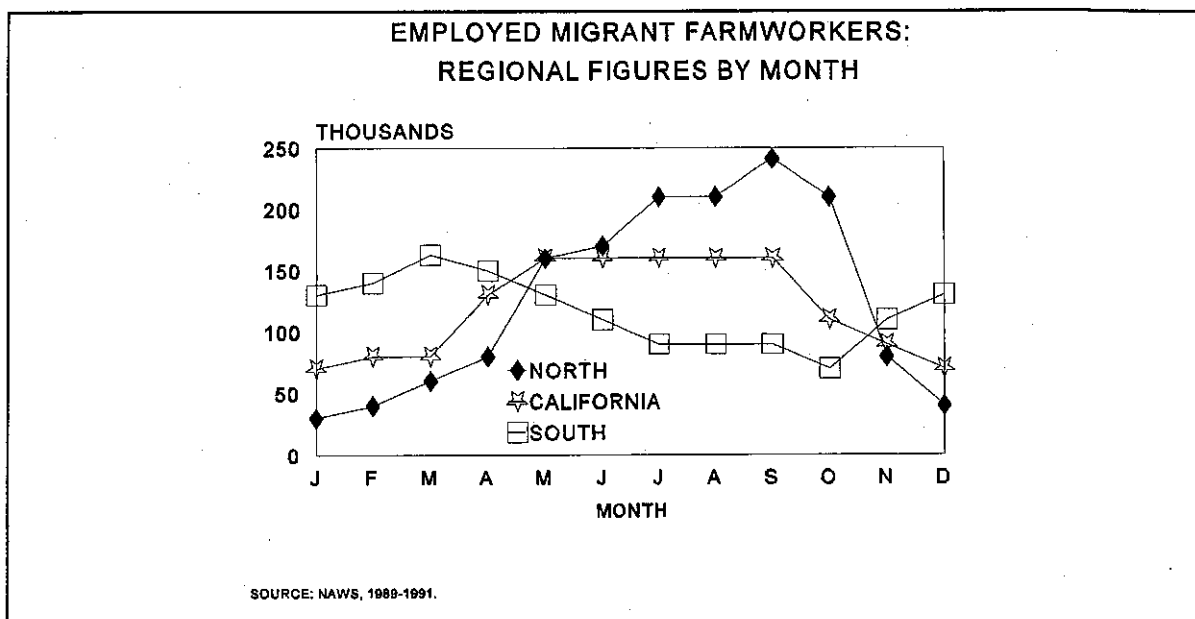


Figure 6. As in the case of all farmworkers, the North and California have seasonal patterns in migrant farmworker demand that complement the South's patterns.

Because the southern region has year-round production and a temperate climate, its seasonal swings in labor demand are less dramatic than the North's. The South, which is home base for some who work in the North, has its low-point in August, when the North is near its peak. The resultant complementary use of migrant farmworkers between the North and the South is apparent in Figure 6. The total proportion of migrants employed by the North and South is relatively stable throughout the year, but the breakdown between the two regions fluctuates widely. At its lull in August, the South employs 180,000 farmworkers; in March, the South peaks at 280,000 employed farmworkers. This represents a modest 60% increase in employment from valley to peak, as compared to the North's 130% surge. Yet, proportionately, the South is the most dependent on migrant workers, though many are from within the region. At peak demand, migrants form 56% of the southern labor force. Fifty-seven percent of these migrants come from outside the United States, 35% from within

the region, 6% from the North, and 2% from California. Even at its August lull, migrants make up 46% of the South's farm labor force, with a consistent one-third (31%) from within the region.

California contains a multitude of micro-climates, or small areas with distinct weather and soil conditions. It, therefore, produces a variety of crops during sequential harvest seasons, which leads to no distinct labor demand peak. Instead, California agriculture has an intensive demand from May to September and a less intensive demand for labor from November to March. April and October are transition months during which farmworker demand is about midway between the peak-to-trough difference. At any point from November to March, there are 200,000 to 210,000 farmworkers employed in California, over a third (35-44%) of whom are migrants. At any point from May through September, there are 320,000 to 330,000 farmworkers in California, half (47-49%) of whom are migrants. Like the South, California is dependent year-round on migrant workers. The proportion of migrant workers in California agriculture fluctuates during the year between 35% and 49%. In addition, California is the region that depends most heavily on foreign-based migrants; of 160,000 migrants at the height of peak season (in August), three-quarters (76%) are based outside the United States. Only 4% have their home base in the South and fewer than 2% in the North. One-fifth (18%) of peak-season migrants in California have their home base in the state. In March, the slowest month of the off-season, 88% of California's 70,000 migrants are from outside the United States, 3% from the North, virtually none (fewer than 1%) from the South, and 9% from within California.

The Role of Migrants in Filling Short-Term Tasks

U.S. agriculture maintains a high demand for workers willing to fill short-term tasks, particularly during peak season. In any given year, half (50%) the farm labor force performs tasks that last six weeks or less.⁹ Traditionally, settled workers who engaged in farm work for a few weeks every year filled these short-term tasks. These temporary farmworkers were local residents, such as homemakers or students. For a short time every year, these residents left their year-round occupations to do short-term tasks in agriculture (Fuller and Van Vuuren, 1972). Over the last thirty years, however, the number of local temporary workers has plummeted. Rural development, accompanied by increased female labor force participation in the non-farm sector, has reduced the supply of local temporary workers. These workers now comprise only 6% of the total farm labor force and 12% of the labor force for short-term tasks.¹⁰ Migrant workers partially fill the gap left by locals. They comprise half (54%) the workers in short-term tasks. The remaining short-term tasks are performed by settled farmworkers who work primarily in agriculture and earn a living by piecing together long- and short-term farm tasks.

⁹ Six weeks is used as a cut-off point for short-term tasks since the majority of workers hired exclusively to harvest raisins, the short-term task which employs the greatest number of U.S. workers, are hired in this task for six weeks or less.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the small proportion of casual workers engaged in short-term jobs, see Mines, Gabbard and Samardick, 1993.

Despite their significance in filling agriculture's short-term tasks, migrant farmworkers are also prominent in the long-term job market. They account for one-third (38%) of the labor force working exclusively in farm tasks in the United States that last longer than six weeks.

The Role of Migrant Farmworkers in Meeting Harvest Labor Needs

Peak labor demand usually occurs during harvest. To complete the harvest, growers often recruit or contract large numbers of workers for short-term jobs. Recruitment is at times difficult due to the unpredictability of harvests. Weather fluctuations affect labor supply since workers may be unavailable to harvest either an early or a late crop.

United States farmers currently rely on migrants for almost two-thirds (62%) of their harvest workers (see Figure 7). At any given moment two-thirds (64%) of employed migrants are involved in harvest activities (see Figure 8). In contrast, settled farmworkers are only half as likely (29%) to work in harvest jobs.

Although settled farmworkers do most of the non-harvest tasks, migrants still comprise an important component of the non-harvest labor force. Migrants account for one-third (32%) of the semi-skilled workers¹¹ and one-fourth (24%) of other non-harvest farmworkers.

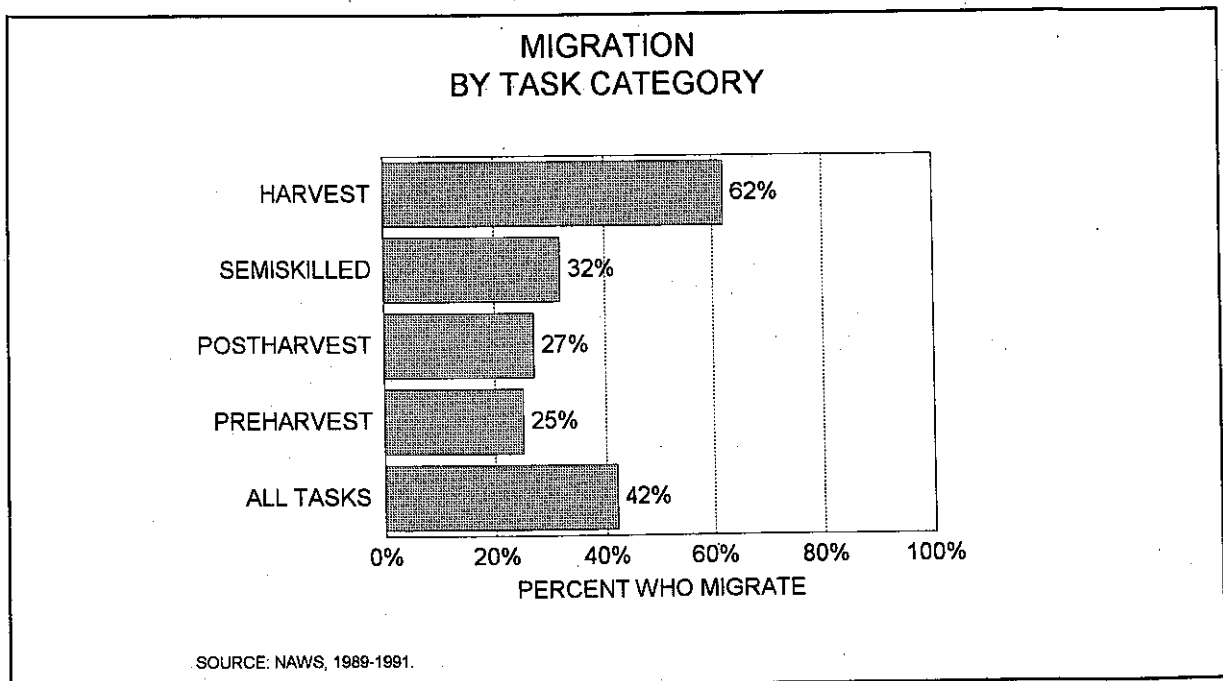


Figure 7. Most harvest workers are migrants.

¹¹ Semi-skilled work includes tasks such as pruning, irrigating, operating machinery, and applying pesticides.

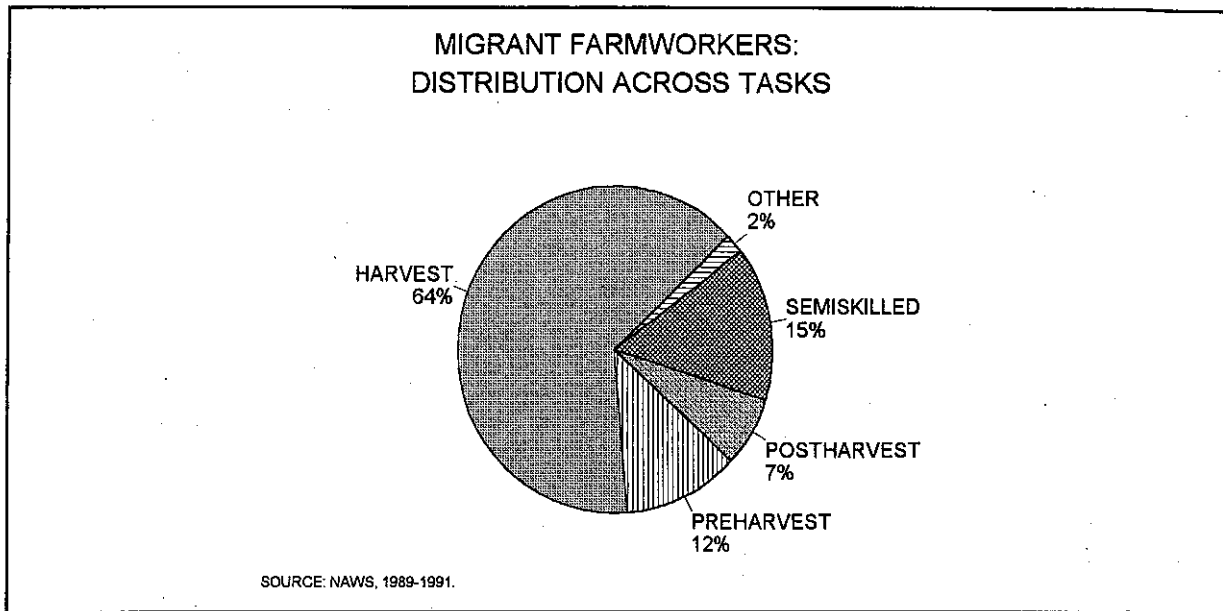


Figure 8. Two-thirds of migrants work in harvesting.

