

The Role And Future of

Migrant Farmworkers In Wisconsin Agriculture

By Doris P. Slesinger

Every year Wisconsin's population swells with transient out-of-state residents who play a vital role in agricultural production and processing of vegetables, fruits, nursery stock, and Christmas trees. This article looks at migrant workers in Wisconsin, their history, characteristics, and future outlook.

History

Migrant workers first appeared in Wisconsin around the turn of the century. At that time, sugar beet and vegetable production expanded, leading to the recruitment of European workers from low-income areas in several midwestern cities, including Sheboygan, Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Most early migrants were Belgian; they were later replaced by Germans and Russians. Many of these migrants eventually bought their own farms, settled in the community, and became permanent residents of the state. In the 1920s and 1930s, the number of migrant Hispanic workers increased. Sugar beet companies actively recruited workers from the Southwest and along both sides of the Mexican border. By 1942, Wisconsin growers increased farm production to support the war effort but experienced severe labor shortages. This led to the establishment of the National Emergency Farm Labor Program (1943-47) which permitted the importation of foreign workers. Wisconsin imported male workers from Jamaica, the Bahamas, British

Honduras, and Mexico. German and Italian prisoners of war were also used. In 1945 the number of foreign agricultural workers peaked at 6,700.

Following World War II, many Wisconsin farmers abandoned their agricultural pursuits for higher-paying jobs in the city. Wisconsin's production of crops requiring a large seasonal labor force did not decrease, but growers recruited more domestic migrants and fewer foreigners. About 85 percent of the migrant workers in Wisconsin during the postwar period were Texas-Mexicans. The remainder were recruited from neighboring states, from the South (mostly from Louisiana and Mississippi), and from the Chippewa, Oneida, and Menominee Indian tribes in northern Wisconsin. Wisconsin also received some foreign workers from 1951 to 1964 under the federal "Bracero Program," which was aimed at alleviating agricultural labor shortages.

Since 1955, the number of migrant workers in the state has declined due to the mechanization of planting, picking, and sorting crops, and the use of herbicides in agriculture. These industrial advances lowered labor requirements for many commodities. On the other hand, increased production of highly perishable crops—primarily vegetables for processing—created more jobs for migrant workers. These countervailing forces can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the trend in employment of migrant workers in Wisconsin from 1945 to

the present.

Mechanization

Mechanization cut sharply the number of migrant workers in Wisconsin, beginning in the early 1950s with the development of mechanical harvesters for sugar beets, potatoes, and snap beans. These crops are among the less delicate fruits and vegetables grown in the state and are relatively conducive to machine handling. By the 1960s, the potato harvesting machine had virtually supplanted hand harvesting. A snap-bean harvester, adopted around 1954, helped to make Wisconsin the nation's top producer of snap beans for processing. Mechanical cherry tree shakers were also developed in the past twenty years; by 1978 almost the entire cherry crop was picked by machine. The cucumber is one vegetable for which there has not yet been a satisfactory mechanical picker devised. Although there have been attempts at mechanization since the early 1960s, and some machines have been successfully used in soils different than Wisconsin's, to date almost all cucumbers in the state are still hand picked and sorted by migrant workers.

The number of migrants working in strawberry production has also declined, but not due to mechanization. Wisconsin growers used to employ many migrant workers to harvest their crops. As labor costs increased, however, the growers did not mechanize. Instead, they eliminated the labor pool by converting their fields to "pick-your-own" op-

erations. Today, almost all strawberry operations have eliminated migrant labor and instead use local labor or are "pick-your-own" operations.

Herbicides

Increased use of herbicides in agricultural production has also contributed to the decline in use of migrant labor. Many migrants had been employed to weed intensively grown crops with a high per-acre value. Weed control was especially important in onion production, because onions compete poorly with weeds, and mint production, since the presence of weeds in mint hay diminishes the quality of mint oil. Today, herbicides have virtually

displaced migrant workers in these tasks.

Field vs. cannery work

For the first half of the century migrant seasonal labor worked as field laborers. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increased number of canneries hired migrant labor, although the total number of migrants in Wisconsin declined. In 1968, for the first time, more migrants worked in food processing plants than in field work. According to Wisconsin State Employment Service data, the proportion of migrants in cannery work peaked in the early 1970s at around 60 percent, and since has hovered around 50 percent. Recent data, however, indicate that many canneries are

closing or converting to freezing produce—an operation that is more easily computerized and can eventually be converted to robotics.