Summary

Migrant workers, who make up 42% of the farm labor force, are critical to U.S. agricultural production. They comprise most (55%) of the short-term farm task labor force, two-thirds (64%) of the harvest labor force, and half (45%) the peak season labor force in the United States. In effect, employers depend disproportionately on migrants to do the more arduous tasks, such as harvesting, while the lighter tasks, such as packing, are done mostly by settled farmworkers. Migrants work most often in fruit and vegetable growing areas and are less prevalent in areas specializing in cash grains or other field crops.

CHAPTER 2

MIGRATION PATTERNS AS STRATEGIES FOR MAKING A LIVING FROM SHORT-TERM JOBS

Migrants can satisfy farmers' need for seasonal labor by adapting their work and travel plans to the constraints of short-term work. Faced with the marginal compensation and few benefits offered by short-term farm jobs, workers employ several strategies to make ends meet.¹² Some migrants patch together multiple farm jobs in different areas in the United States to extend their employment season. Other migrants, like many local temporary workers who historically preceded them, increase their incomes by working non-farm jobs during the off-season. A third group of migrants leaves the United States during the off-season for low-cost areas. Finally, some migrants employ two or more of these tactics.

Many workers employ the strategy of traveling to two or more U.S. farm areas to find consecutive short-term jobs, particularly at peak season. This is "follow-the-crop" migration. Under the NAWS definition, travel distances must exceed 75 miles to qualify a worker as a migrant, although the distances traveled by follow-the-crop migrants are usually far greater (see Table 1). Thirteen percent of farmworkers, or 210,000 individuals, are follow-the-crop migrants.

During the off-season, workers use two survival strategies: increasing earnings by finding non-farm jobs, and reducing expenditures by returning to their low-cost home bases. "Back-and-forth" migration occurs when the worker employs one of these two approaches during the off-season and then travels 75 miles or more to do farm work in one U.S. location. One-third (36%) of farmworkers, or about 580,000 workers, are back-and-forth migrants.

Some farmworkers use both strategies to cope with the instability and seasonality of U.S. farm work. One in twelve farmworkers (8% or 120,000 workers) is both a follow-the-crop and a back-and-forth migrant (see Figure 9). Workers in this combination group return to a non-farm home base (usually Mexico) during the off-season, and then travel between two or more U.S. farm jobs during their farm work season.

¹² See Chapter 5 for details on compensation and benefits offered in short-term agricultural jobs.

Table 1. Defining Migrant Travel Patterns

	RESIDES IN LOCATION LESS THAN 75 MILES FROM ALL HIS/HER U.S. FARM JOBS	RESIDES IN LOCATION MORE THAN 75 MILES FROM ANY OF HIS/HER U.S. FARM JOBS
ALL FARM JOBS ARE LESS THAN 75 MILES APART	Not a migrant	Back-and-forth migrant
HAS AT LEAST TWO FARM JOBS MORE THAN 75 MILES APART	Follow-the-crop migrant	Back-and-forth and follow-the-crop migrant

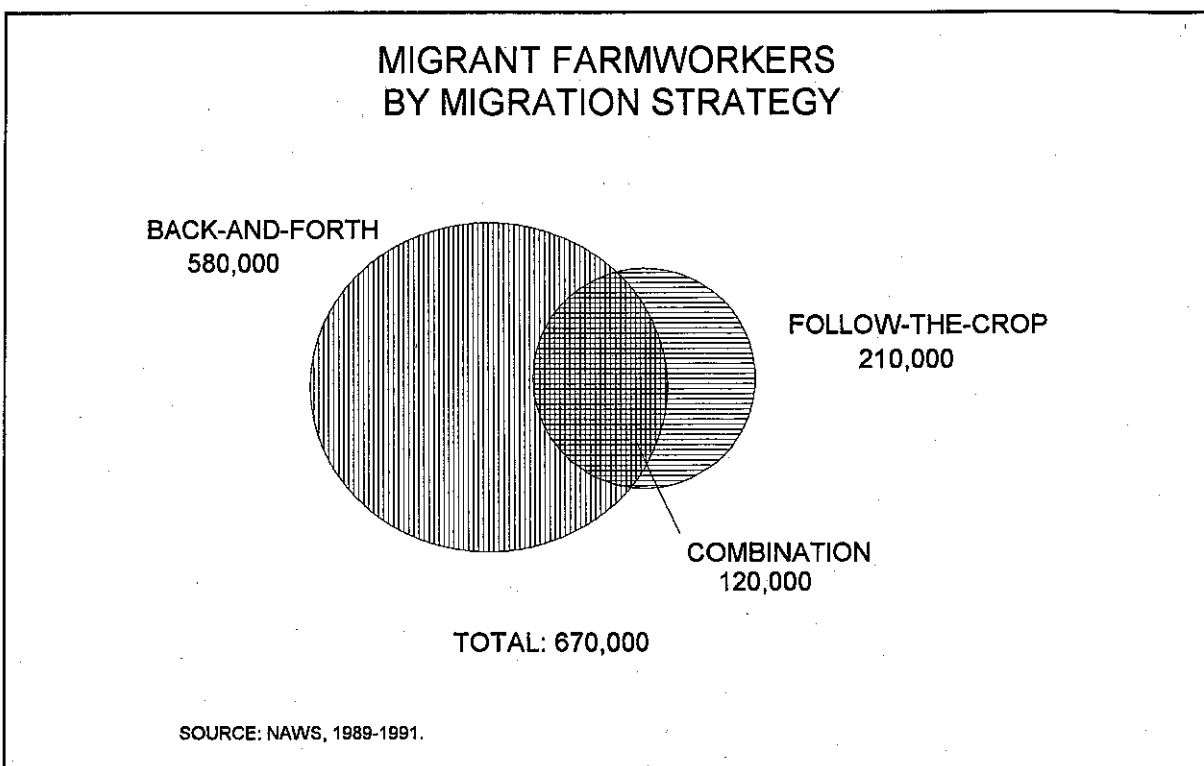


Figure 9. A significant portion of follow-the-crop migrants are also back-and-forth migrants, but not vice versa.

Follow-the-Crop Migration

Follow-the-crop migration is consistent with common stereotypes of migrants who travel from harvest to harvest, such as those depicted in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. While there is scant historical information on the number of U.S. follow-the-crop migrants, in the 1990's follow-the-crop migrants are a minority.¹³ They comprise 13% of the U.S. farm labor force, approximately one in three (31%) migrants.

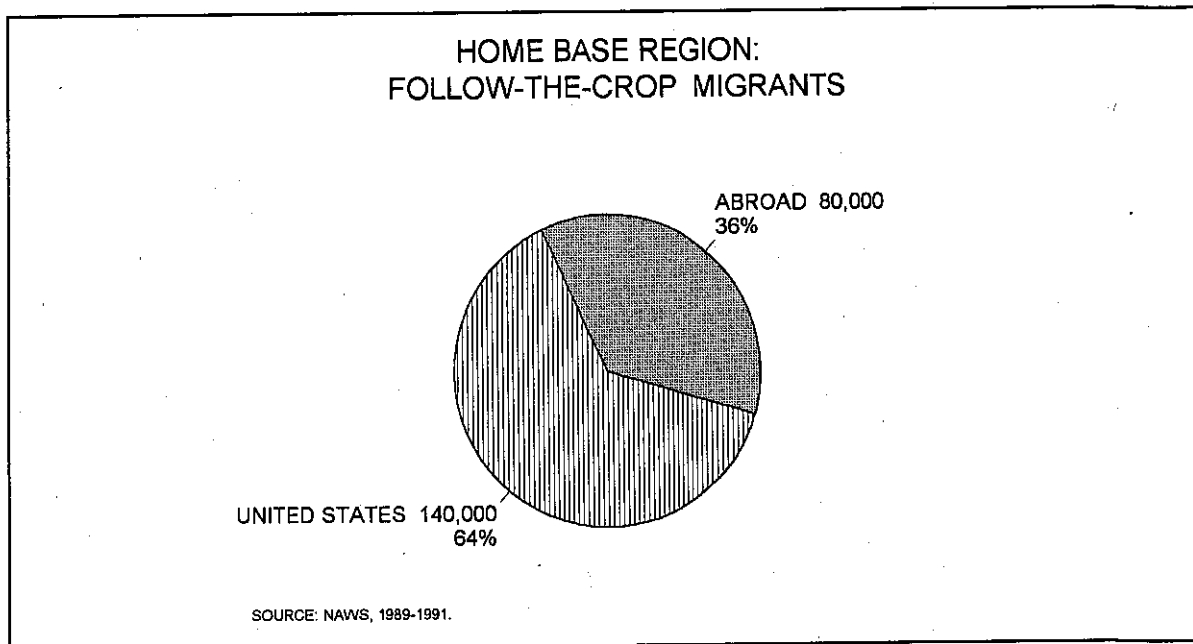


Figure 10. The majority of follow-the-crop migrants are based in the United States.

By stringing together a series of short-term jobs, follow-the-crop migrants work more weeks per year in farm work (35) than any other group, including settled farmworkers (26).¹⁴ The 140,000 U.S.-based follow-the-crop migrants, who make up two-thirds (64%) of this type of migrant (see Figure 10), are particularly successful at extending their employment. They work 37 weeks per year in U.S. farm work. Internationally-based follow-the-crop migrants spend 31 weeks per year working in U.S. agriculture.

¹³ Data do exist for California. In this state, at least, it appears that follow-the-crop migration is decreasing and back-and-forth migration is on the increase. In 1983, 39% of California field workers were migrants; of those, about one half followed the crops. In the 1990-91 NAWS data, 47% of California field workers were migrants, fewer than one quarter of whom were following the crops (Mines and Martin, 1986, p. 32).

¹⁴ During a worker's first year of U.S. farm work, the NAWS could interview the worker in his/her first few weeks in the United States, resulting in biased data. Thus, unless explicitly stated, first year workers are excluded from all averages of time worked in farm and non-farm work.

To obtain as much farm work as they do, follow-the-crop migrants tolerate many disruptions. These migrants work, on average, for three employers in two locations per year. Four out of five (79%), or 170,000 follow-the-crop migrants, travel between states. One-third (36%) of the follow-the-crop migrants, or 7% of all farmworkers, are international migrants. These migrants work in two or more locations in the United States and, when out of work, leave the United States for a less expensive environment.

Back-and-Forth Migration

The back-and-forth migration strategy aims to increase the buying power of farm earnings by lowering expenses, increasing farm earnings with non-farm work, or both. Specifically, home bases, where farmworkers spend the off-season and do not work in farm work, allow them to live inexpensively and/or do U.S. non-farm work. One-third (36%) of all farmworkers, about 580,000 individuals, are back-and-forth migrants. Eighty-three percent take advantage of the lower costs associated with being based outside the United States, and the remaining 17% live in lower-cost U.S. regions (see Figure 11). Thirty-five percent of back-and-forth migrants engage in U.S. non-farm employment.

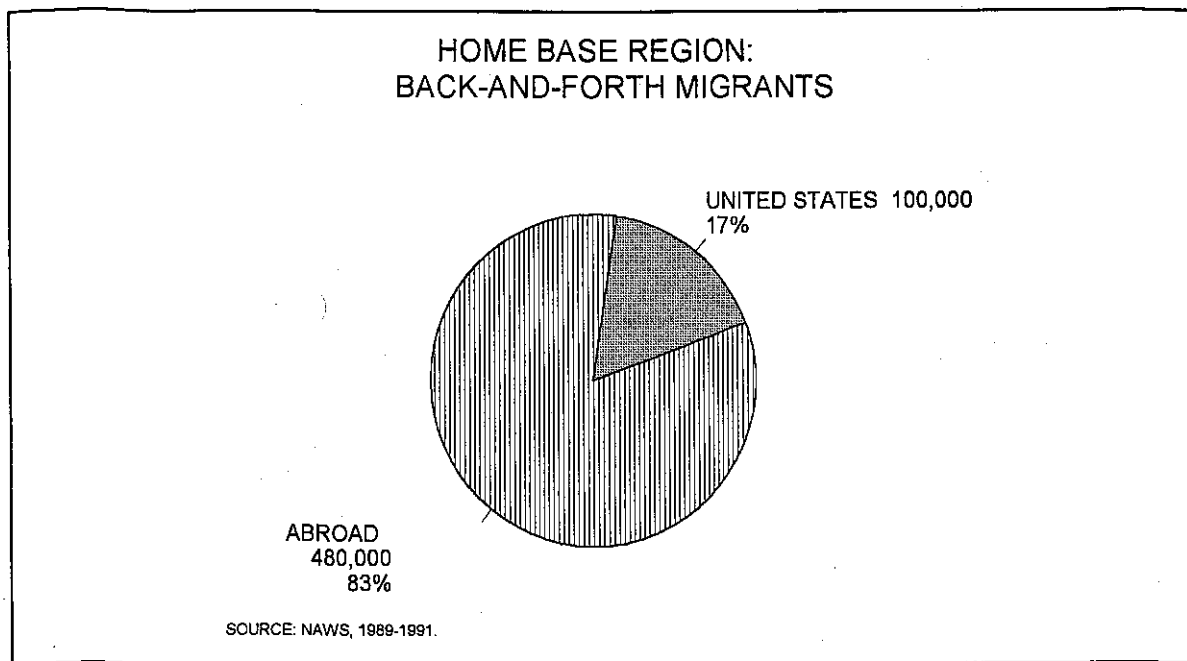


Figure 11. The majority of back-and-forth migrants are based outside the United States.

International Back-and-Forth Migrants.¹⁵

International back-and-forth migrants, a large group of 480,000 workers, focus on increasing the buying power of their U.S. farm earnings by paying lower prices, especially for housing and food, across the border. Almost all (96%) are based in Mexico. The rest are based in the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and Central America. Although some international migrant farmworkers work in their home base, this employment typically increases their income only marginally.

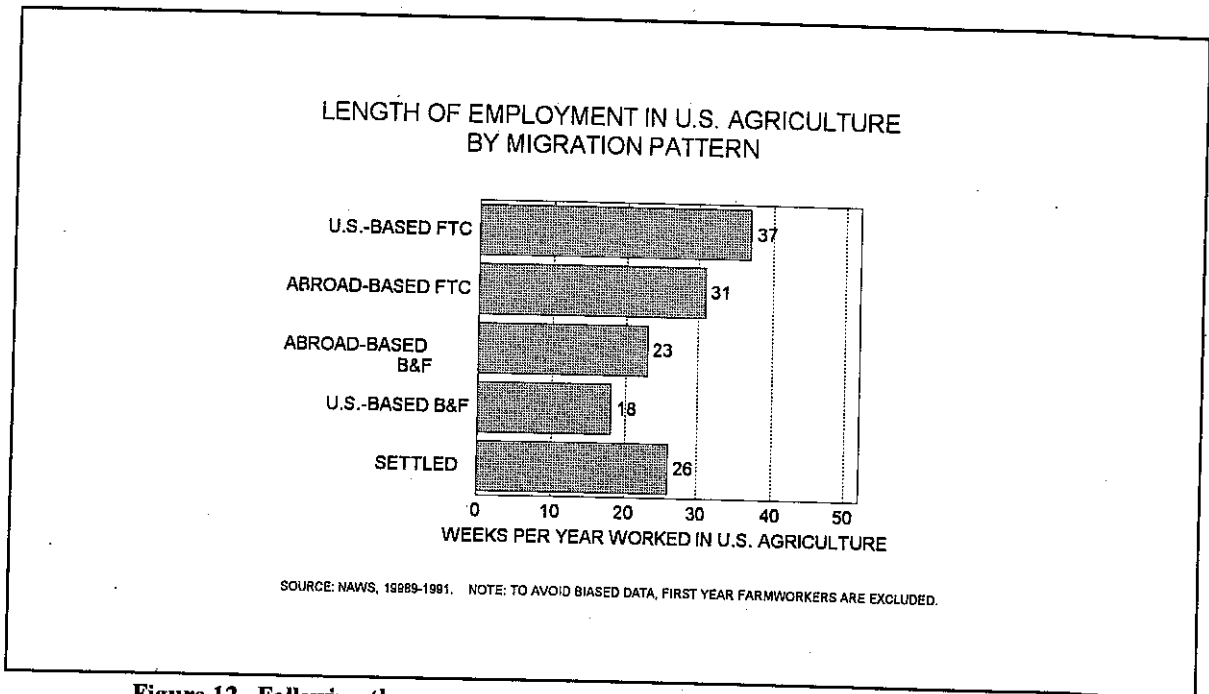


Figure 12. Following the crops appears to extend length of employment in farm work.

International back-and-forth migration is a strategy for containing expenses, rather than a strategy for extending U.S. farm employment. Thus, those international migrants who do not follow the crops work significantly fewer weeks per year in U.S. farm work than their counterparts who follow the crops, 23 and 31, weeks respectively (see Figure 12). Despite the small amount of time in U.S. farm work, most international back-and-forth migrants depend on this work for all their earnings. Seventy-five percent of international back-and-forth migrants do farm work exclusively.

¹⁵ A migrant who spends 30 or more consecutive days abroad during the year prior to the survey is considered an international migrant.

United States-Based Back-and-Forth Migrants.

The 100,000 U.S.-based back-and-forth migrants bring to mind the traditional stereotype of temporary workers, including homemakers and students, who use farm work for supplementary income. U.S.-based back-and-forth migrants experience the most out-of-work time in the United States among migrants (20 weeks). Also, U.S.-based back-and-forth migrants are the most likely (60%) of any group to derive part of their income from U.S. non-farm work. Even non-migrant farmworkers, including both U.S.-born and foreign-born settled workers, are less likely (53%) to supplement their farm work with other U.S. work.

Summary

For many farmworkers, migration is key to their strategy of making a living from short-term agricultural work. For some farmworkers, geographic mobility allows them to string together a series of short-term jobs into several months of employment. Migration also allows farmworkers to more easily combine off-season non-farm jobs with seasonal farm jobs. Finally, migration allows a large group of workers to combine seasonal farm work in the agricultural areas of the United States with lower living costs elsewhere.

CHAPTER 3

MIGRANTS, IMMIGRANTS AND SETTLERS: THE PURSUIT OF SECURITY

Follow-the-crop and back-and-forth migration are two strategies used by migrant farmworkers to increase their incomes and minimize their costs. Even with these strategies, the average migrant spends several years seeking reliable farm employment. During these years, many migrants move through several distinct stages of migration and settlement while seeking stable work and living conditions. Despite these efforts, as Chapter 4 explains, most migrant farmworkers do not earn enough from U.S. seasonal farm work to sustain themselves and their families.

National, Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Origins of Migrant Farmworkers

Immigrants and U.S.-born children of immigrants, most of whom are Latinos, comprise virtually the entire migrant farm work force. Eighty-five percent of migrant farmworkers were born abroad, the vast majority (95%) in Latin America. U.S.-born Hispanics account for another 10% of all migrants, and represent a large majority (83%) of native-born migrants. In terms of numerical estimates, 570,000 migrant farmworkers were born outside the United States and 100,000 were born in the United States (see Figure 13). Seventy thousand of the U.S.-born are Hispanic. In total, nineteen out of twenty (94%) migrants are Hispanic. Three percent of the farmworkers who were born abroad are non-Hispanics. Additionally, many of the 3% of migrants who are U.S.-born non-Hispanics have ties to the immigrant population; more than half are married to a foreign-born spouse. In sum, 99% of migrants are, or have immediate family members who are, Hispanic or foreign-born.

Most of today's migrants come from the less advantaged segments of the Latin American population.¹⁶ Eight in ten (79%) migrants who maintain their home base abroad are landless. Since migrants are from some of the poorest areas of Latin America, their access to education is limited. Migrants average seven years of school. Two-thirds (65%) of migrant farmworkers have less than an 8th grade education, and another 20% did not complete high school. Hence, only one in six migrants is a high school graduate.

Most migrant farmworkers have legal authorization to work in the United States (74% in 1991). Yet, despite efforts by Congress to reduce unauthorized immigration, the number of undocumented migrants is increasing. In 1989, 17% of migrant farmworkers reported being undocumented; in 1990 and 1991, these figures were 23% and 26%, respectively. Many experienced farmworkers obtained

¹⁶ This NAWS finding confirms the results of studies done by others. See Portes and Rumbaut, 1990; Massey, Alacron, Durand, and Gonzalez, 1987; Cornelius, 1976; Weist, 1973; Reichert, 1979; and Stuart and Kearney, 1981.

legal papers through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. Almost half (45%) the current migrants were legalized under the Act. Four out of five (78%) of today's undocumented farmworkers, or 140,000 individuals, have crossed the border for the first time since the implementation of IRCA.