Labor laws

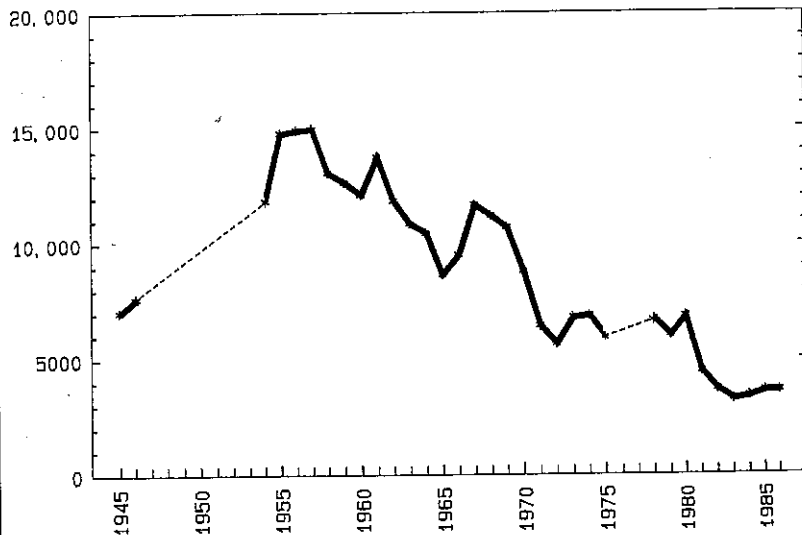
New laws designed to protect migrant workers in Wisconsin also influenced employment patterns. Wisconsin has had a series of state laws, commencing in 1951, that have increasingly required more stringent enforcement of registration, inspection, and certification of migrant camps. There has been particularly strong antipathy among employers toward a 1977 law that regulates housing, job contracts, guaranteed minimum wages, and transportation. Some employers claim to have closed their operations, or changed from hiring migrants to hiring local laborers, because of this law. They cite the continuing decline in the number of employers of migrant workers as evidence of this burden. However, there has been a consistent decline in the number of farms in Wisconsin for decades and the current economic plight of farmers has little to do with the costs associated with migrant labor. Marginal farmers have always been at risk of losing their farms, and today's economic environment may have exacerbated their tenuous situation.

The most recent regulations passed concern sanitary and health conditions. A 1986 regulation requires employers to provide the following sanitary measures for field workers: one portable toilet per twenty workers, drinking water, and water for washing hands. Although growers raised concerns about the expense of such additions, they have been pleased with the positive effects of these changes on both morale and productivity of the workers.

Current situation

In the 1986 season, an estimated 3,500 migrant workers came to Wisconsin. This indicates a sharp decline since the peak of 15,000 workers estimated to be working in Wisconsin in 1955. As shown in Figure 1, the decline in number of

Figure 1.
Estimates of Migrant Farmworkers in Wisconsin, 1945 - 1986



Sources

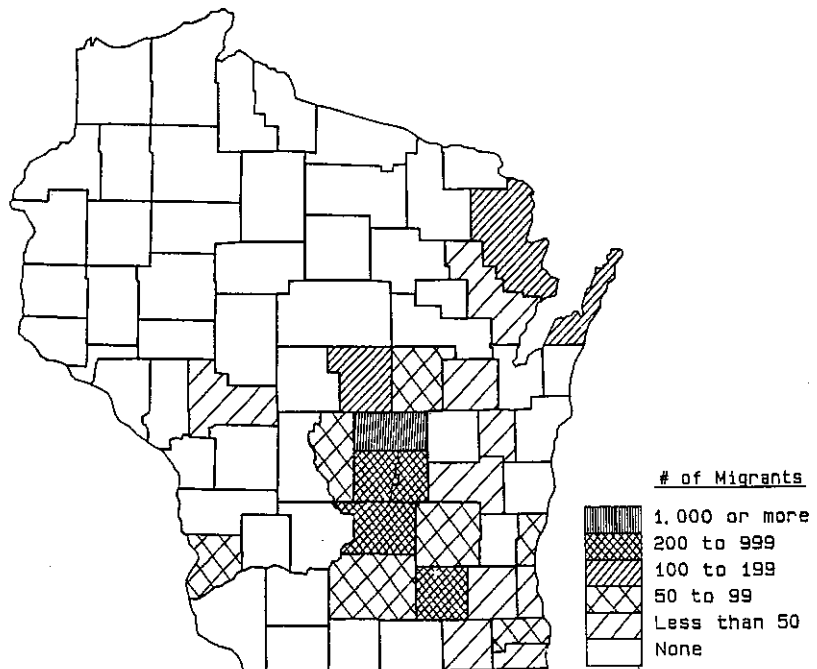
- 1945-1946, 1954-1962 Wisconsin State Employment Service "Fact Sheet."
- 1963-1967 Rauschenbush, Elizabeth Brandeis, "Wisconsin Governor's Committee on Migratory Labor Report for 1966 and 1967 with a Summary of Earlier Developments," Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations, Madison, 1968.
- 1966-1975 Wisconsin State Employment Service "Fact Sheet."
- 1978-1986 Figures based on numbers provided by migrant camps registered with Bureau of Migrant Law Enforcement, Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations.