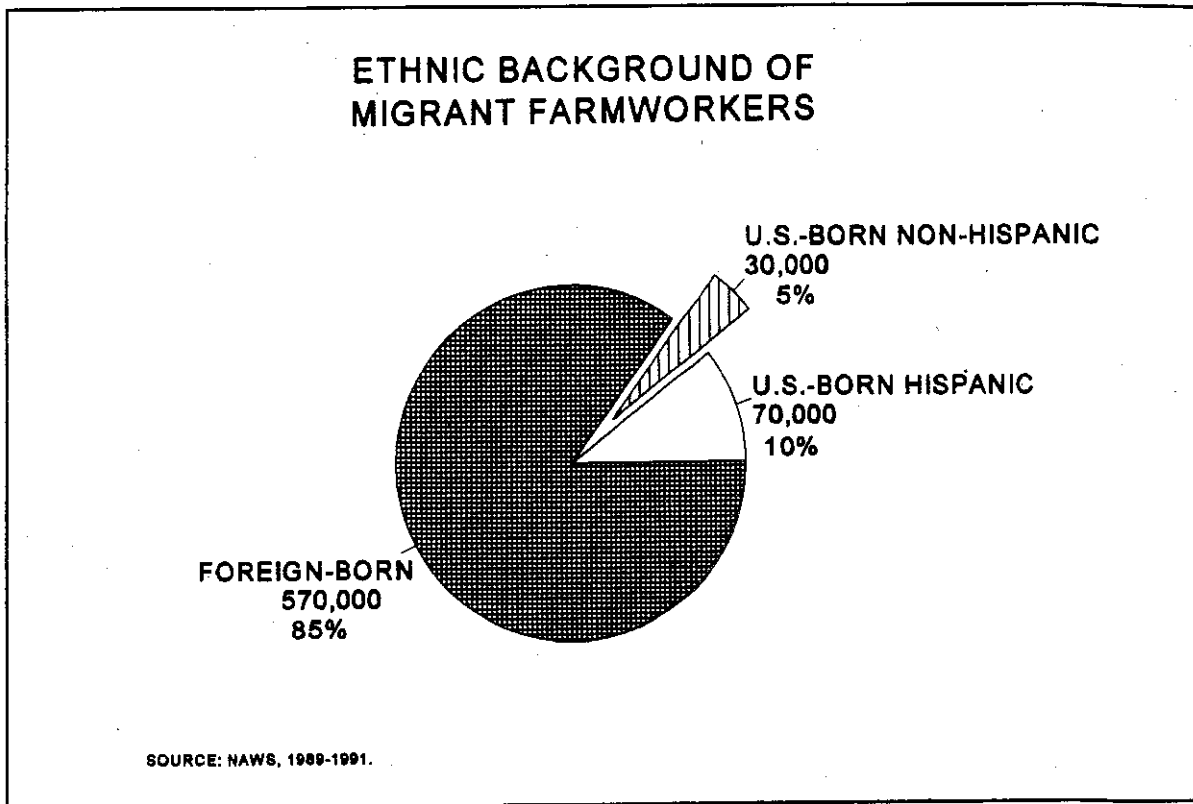


Figure 13. Only 5% of migrant farmworkers are U.S.-born non-Hispanics.

Over several decades, the influx of Latino farm labor migrants, many of whom subsequently have settled in the United States, has led to the "Latinization" of the U.S. farm labor force. Although Latinos make up 72% of the farm labor force, the reliance of U.S. agricultural producers on Latino farmworkers has not occurred uniformly across the nation. In the traditional immigrant receiving areas of the western United States¹⁷ and Florida, the "Latinization" process began thirty to forty years ago. Today, both migrants and settled farmworkers in these areas are predominantly Latinos. In recent immigrant receiving areas, such as the Northeast, the Southeast (except Florida), and the Midwest, older farmworkers are predominantly non-Latino Whites, and some are African American.

¹⁷ This region consists of the Northwest, West and Central Plains as defined in Chapter 1, Footnote 4.

Younger migrant workers in these areas are overwhelmingly Latinos (Mines, Gabbard and Samardick, 1993, ch. 2).

The "Latinization" process begins when Latin American immigrants take jobs primarily as harvesters (these jobs represent 42% of all jobs). Subsequently, they move into pre-harvest, post-harvest and, eventually, skilled jobs. A parallel process occurs when the original workers, who tend to be "pioneering" solo males, eventually bring their families and settle. This migration pattern, which began in California and Texas, has expanded to the Northwest and to Florida and is making major inroads wherever fruits, vegetables, or other labor intensive crops are grown.

The "Latinization" of new rural immigrant areas is taking place rapidly in the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast. One example is the peach industry in Georgia and South Carolina. Since 1984, Georgia peach harvesting jobs, formerly done mainly by African American workers, have been performed by Mexican workers. This changeover also occurred in 1989 in South Carolina. In Georgia, but not yet in South Carolina, Mexicans also predominate in pre-harvest tasks. Post-harvest and skilled work in both areas is still done primarily by local African Americans and older White women (Amendola, Griffith and Gunter, 1993). Another case of "Latinization" is taking place in the Piedmont flue-cured tobacco growing area of North Carolina and Virginia. In the early 1980's Mexicans began working in harvesting jobs, formerly held by African Americans. The less arduous jobs of transplanting and barn work (hanging the leaves) continue to be done largely by local White women and African Americans. However, this also is changing (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1988). Consistent with these case study findings, the NAWS data show that Latin American immigrants do most (87%) harvest tasks, even in the most recent settlement areas (Mines, Gabbard and Samardick, 1993).

Patterns of Migration and Forms of Settlement

The uncertainties associated with repeated moves to new locations that offer insecure employment forces foreign-born workers to seek reliable travel and employment patterns. As they grow more experienced in the United States, migrant farmworkers can diminish the employment and personal risks of their yearly trek. Among Latin American immigrants who remain in U.S. farm work, there are two predominant patterns of stabilization. First, most immigrants who remain farmworkers settle in one farm area of the United States. They find farm work within commuting distance in nearby areas and cease to migrate. Second, some immigrants continue to migrate within predictable patterns.

While nearly all migrant farmworkers are part of a transnational Latino community, many eventually settle in the United States. Among those who remain farmworkers and settle, there exists an identifiable pattern with three consecutive stages: (1) transnational migration to the United States from a non-U.S. home base, (2) migration from a home base in the United States, and (3) settlement out of migrant work into settled farm work in the United States. Many farmworkers experience all three stages of the settlement pattern, but a significant proportion continue to migrate for the duration of their farm work careers. Most veteran farmworkers who continue to migrate seek predictability

by choosing a back-and-forth pattern that allows them to set up a home in only two locations each year.

Stage One: International Migration.

In the first stage of the stabilization process, migrant farmworkers are usually based in their countries of origin and migrate annually to the United States in search of farm work. International migrants, representing 480,000 workers, account for 71% of migrants and 30% of all farmworkers.

The international migrant group consists largely (86%) of men. Although most (64%) of these men are married, only a minority (16%) is accompanied by their spouses.¹⁸ The few (14% or 70,000) women in this group, however, are less likely (49%) to travel without their families. Three-quarters (74%) of the married men who migrate internationally leave their spouses behind, compared to 8% of women in the same circumstances. In addition, married women in this group rarely (8%) leave small children behind when they migrate, while married men in this group often (77%) do. In all, unaccompanied men make up 71% of international back-and-forth migrants.

There is large variation in the number of years foreign-born farmworkers spend in the international migration pattern. Although there is a continuous settling of foreign-born farmworkers in U.S. locations, a significant minority migrates internationally throughout their careers. Of foreign-born workers who remain in farm work for more than 20 years, one quarter (25%) are still international migrants. Thus, international migrants are largely composed of two types of workers: (1) a large group of young workers who are just beginning their farm work careers, and (2) a smaller group of older workers who have maintained an international, back-and-forth migration pattern for much of their farm work careers.

Most (57%) international migrants are in an early stage¹⁹ of the stabilization process. Since transnational migration requires distant travel, most workers who can eventually abandon it. Consequently, the international migrant group has the largest proportion of young migrants; about two-fifths (39%) are under 25 years old. Furthermore, international migrants are less experienced in U.S. agriculture than are settled immigrant farmworkers (they average seven and ten years of U.S. farm work, respectively).

During the early years, as foreign-born migrants struggle to provide their families a viable income, they often try various migration strategies. In their first year of international migration, they usually work in only one location north of the border. In the ensuing few years, some international migrants experiment with following the crops. Eventually, however, the vast majority of veteran migrants choose either the stability of settling down in one location in the United States or selecting one U.S. farm area to which they migrate each year (see Table 2).

¹⁸ Other researchers have found that Mexican farmworkers who are new to international migration are predominantly solo males. See Durand and Massey, 1992, pp. 20-22.

¹⁹ Have been in farm work fewer than six years.

In the first year in the United States, eight out of ten (77%) foreign-born international migrants work in only one place in the United States. This is expected, since it takes time to put together a portfolio of work in several locations. In the following few years, a significant minority of migrants finds it advantageous to adopt a follow-the-crop migration pattern as the workers find work in various locations. This shift is evident in the sharp increase during the first to fifth years in the proportion of follow-the-crop migrants, from 10% to 29%, and the complementary decrease of those who do back-and-forth migration, from 77% to 51% (the decrease among those who migrate back and forth exclusively is from 70% to 33%).

Table 2. Evolution through Migration Strategies: Foreign-Born Workers

YEARS IN FARM WORK	FOLLOW-THE-CROP		BACK-AND-FORTH		SETTLED
	ALL F.T.C.	EXCLUSIVELY F.T.C.	ALL B.A.F.	EXCLUSIVELY B.A.F.	
1	10%	3%	77%	70%	20%
2-3	25%	8%	56%	39%	36%
4-5	29%	11%	51%	33%	38%
6-9	18%	6%	51%	39%	43%
10+	16%	7%	38%	29%	55%

Despite its decline during the first few years, international back-and-forth migration is a stable long-term migration pattern for many veteran farmworkers. Not all foreign-born migrants continue to the second and third phases; U.S.-based migration and settlement. There is a group of foreign-born migrants that continues to migrate even after 10 years in farm work. In fact, 45% of foreign-born farmworkers with 10 or more years of experience continue to migrate. Most (84%) of these workers cease going to more than one farm work location, if they ever did. The reduction in the proportion of follow-the-crop migrants from 29% to 16% between years five and ten demonstrates this. Most (90%) who continue to migrate are based outside the United States.

Veteran back-and-forth migrants apparently find that this constant transnational migration offers sufficient stability. Two-fifths (44%) find work with the same employer for five years or more, rates comparable to U.S.-based migrants (50%). Case study research done in rural Mexico depicts in detail the seasonal migration patterns adopted by these permanent shuttle migrants (see Weist, 1979; Mines, 1981; Lopez, 1986; and Diaz-Briquets and Weintraub, 1991). Still, many long-term international, back-and-forth migrants spend several years as follow-the-crop migrants first. This experience is helpful to properly select an acceptable U.S. destination community.

Stage Two: U.S.-Based Migration.

Over time, many foreign-born farmworkers move their home base to the United States. U.S.-based migrants make up 12% of the farm labor force, 29% of the migrant labor force, and comprise an estimated 190,000 workers.

Migrants who move their home base to the United States usually do so early in their careers. The heaviest concentration of U.S.-based migrants is in the group with four or five years of U.S. farm work experience (see Figure 14). Moreover, migrating from a U.S. base is often a transient state for foreign-born farmworkers. Only 15% of foreign-born farmworkers fall into this group. Apparently many foreign-born workers who move to the United States soon after become either settled farmworkers or non-farm workers.

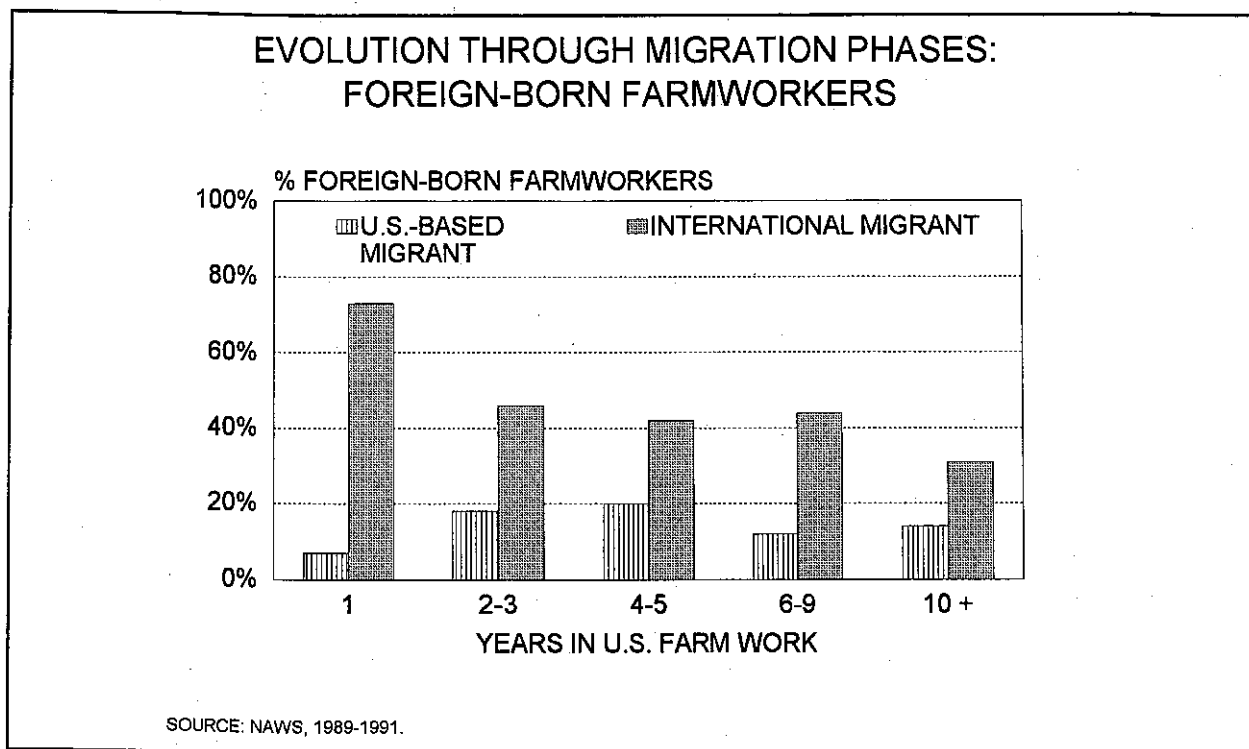


Figure 14. With added years in U.S. farm work, many migrants switch from international migration to U.S.-based migration.

Workers' families frequently migrate only after the migrant moves the home base to the United States. Single migrants often marry in their home country or begin forming families as they relocate their home base to the United States.²⁰ While family members accompany one-third (32%) of international migrants, families accompany over half (57%) the U.S.-based foreign-born migrants. In addition, the

²⁰ There is ample literature on the process of incorporating women and children into the migration process. See Durand and Massey, 1992; Massey, Donato and Liang, 1990; Gonzalez and Escobar, 1990; and Fonseca and Moreno, 1988.

average number of family members living with U.S.-based foreign-born migrants (4) is higher than the number living with non-U.S.-based migrants (3).

In moving their home base to the United States, foreign-born migrants increase their chances for economic improvement. They find more U.S. farm work, 32 weeks per year compared to 24 weeks for international migrants. They also command a higher farm wage, \$5.80 an hour compared to \$5.40 an hour. Additionally, 23% of U.S.-based migrants receive some form of U.S. public assistance, while only 7% of international migrants receive such assistance.

Legal status may influence migration and settlement decisions. Undocumented farmworkers are apparently less likely to move their home base to the United States than are their documented counterparts. Many may wait until they have legal status before they invite their families to join them in the United States. Thirty percent of international migrants are undocumented, compared to only 13% of foreign-born, U.S.-based migrants. IRCA's legalization of large numbers of farmworkers may have encouraged some international migrants to shift their home base to the United States.

Stage Three: Settlement.

Many migrants settle in the United States and remain in farm work. Forty-five percent of settled farmworkers, or 420,00 individuals, are foreign-born former migrants. Women, who make up 27% of this group, are particularly quick to settle. Over half (55%) the foreign-born farmworkers with ten or more years of experience have settled in one location in the United States (see Figure 15). Thus, foreign-born settled workers tend to have more farm experience: an average of ten years of farm work experience compared to eight years for migrants.

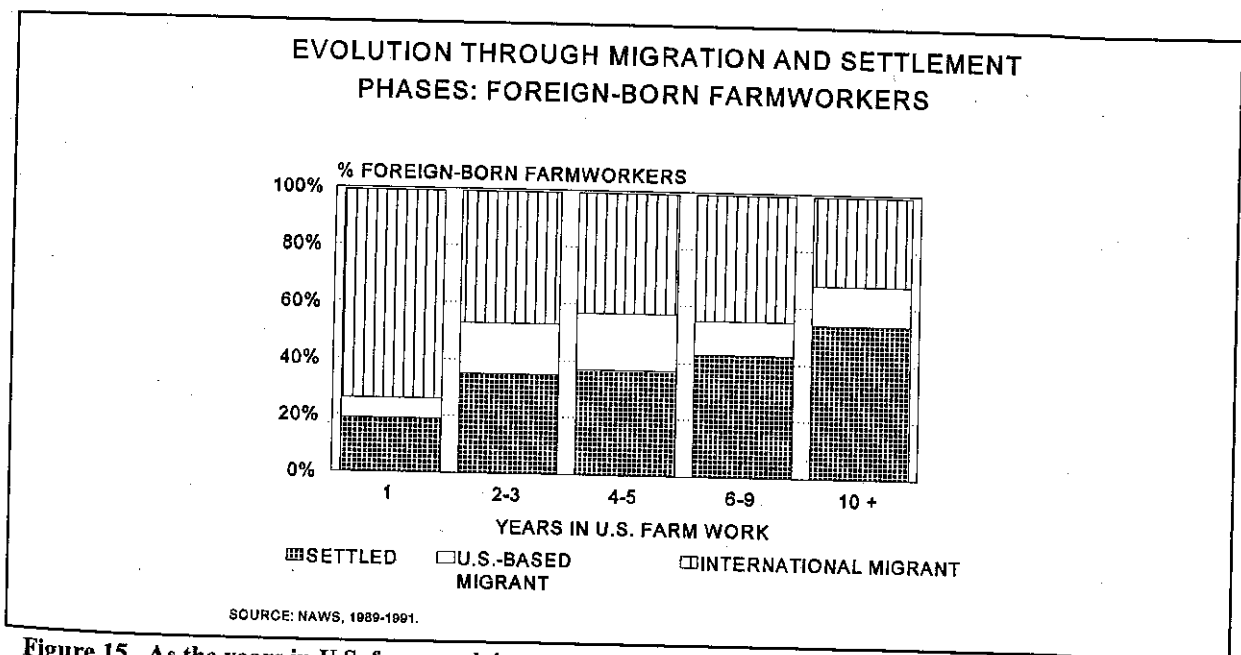


Figure 15. As the years in U.S. farm work increase, so does the percentage of foreign-born farmworkers who have settled.

Although many foreign-born farmworkers who settle in one farm work location continue in a precarious economic situation, they show some improvement over their migrant counterparts. Two-thirds (63%) of migrant farm workers live below the poverty line compared to half (48%) of foreign-born settled workers. The settled population has more stable employment. It averages four years with the same farm employer, compared to three for the migrant population, and two employers per year, compared to three for the migrant population. Yet this is not without a cost. Those who were follow-the-crop migrants will forego, on average, seven weeks of farm work when they settle (28 vs. 35). Foreign-born migrants who settle typically need to supplement their farm income with other income to make ends meet.

Foreign-born women pass through the phases of farmworker migration and settlement differently from foreign-born men (Durand and Massey, 1992; Massey, Donato and Liang, 1990; Gonzalez and Escobar, 1990; and Fonseca and Moreno, 1988). The low incidence (14%) of women who are international migrants suggests that most women pass quickly through the first migration stage. In most cases, they come to the United States to join their husbands or fathers at the point when a U.S. home base has been established. Most women who remain U.S. farmworkers for more than a few years settle in the United States. Twenty-eight percent of immigrant women who have worked less than three years and 68% of those who have worked from three to nine years have settled.

The Instability of the Farm Labor Force

While many migrant farmworkers follow the migration and settlement patterns outlined above, others leave farm work, some temporarily, others permanently. Of these, some return to their countries of origin while others leave farm work for non-farm jobs in the United States.

Since the NAWS does not survey workers who leave farm work, the proportion of farmworkers who choose this route cannot be determined directly. However, more than one in ten active farmworkers is new to farm work each year. Assuming the population of migrant farmworkers is relatively stable from year to year,²¹ the number of active workers who leave each year is similar to the number of workers who arrive for the first time. This means that an estimated 160,000 farmworkers exit annually to engage in other pursuits.

Case study research suggests the likely activities of those who leave farm work (Mines, 1981; Rouse, 1989; and Smith, 1992). This literature shows that, while many U.S. migrants return to or stay in Latin America, others follow their kinship/friendship networks to non-agricultural U.S. jobs. Many sending communities which once provided farm labor to the United States now provide workers for U.S. urban occupations. Immigrants establish permanent settler core communities in the urban areas of the United States, providing participants in these networks access to more stable non-farm

²¹ While production figures point to increasing labor needs, employer surveys show slowly declining labor demand. Measurement problems have been hypothesized as the cause of this discrepancy. In any case, the change in a single year is likely to be small.

employment. The literature also depicts Latin Americans who reject the insecurities of agricultural work in the United States and settle back into the economic life of their home towns .

An indication of the instability of the farm labor market is the flight from it of those with even a modest education. Those who remain in U.S. farm work, even as settled workers, tend to be those without alternatives. Educational skills are the most significant determinant of foreign-born migrant longevity in farm work. The vast majority (72%) of foreign-born farmworkers with less than nine years of education plans to stay in farm work indefinitely (see Figure 16). As farmworkers' education increases, they are less likely to stay in farm work. Sixty-five percent of foreign-born migrants without a high school degree plan to stay in farm work as long as they are able. Only 33% of those with a high school degree plan to stay indefinitely. Moreover, one-quarter (25%) of migrants point to their lack of educational and other qualifications²² and 15% to their lack of English ability as obstacles to leaving farm work.