Table 1. Crops on Which Migrants Work in Wisconsin, Arranged by Number of Sites in 1981

Crops	Number of Sites
Cucumber	40
Onions*	20
Peas	16
Carrots*	15
Sweet Corn	14
Cabbage	12
Potatoes*	12
Mint	11
Green Beans	8
Sod	8
Apples	6
Cauliflower	6
Beets	5
Mixed Vegetables	5
Lettuce	4
Peppers	4
Celery	3
Cherries	3
Evergreens	3
Tamarack	3
Lima Beans	2
Ornamental plants	2
Radishes	2
Soybeans	2
Wheat	2
Canned Sauces	1
Kohlrabi	1
Melons	1
Spinach	1
Strawberries	1
Tomatoes	1

* Field and cannery crops are combined.

Figure 2. Number of Migrant Workers by County, 1986



workers proceeded at a steady pace until the early 1970s when the number of workers dropped to about 5,000. Since then, the number of workers has continued to decline, but at a slower pace. The numbers shown include only migrant workers; many bring dependent family members with them. Thus, in 1955, 15,000 migrant workers brought 5,000 dependent family members with them to Wisconsin. By 1978, the number had dropped to an estimated 4,100 workers and 2,500 dependent family members. Today, the Job Service Division of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations estimates there are 3,500 workers and 2,000 dependents in the migrant population.

Table 1 shows crops on which the migrants work, arranged according to number of sites in the state. (Data were obtained from a telephone survey of employers in 1981. See M. Richards and D. P. Slesinger, "The Migrant Farm Worker Population in Wisconsin, 1981," Agricultural Bulletin R3257, University of Wisconsin-Madison.) Figure 2 shows the counties in which migrants work and the approximate number of workers employed in that county in 1986. Today migrants are employed in approximately twenty-five counties, but only five have over 200 workers. Waushara county continues to have the largest number of workers with approximately 1,050 workers in twenty-nine camps certified by Job Service this year.

Migrants start arriving in Wisconsin in late March for nursery work. Numbers peak in the first weeks of August, when harvesting and cannery work is at its busiest, and decline rapidly after Labor Day. A few workers stay until early December, usually packing carrots, onions, potatoes, or trimming Christmas trees.

About 90 percent of migrants come from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, near the Mexican border. Most workers speak Spanish and English, although a number of the older workers speak only Spanish.

Some interesting information was obtained from personal interviews with migrants in a statewide random sample survey in 1978. (For more details, see D. P. Slesinger, *Health Needs of Migrant Workers*

in Wisconsin, Dept. of Rural Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Madison, 1979.) In 1978, about 60 percent of workers were males, who, on average, were older than female workers. The average age of male workers was thirty-six years compared to thirty-three years for female workers. About two thirds of the workers were married, and one third were single, divorced, or widowed. About three fourths migrated with families and/or relatives, and one fourth migrated alone. Canneries tend to hire single workers while growers tend to hire families to plant, tend, and harvest crops in the fields. Thus, counties such as Green Lake tend to have single workers living in dormitories and working in canneries, while counties such as Waushara tend to have migrant families living in camps and working in the fields. About one fourth of the workers are new to Wisconsin each year, although some migrant families have been returning to Wisconsin for over twenty-five years.

On average, migrants have not completed high school. Among workers twenty-five years and older, only 8 percent of males and 4 percent of females are high school graduates. Over 70 percent of both men and women had not reached ninth grade. Yearly income of migrants hovers around the poverty level. Although data on earned income of migrant workers are very hard to obtain, a 1978 survey found that, on average, about three fourths of the total family income was earned through migrant work. In 1977, the median family income for workers was \$5,500 with almost one out of three families earning less than \$4,000. Their per capita income was just under \$2,000—which compares most unfavorably with the 1976 per capita income of \$6,300 for Wisconsin residents. About two out of three migrant families receive some form of public assistance. This includes food stamps, unemployment compensation, and/or participation in the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. In gen-

eral, most migrants live close to the poverty level and receive their income in short but intensive periods of work.

What does the future hold?

The number of migrant workers employed in Wisconsin agriculture will likely continue to decline slowly. Only two major industrial activities employ workers today: hand-picking cucumbers for pickles and canning peas, green beans, corn, and mixed vegetables. The migrant work force in Wisconsin will likely decline precipitously when cucumber picking is successfully mechanized. This will happen when a mechanical picker is designed which can pick cucumbers without blowing sand in the pickles, and when plants are genetically created to produce a crop of the same sized pickles which mature at the same time so that a once-over harvesting machine will obtain uniform pickles. In addition, as frozen vegetables replace canned ones, as is the trend in the food industry, it is likely that canneries now employing migrants will use only local labor and computers to handle the freezing process. Either of these conditions would have a major impact on the number of migrants traveling to Wisconsin for agricultural work, reducing the number of out-of-state migrants to a trickle.

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