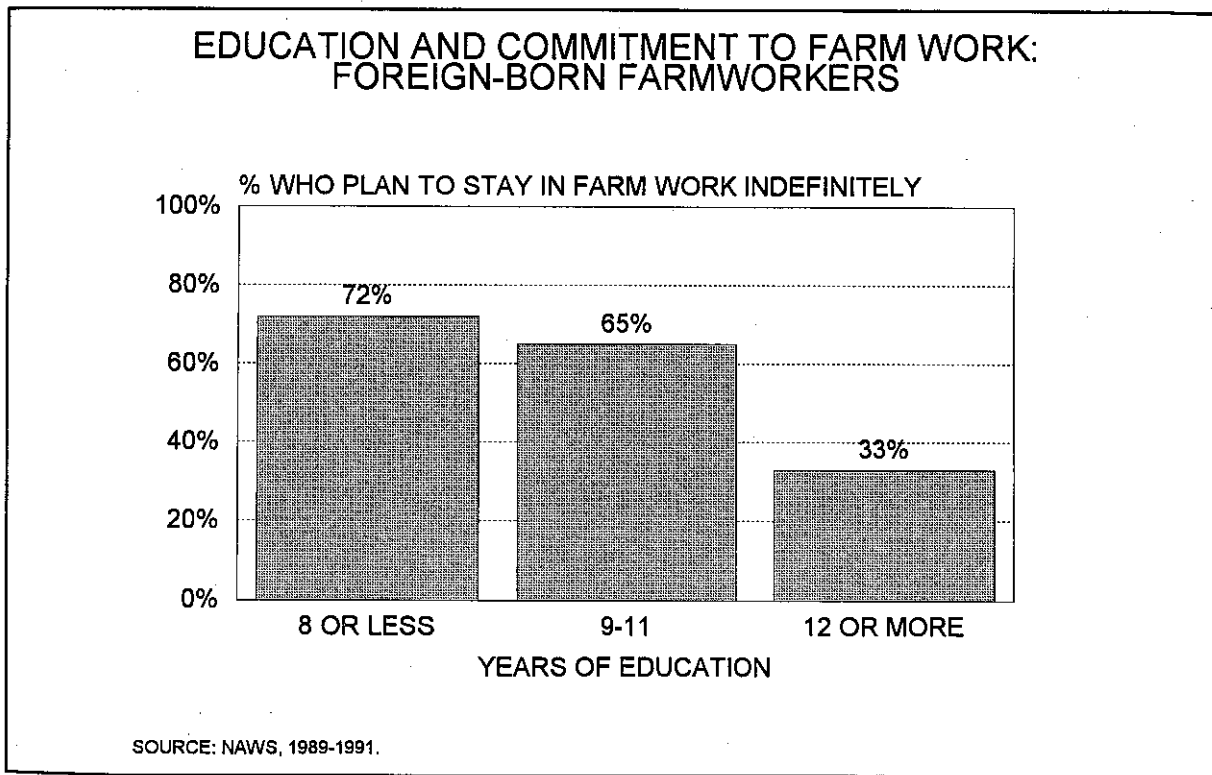


Figure 16. The higher the educational level of the farmworker, the less willing he/she is to stay in U.S. farm work.

²² Case study research found that Oregon farmworkers who entered the non-agricultural labor force have twice as much schooling (nine years) as the average foreign-born farmworker (Mason, Cross and Nuckton, 1993, p. 213).

Similarly, many young farmworkers plan to pursue other jobs. This may leave the most educationally disadvantaged in the maturing labor force. Sixty percent of migrants under age 18 plan to leave farm work within five years; 45% of those between 18 and 21 expect to leave farm work within five years. International migrants who are 35 years or older, on the other hand, typically expect to make farm work a lifelong activity: 75% plan to stay in farm work indefinitely.

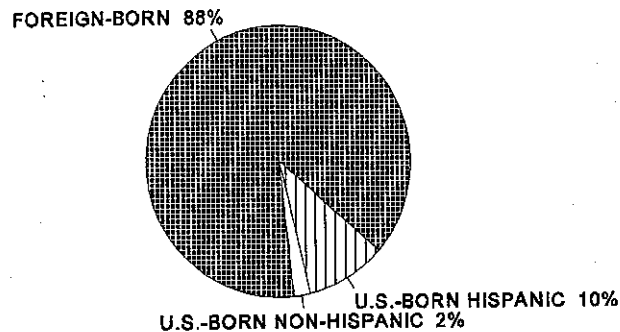
U.S.-Born Children of Farmworkers and the Continued Dependence on Foreign-Born Workers

Although some children of immigrants follow their parents into farm work, they are not a significant source of farmworkers. U.S.-born Hispanics constitute only 12% of farmworkers. Most (80%) U.S.-born Hispanic farmworkers are children of farmworkers; however, most U.S.-born children of Hispanic farmworkers do not become farmworkers. Among U.S.-born farmworker children over 14 years of age living with their parents in the United States, only 5% do farm work at a given time.

If current trends continue, it is unlikely that the U.S.-born children of the existing farmworker population will make a major contribution to future farm labor needs. Although 10% of migrants are U.S.-born Hispanics, making this the only U.S.-born ethnic group that does a significant amount of migrant farm work, most are young (31% are under 21 years old) workers who will outgrow U.S. farm work. Most (60%) of those under 21 expect to leave farm work within five years; overall, more than half (56%) expect to leave farm work within five years. This suggests that the reliance on immigrant farmworkers will continue.

A look at first-year migrants and other first-year farmworkers reinforces the conclusion that immigrants, and U.S.-born Hispanics to a smaller extent, will remain the primary contributors to the U.S. labor force. Nine out of ten (90%) first-year migrants are foreign-born; the other one-tenth are U.S.-born Hispanics. This dependence on Hispanic immigrants is not limited to migrant farm work. Eighty-eight percent of all first year farmworkers are foreign-born, 10% are U.S.-born Hispanics and only 2% are U.S.-born non-Hispanics (see Figure 17).

**CURRENT SOURCES OF FARMWORKERS:
ETHNICITY OF FIRST-YEAR FARMWORKERS**



SOURCE: NAWS, 1989-1991.

Figure 17. Virtually all workers entering farm work are foreign-born or U.S.-born Hispanics.

As workers leave U.S. farm work or settle into one location in a farm area in the United States, new foreign-born workers enter at the beginning of the migration process. Each year about one-ninth (12%) of the migrant population is new to U.S. farm work. The foreign-born population overall is quite new to farm work: 68% have worked on farms for fewer than five years. The data indicate that a process of immigration, migration and settlement is ongoing among Latin American immigrants and may continue into the future unless the current circumstances that confront these workers are radically altered.

Summary

Latin American and U.S.-born Hispanics who began their farm work careers as migrants comprise the majority of the farm labor force. These workers seek relative stability in their lives by implementing different survival strategies. The majority of migrants who remain in the U.S. agricultural work force eventually settle down to do farm work in one location in the United States. Many in this group pass through several distinct stages of migration and settlement: (1) transnational migration to the United States from a home base abroad, (2) migration from a home base in the United States, and (3) leaving migrant work to settle and establish residence in one U.S. farm area. Another large group of migrants finds sufficient stability by continuing to migrate between one location in Mexico and one farm area in the United States.

The large numbers of migrant farmworkers who conform to neither of these patterns either return to their home country or work in U.S.-based, non-farm jobs. Since most workers with relatively high

educational skills leave farm work, new migrant workers from outside the United States constantly replenish the migrant labor force. The outcome is an unstable labor market.

CHAPTER 4

THE FAILURE OF MIGRANT SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Despite migrant farmworkers' efforts to attain a lifestyle with secure, long-term U.S. farm employment, as described in Chapters 2 and 3, only a small minority succeeds. The vast majority of migrants attains only a marginal living from U.S. farm work. Most migrants earn below poverty-line wages, receive few employer-provided benefits, and endure poor working conditions. Even those migrants who attain the higher stability inherent in the settled lifestyle show only slight improvement in their living standard. Furthermore, most migrant and settled farmworkers whose income falls below the poverty level rely strictly on their own resources to survive; few receive government assistance. It is this undesirable lifestyle that discourages most migrants from a long-term commitment to U.S. farm work and leads to an unstable labor market.

Low Wages, Underemployment, and Poverty

The lack of full-time and year-round work combined with low wages relegates two-thirds (63%) of migrant farmworkers to living below the poverty line. When paid by the hour, as 66% of migrants are paid, migrants average \$4.47 per hour. When paid by the piece, a system that rewards productivity, migrant farmworkers average \$6.94 per hour. Despite the continuous efforts of many workers to string together several farm jobs, the inability to obtain full-time, year-round employment compounds the problem of earning modest wages. Migrants work an average of only 29 weeks per year, 25 of them in farm work, yielding a median income of \$5,000 a year. Similarly, the strategy of reducing living costs by spending non-working weeks in a low-cost area, usually Mexico, does not appear to significantly increase migrants' purchasing power. One-third (36%) of international migrants own no assets apart from their personal belongings.

The effects of poverty among migrants extend beyond the 670,000 workers who migrate. There are 410,000 dependents of migrants in the United States. Thus, between migrant farmworkers and their dependents, there are 1,080,000 individuals who live part or all year in the United States and rely on earnings from migrant farm work. Fifty-seven percent, or 620,000, of these individuals live in poverty. Many children are affected. Eighty-three percent or 340,000 of the 410,000 dependents are children under the age of 14, 73% of whom live in poverty.²³

²³ Although there are even greater numbers of individuals who depend on migrant farmworkers outside the country, the U.S. poverty guidelines do not apply to them. Thus, they are excluded from this analysis.

Inadequate Benefits and Poor Working Conditions

Migrants often encounter difficult work environments. Few migrants have access to employer-provided benefits and many endure poor working conditions. Eighty-seven percent of migrants say they are not covered by medical insurance and 73% say they do not get paid holidays or vacations. Additionally, growers do not always provide adequate sanitation facilities at the work site. One-third (33%) of migrant farmworkers lack adequate drinking water, water for washing, and/or toilets at the work site. Finally, many growers do not provide equipment for workers. Thirty-two percent of migrants who use equipment must buy it themselves.

The Predicament of Formerly Migratory Farmworkers

As seen in Chapter 3, settlement is a step foreign-born migrants often take in trying to stabilize their lives within the context of U.S. farm work. For many of these 420,000 former migrants, this action does not improve their situation a great deal. Migrants, once established in one location in the United States, appear to remain with many of the disadvantages of their years as migrant farmworkers.²⁴

Formerly migratory farmworkers have only slightly higher farm wages (8%) than migrant farmworkers. Former migrants make, on average, \$4.81 when paid hourly, and \$7.19 when paid by the piece. This is a small improvement over migrants' wages of \$4.47 and \$6.94, respectively. Like migrants, former migrants do not secure year-round employment in farm work; they average 28 weeks a year. The result is that half (48%) the formerly migratory farmworkers continue to live in poverty. This relegates another 400,000 farmworkers and family members to poverty. Furthermore, many continue to work at jobs that lack sanitary facilities (26%). A large group (27%) pays for its own equipment. Finally, 63% are still not covered by medical insurance, 76% do not receive paid holidays and vacations, 29% report that they lack unemployment insurance, and 35% report that they lack workers' compensation coverage.

Falling Through the Safety Net

The 1,020,000 individuals who live below the federal poverty line and who are migrants, former migrants or their family members, are good candidates for public assistance. Unfortunately, they rarely receive any. Three-quarters (77%) of them have not received, and do not know of anyone in their household who has received, government assistance²⁵ during the last two years. Most (80%)

²⁴ Only foreign-born former migrants are included here. There are a small number of former migrants (estimated at fewer than 10% of all former migrants) who are U.S.-born. However, there is no way for them to be identified in the NAWS.

²⁵ Income transfer programs such as AFDC, public assistance, food stamps, or low-income housing.

of these non-recipients are legal residents and, thus, are probably eligible.²⁶ Three-quarters of a million (790,000) migrant and formerly migratory farmworkers and family members living in poverty in the United States receive no government assistance.

Food stamps is the income transfer program most commonly used (16%) by migrant and formerly migratory farmworkers. Among the poor, 22% of the migrant and formerly migratory farmworker households received food stamps during the two years preceding the interview. Only 3% of migrant and formerly migratory farmworkers received or know of someone in their household who, over a two-year period, received general assistance, AFDC, or low-income housing.

Summary

Migrant and formerly migratory farmworkers find themselves without sufficient income or adequate public assistance to raise their incomes over the poverty level. Under current circumstances, despite their best efforts, most migrant farmworkers are destined to live a marginal existence as long as they depend on U.S. farm work for their livelihood. As Chapter 5 explains, the resulting flight from U.S. farm work leaves an unstable labor force. The difficulty of making a living off U.S. farm work is inherent in the farm labor system. The actions of individual farmworkers are ineffective toward overcoming this difficulty.

²⁶ Although poverty is not a sufficient criterion for eligibility for most of these services, it is a good proxy. Thus, all legal and poor migrants would be expected to be eligible for one or several of these services. The one exception is AFDC for IRCA-legalized workers; they need to wait five years to qualify.

CHAPTER 5

THE STRUCTURE OF FARM LABOR DEMAND

As described in Chapter 4, migrant farmworker efforts to attain a lifestyle with stable, long-term U.S. agricultural employment are often unsuccessful. This is largely due to the structure of farm labor demand. Farmworkers confront labor practices that shift production costs to workers. A labor system has evolved that (1) emphasizes temporary jobs, (2) encourages subcontracting for labor management, and (3) recruits workers in a manner that results in the chronic oversupply of labor. These labor practices are more prevalent in agriculture than in other industries, even other immigrant-dependent industries, for two reasons. First, agriculture is exempt from many government regulations and social insurance programs that discourage these practices.²⁷ Second, official data gathering procedures underestimate the extent of farmworker poverty and seasonal unemployment. As a result, migrant workers, their families, and communities rather than producers, taxpayers and consumers bear many costs associated with agriculture's endemic seasonal labor needs.²⁸

Temporary Jobs

Agricultural labor demand is structured into short-term work opportunities. Over half (58%) of farm jobs last fewer than 13 weeks (one quarter). Migrants make up most (54%) workers who take these short-term jobs. While climatic conditions justify the creation of some temporary jobs, the extensive use of such jobs is largely due to deliberate labor management decisions (Zabin, Kearney, Garcia, Runsten and Nagengast, 1993). Since ample labor is available, it is cheaper for farmers to use large numbers of workers for shorter periods rather than hire fewer workers.

Seasonal and short-term jobs in agriculture, as in other industries, are often less desirable than long-term jobs. Workers in short-term jobs often are ineligible for employer-paid benefits such as health insurance and paid vacation or sick leave. Some seasonal employers provide no employee benefits, while others offer benefits to permanent workers but have policies such as waiting periods that exclude temporary employees. In addition, many states exempt seasonal agricultural employers from mandated social insurance benefits.

Compared to their counterparts with longer-term jobs, farmworkers who have been at their jobs for fewer than 13 weeks have less desirable working conditions. They are less likely to receive paid

²⁷ Firms below a certain payroll in agriculture are exempt from federal labor and safety standards which must be followed in other industries.

²⁸ However, because the cost of field labor is only a small portion of retail food costs, the savings the current system affords consumers are minimal.

vacations or holidays (19% compared to 34%) or employer-provided medical insurance (37% compared to 46%), and they are more likely to work in an environment with inadequate sanitary facilities (23% compared to 16%).

Most migrants (67%) work exclusively in U.S. agriculture. Thus, the predominance of short-term jobs that do not offer benefits in U.S. agriculture results in a large working population that receives no benefits. Because of this, the costs of benefits such as health coverage, sick leave, and unemployment insurance are transferred to individual farmworkers.

There are various factors that lead to agricultural employers' reliance on short-term jobs. In other industries, unemployment insurance (UI) provides employers an incentive to reduce seasonal layoffs. Employers' UI premiums are partially experience-rated, a system that yields lower premiums for those with lower claims rates. Excepting California, no state requires UI coverage of all migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. Furthermore, seasonal farmworkers who work intermittently for short periods of time, or whose seasonal employment falls across two quarters, may have insufficient earnings to qualify for benefits. Migrant farmworkers file unemployment insurance claims at below-average rates; only 28% of those who spend some time unemployed submit claims. Thus, unlike the consequences felt by employers in other industries, large layoffs do not result in premium increases for agricultural employers. In fact, farm employers are probably encouraged to favor the use of high turnover workers by the UI system; short-term workers are less likely to file claims and drive up premium rates.

A large proportion (31%) of migrants return to their homes abroad, usually in Mexico, at the end of the agricultural season. Although this temporarily reduces living costs for some workers, it also indirectly perpetuates the tendency to define jobs as short-term. While abroad, workers rarely file unemployment claims and are not counted in U.S. unemployment statistics. Thus, the full impact of U.S. farmers' temporary labor demand system is not apparent, since the cost of maintaining the unemployed workers is transferred abroad, mostly to Mexico.

Even farmworkers who stay in the United States often do not appear in U.S. poverty and unemployment figures. The U.S. government measures needs for services in two ways: (1) the number of people filing jobless claims and using social services, and (2) from survey results. Since migrant farmworkers use social services and file unemployment claims at below-average rates, these official statistics do not adequately reflect their situation. In addition, farmworkers are difficult to survey accurately because of their limited English proficiency and limited literacy skills, high mobility, precarious legal status, and unusual living arrangements. They are, therefore, routinely under-represented in national jobless and poverty profiles (see Gabbard, Kissam and Martin, 1993).

Labor Market Intermediaries

To reduce costs and ensure supply, many farm producers turn to labor market intermediaries to provide seasonal workers. Labor contractors and crew bosses relieve producers of some of the

responsibility and anxiety associated with securing seasonal laborers. By spreading the costs of labor recruitment, supervision, compliance with regulations, and payroll accounting over several producers, labor contractors often enjoy a cost advantage over individual growers. Intermediaries also allow growers to avoid the paper work, and at times the legal liability, of complying with regulations covering farmworkers.²⁹

During the current period of oversupply of workers and intermediaries, fierce competition among contractors can further lower growers' payrolls. Wages cannot legally fall below the minimum. Yet some contractors recoup their costs and lost profits by lowering workers' net wages through petty cost-saving measures and by charging workers for services.³⁰ For example, piece rates may not compensate workers for cleaning, sorting, and stem removal, although workers do perform these tasks when harvesting. Contractors also may impose strict quality controls for color, shape, or size that result in frequent unpaid buckets or bushels. Farmworkers who earn a piece rate wage, whether they work for an intermediary or not, are four times more likely to make less than the federal minimum wage than those who earn an hourly wage (30% and 7%, respectively).

Contractors can lower costs by making workers pay for equipment, daily rides, check cashing, meals, and lodging. Compared to farmworkers hired directly by the grower, farmworkers employed by intermediaries are more likely to pay for their equipment (45% compared to 16%), and for rides, food and/or housing (34% compared to 14%). Furthermore, workers may pay a fee to the contractor for finding a job and for transportation from their home base, often in Mexico, to the U.S. work location. One study found that ride and tool deductions reduced gross wages for tomato harvesters in Stockton and Fresno, California, by 14% (Runsten, Cook, Garcia and Villarejo, 1993). In addition, these workers often paid check-cashing fees. Intermediaries may also lower their expenses by minimizing out-of-pocket expenses. For example, workers hired by intermediaries are less likely than their directly-hired counterparts (65% compared to 78%) to find sanitary facilities in the field. These methods, which lower farmworkers' take-home pay, allow contractors to show a profit in a highly competitive market, and also lower labor costs for producers.

Farmworker "newcomers" are more likely to be dependent on contractors for services such as rides, check cashing, food, housing and other goods and services. Intermediaries, at the same time, profit more from workers who need services. The result is a complicated sourcing system where intermediaries recruit the most vulnerable workers for the jobs with the fewest protections and benefits. The most vulnerable workers are often migrants, who are, on average, three years younger and four years less experienced than settled farmworkers. Thus, most (70%) farm labor contractor employees are migrants. One-third (29%) of migrants work for farm labor contractors or

²⁹ The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 prohibits the hiring of unauthorized workers and imposes sanctions on employers who violate this prohibition.

³⁰ The minimum wage law is not always obeyed. For example, Zabin, Kearney, Garcia, Runsten and Nagengast (1993) found that one-quarter of Mixtec-speaking workers in California were paid less than minimum wage (p. 102).

intermediaries. By comparison, only one in ten (10%) settled farmworkers works for a farm labor contractor.

In sum, contracting is beneficial to growers because it lowers labor costs and relieves them of the responsibility of employing seasonal labor. Intermediaries, competing fiercely with each other, transfer many costs to their workers, who are often migrants.

The Recruitment System and the Oversupply of Workers

In agriculture, a recruitment system designed to guarantee an adequate seasonal labor force has spawned a labor market that is in chronic surplus. Because of the uncertainty inherent in timing and size of harvests, the agricultural industry feels it needs an ample supply of workers to prevent shortages during peak periods. Over many years, the system has incorporated a web of employer agents, both in the United States and in Mexico (see Gamio, 1930; Valdez, 1991; Mines and Anzaldua, 1982; and Hancock, 1959). They have increased the supply of labor in two ways: (1) employer agents directly hire and attract workers to specific sites,³¹ and (2) once started, immigrant networks take on their own life and facilitate the movement of people at the immigrants' own initiative. These labor-generating mechanisms have produced a recruitment system with unevenly divided costs. If the system produces too many workers in one farm area, employers or contractors do not incur appreciable costs. Instead, individual workers and the local communities that provide emergency social services absorb the costs of dislocation and unemployment.

The U.S. farm labor system is characterized by an oversupply of workers. At any point in the year, there is a plentiful supply of farmworkers (at least 190,000, or 12% of farmworkers) in the United States who are not working (see Figure 18). Furthermore, there are many workers who are out of the country but may be available for work. Even those in non-farm work may be available. It appears that the chronic surplus exists at the regional level as well. In the North, at any point in the year, at least 10% of locally available farmworkers are not employed; in California, 13%, and in the South, 15%. Furthermore, case study research confirms the prevalent surplus conditions in many different areas of the country (Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1993b).

The chronic oversupply of agricultural workers in the United States has led to a pattern of replacement of one group by another. Farmworkers cannot achieve and maintain improved pay and working conditions while employers and intermediaries can recruit newly-arrived immigrants willing to work for less. Traditional receiving areas, such as California, and increasingly other areas of labor-intensive agriculture in the United States witness recurrent cycles of replacement. In these cycles, more established farmworkers see their wage gains and their employment security eroded (Zabin et al., 1993; Mines and Anzaldua, 1982; and U.S. General Accounting Office, 1988).

³¹ Mexican employers bus workers, who eventually work in U.S. agriculture, from southern to northern Mexico (Zabin et al., 1993).

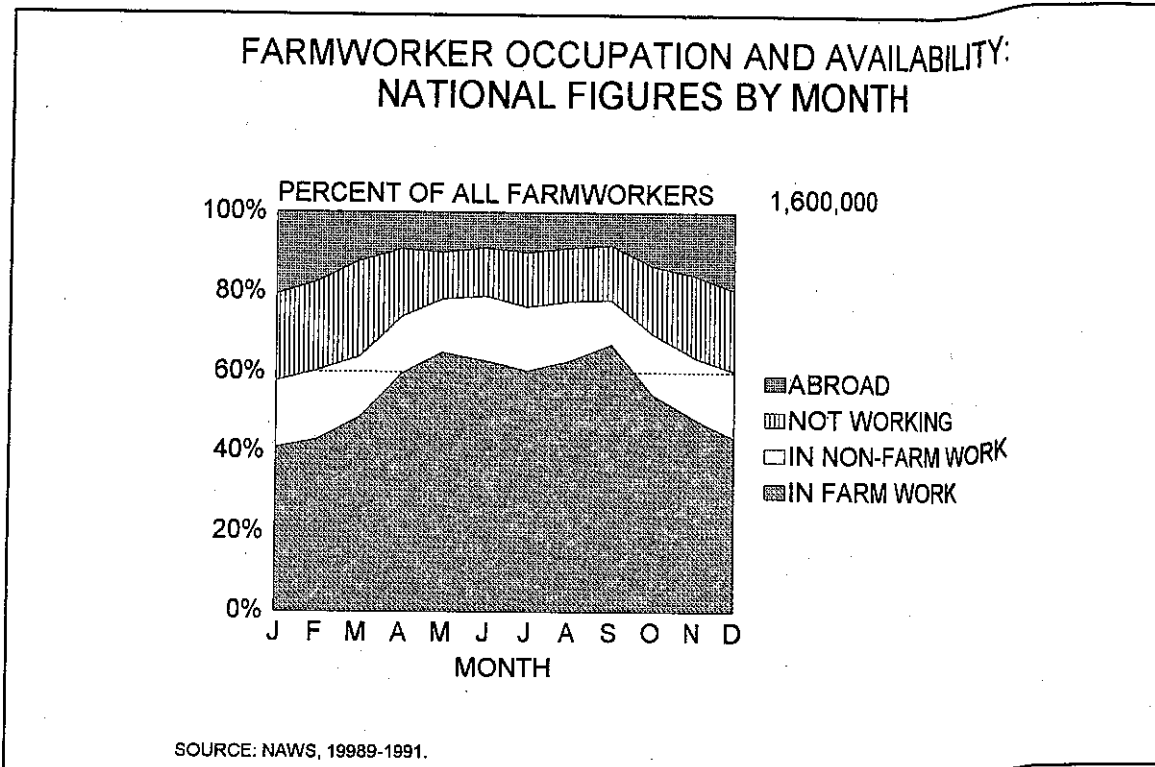


Figure 18. At any time during the year there appear to be large numbers of farmworkers who are not employed.

Farmworkers tend to enter farm work through migrant networks. New networks originate when pioneer migrants from a given community, usually unaccompanied males, come to the country in search of work. Often employer agents help them find work and provide transportation and support services during the initial immigrant experience. As networks mature, more individuals from the same village follow the pioneers to the United States. More established community members gain access to legal resident status and steady jobs, and then help new friends and relatives find jobs and acquire legal status. As the process continues, the role of employer agents and other paid intermediaries declines for that community. The expansion of a community network is limited to the population of the hometown and grows at a fairly predictable rate. As discussed in Chapter 3, in many communities migrant workers move into non-farm work over time and that particular community's contribution to the farm labor force declines.

As an established community network's need for paid intermediaries diminishes, the affected employer agents may then seek out new sources of workers in villages that have few or no contacts with U.S. employers. Thus, labor market intermediaries often facilitate the introduction of new migrant groups into farm work in the early phases (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1988). In this manner, pioneer migrants have been recruited from the most southern regions of Mexico. The most recent entrants to the farm labor force are the Mixtecs from southern Mexico and the Kanjobals from the Guatemalan highlands (Zabin et al., 1993). Neither of these groups of indigenous people speaks Spanish as a

native language; they average two years of school in Spanish. Without paid intermediaries to help them connect with farm jobs in the United States, neither group could have rapidly joined the U.S. farm labor force.

Summary

The reliance on short-term job assignments, paid intermediaries, and recruitment practices that produce labor surpluses transfer many U.S. agricultural production costs to the migrant workers and the local communities that sustain them. In effect, migrant workers, so necessary for the success of the labor-intensive U.S. agricultural system, subsidize that very system with their own and their family's indigence. The system functions to transfer costs to workers who are left with income so marginal that, for the most part, only newcomers and those with no other options are willing to work on our nation's farms.

CONCLUSIONS

The NAWS data have improved our insight into the role played and lives endured by migrant farmworkers. For the first time, several facts can be clearly demonstrated based on hard information derived from a national survey of employed farmworkers.

Labor intensive agricultural production in the United States depends on a predominantly foreign-born migrant labor force to perform many arduous short-term tasks which, under present circumstances, appear necessary for the survival of the affected industries. The information from the NAWS demonstrates that migrants have created strategies to maximize their earnings and minimize their costs in ways that are compatible with their continued participation in U.S. farm work. However, the data also show that, although these strategies aspire to a stable lifestyle, the achievement of that lifestyle is elusive and the efforts usually end in failure. This failure can be measured in the migrants' inability to achieve and maintain adequate earnings, their lack of employer and social benefits, and the poor working conditions under which they labor. The data further demonstrate that this failure may be the consequence of a labor system that perpetuates a chronic labor surplus, provides primarily short-term employment, and uses middlemen. All three of these factors exert downward pressure on farm labor conditions. The workers directly or indirectly pay for much of the travel, housing, health care, child care, periods of unemployment, training, and equipment required to manage a system based on migrant and seasonal labor. The labor market, in effect, transfers most of the costs of its inherent instability to the workers themselves.

The high outflow of farmworkers to non-farm work in the United States and the constant replenishment from abroad means that the agricultural labor market serves as an entry point for low-wage, low-skilled immigrants for the entire U.S. economy. To slow this influx of new entrants and stabilize the farm labor market requires diverting the costs of instability from the migrants back to the employers, taxpayers, and consumers who benefit from their labor.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY AND STATISTICAL METHODOLOGY

Survey Methodology

This report is based on information from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), a U.S. Department of Labor survey of U.S. farmworkers. The data used in this report originate from 6,433 interviews performed between January 1989 and June 1991. The NAWS covers field workers in Seasonal Agricultural Services (SAS) crops, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. SAS crops consist of all fruits and vegetables, and the vast majority of nursery products and field crops, including cash grains. The NAWS does not cover workers in fish, beef, hog, poultry, dairy or other livestock industries. The NAWS collects demographic, educational, socio-economic, legal status and service use information on farmworkers and their families. It also collects descriptive information on their most recent farm job and a three-year work history. Only one year of the work history is used to determine which workers qualify as migrants (see definition of migrant in the Introduction).

NAWS sampling and interviewing procedures are designed to obtain a nationally representative sample of workers. Significant seasonal and regional fluctuations in agricultural employment, unconventional living arrangements and high mobility make many of these workers hard to find. The NAWS uses site area sampling to interview over 2,000 randomly selected SAS workers every year.

To account for the seasonality of the industry, the NAWS conducts interviews three times a year in cycles lasting six to eight weeks. The cycles start in January, May and September. The number of interviews conducted in each cycle is proportionate to the amount of SAS activity at that time of year.

To account for 12 distinct agricultural regions, the NAWS uses a sample of 73 counties in 25 states. Multi-stage sampling is used to select the respondents in each cycle. The likelihood of a given county being selected is proportional to the size of its SAS payroll. SAS employers within each county are chosen randomly from public agency records, including lists from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Agricultural Soil and Conservation Service and the Agricultural Commissioner's pesticide registrations. These records are supplemented with lists from other sources such as Dunn and Bradstreet.

The NAWS samples work sites rather than residence to overcome the difficulty of reaching farmworkers with unconventional residences. NAWS regional coordinators contact the selected employers to obtain access to the work site. Interviewers then go to the fields and ask a random sample of workers to participate. Interviews take place at the worker's home or at another location of the worker's choice and are conducted in one of five languages.

Statistical Methodology

Determining the Confidence Intervals.

A confidence interval is an estimated range of values with given probability of covering the true population value. Information that follows can be used to calculate confidence intervals associated with numbers reported in preceding sections.

For categorical variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, legal status), we report the proportion or percentage of workers falling into each defined category. Confidence intervals around the reported survey findings are based on a normal approximation to the binomial distribution. This method implies that, with a 99% confidence interval, reported figures vary at most three percentage points from the true value. The bottom value of the 99% confidence interval is derived by subtracting the percent listed from the mean; the top value, by adding the same percent. For example, if 75% of farmworkers in the sample are reported within a given category, we have 99% confidence that between 72% and 78% of SAS workers in the overall population actually fall within that category.

For continuous variables (e.g., age, years of schooling, wage rate), we generally present measures of central tendency, such as averages or medians. Confidence intervals for the averages of continuous variables are based on standard errors, which provide a measure of variability of an average value obtained through repeated random sampling from the same population. A small standard error characterizes an average that varies little from sample to sample, and a large standard error indicates greater variance. Estimated boundaries of a 99% confidence interval around any sample average can be calculated by respectively adding and subtracting from the average three times the standard error. For example, for a variable with a reported sample average of 31 and a standard error of 1, we are 99% confident that the true population average is no less than 28 and no more than 34.

Table A.1 lists confidence intervals for all continuous variables in this report. It provides variable means and standard errors for the relevant samples.

Table A.1. Means and Standard Errors for Continuous Variables

VARIABLE	GROUP	MEAN	STANDARD ERROR
Age	Migrants	30.30	0.20
	Settled farmworkers	33.00	0.20
Employers per year	Follow-the-crop migrants	2.80	0.10
	Foreign-born migrants	2.70	0.10
	Foreign-born settled (former migrants)	1.80	0.10
Family members with farmworker	International migrants	2.80	0.10
	U.S.-based foreign-born migrants	3.70	0.10
Living locations per year	Follow-the-crop migrants	1.90	0.10
Wage - all forms of payment	International migrants	\$5.40	\$0.04
	Foreign-born U.S.-based migrants	\$5.80	\$0.06
Wage - hourly rate	Foreign-born settled (former migrants)	\$4.81	\$0.02
	Migrants	\$4.47	\$0.02
Wage - piece rate	Foreign-born settled (former migrants)	\$7.19	\$0.20
	Migrants	\$6.94	\$0.10
Weeks of farm work per year	Follow-the-crop migrants	35.40	0.40
	Foreign-born settled (former migrants)	28.40	0.50
	International back-and-forth migrants	23.30	0.30
	International follow-the-crop migrants	31.20	0.50
	International migrants	23.70	0.30
	Migrants	24.80	0.20
	Settled farmworkers	26.20	0.20
	U.S.-based back-and-forth migrants	17.80	0.90
	U.S.-based follow-the-crop migrants	36.70	0.60
	U.S.-based foreign-born migrants	32.40	0.50
Weeks of all work per year	Migrants	28.90	0.40
Weeks not working	U.S.-based back-and-forth migrants	19.60	0.80
Years with employer	Foreign-born migrants	2.70	0.10
	Foreign-born settled farmworkers	4.30	0.10
Years of school	Foreign-born migrants	6.50	0.10
Years of U.S. farm work	Foreign-born settled farmworkers	9.80	0.10
	International migrants	7.00	0.10
	Migrants	7.00	0.10
	Settled farmworkers	11.30	0.10

Differences Between SAS Worker Subgroups.

All reported differences in means or categorical proportions for different groups of SAS workers are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Differences between worker groups with respect to continuous variables, including those for which medians are reported, were assessed using the t-test of means. Relationships among categorical variables were checked using the Pearson Chi-Square test.

The Chi-Square test checks for differences in how a population is distributed across all the groups defined by different combinations of categorical values of multiple variables (i.e., for a two-variable analysis, by respective cells in a cross-tabulation). A significant result indicates that the distribution is not random across all categories and thus that some relationship exists between the two variables within that population.