

pathways  
they  
follow

the  
migrant  
worker  
streams

MIG  
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**Pathways they Follow: The Migrant Worker  
Streams**

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# introduction

In 1969 the Gross National Product in the United States exceeded \$900 billion. Personal income in this country has quadrupled in the last century, even allowing for changes in population and the value of money. The distribution of income, however, has remained almost unchanged over the last 20 years. Although the distribution of income has been relatively stable, the rise in income levels has meant that the number of persons below the poverty line has declined. The poor numbered 40 million in 1960 and only 26 million in 1967.<sup>1</sup>

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The decline in poverty came during a unique period of economic expansion and increased governmental efforts to alleviate the poverty problem. The benefits of economic growth and of the War on Poverty have tended to fall unevenly on the poor population, however. And although the reduction of poverty has been impressive among some groups, an estimate based on past trends suggests that poverty in the United States is not likely to disappear in the near future, even for those groups who have benefited most. (Even with a 4 percent rate of growth in the GNP, there are likely to be close to 17 million persons in poor households in 1974.)<sup>2</sup>

The report of the President's Commission on Rural Poverty, The People Left Behind, states that of the 26 million poor in America in 1967, 14 million of these lived in rural areas. This nation has been largely oblivious to its millions of impoverished people left behind in rural America. In contrast to urban poor, the rural poor are not well organized and have few means for bringing the nation's attention to their problems. Until recently, this country's major social welfare and labor legislation, for the most part, by-passed rural Americans, especially farmers and farm workers.<sup>3</sup>

Migrant farm workers typify the severity of poverty in rural areas more than any other group. The 1969 report of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor states that despite the enactment of minimum wage for some farm workers, the migrant in 1967 worked an average of only 85 farm days for average farm wages of \$922.<sup>4</sup> The U. S. Department of Agriculture states in its report The Hired Farm Working Force of 1969 that in 1969 the migrant did farm work an average of only 78 days and earned average farm wages of only \$891.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of resident rural poor have some alternatives for securing either private or public assistance. But, because of their mobility, migrants and seasonal farm workers are reached and helped less than any other single group by the resources of agencies seeking to assist them. Migratory workers travel because of economic necessity. Either the amount of farm work available is limited, or migratory work is, hopefully, a way of

obtaining higher wages.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, mechanization, restructuring of farm operations, and other problems continue to lessen available opportunities within the migrant employment streams. The futile search for disappearing employment becomes, for many migrants, an aimless existence or an entrance into the urban ghetto.

Reports of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor and such special television reports as the National Broadcasting Company's "Migrant - An NBC White Paper" (August, 1970) have brought the plight of migratory farm workers to the attention of the public. But, no careful gathering of information on the patterns of migration has been maintained. Statistical data used in this report are based upon reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Employment Security, the U.S. Department of Labor, and from reports of various State Employment Services. Because of the very nature of migrant mobility, these statistics are necessarily based upon estimates. The author intends that these figures be treated as just that--statistics based upon estimates. They are not to be construed as final, official, wholly reliable figures. Noticeable discrepancies must be accepted as the inevitable by-product of gathering statistics from many and varied sources.

Despite these discrepancies, most statisticians are in agreement on several important facts. First, migratory workers comprise 9 to 10 percent of the total hired farm labor force in this country.<sup>7</sup> Second, because of further utilization of farm labor-saving technology, the number of people

in the total hired farm working force has continued to drop (since 1964) on an average of 7.5 percent each year.<sup>8</sup> Third, the number of migratory workers has continued to decline each year at about the same rate as all hired farm workers; thus, this group continues to comprise about 10 percent of the total.<sup>9</sup>

The bulk of the migratory farm workers travel in three major routes northward from states along the southern border of the country. This report deals with these three major streams and, using previously listed sources, seeks to present current data on each of them.

# pathways they follow



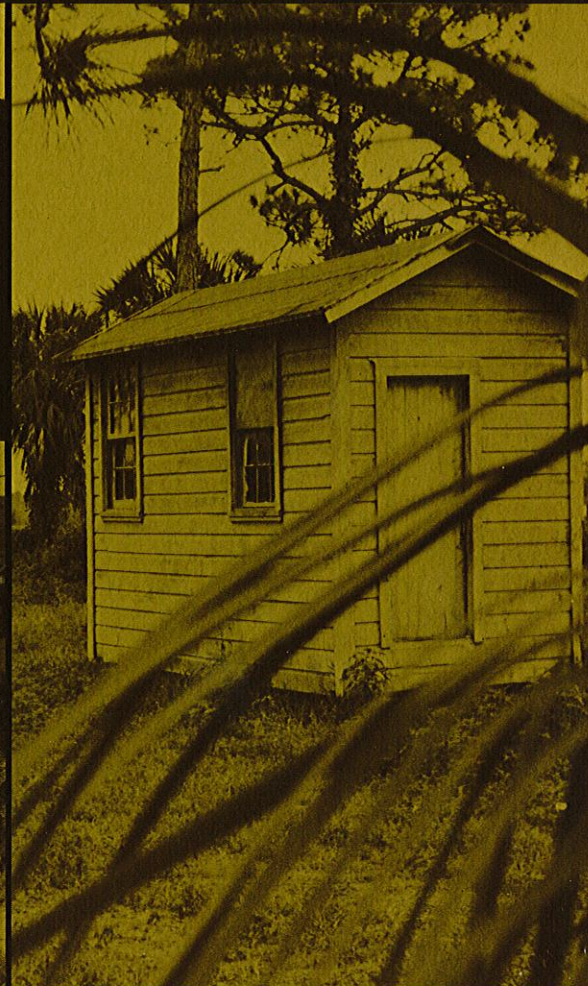
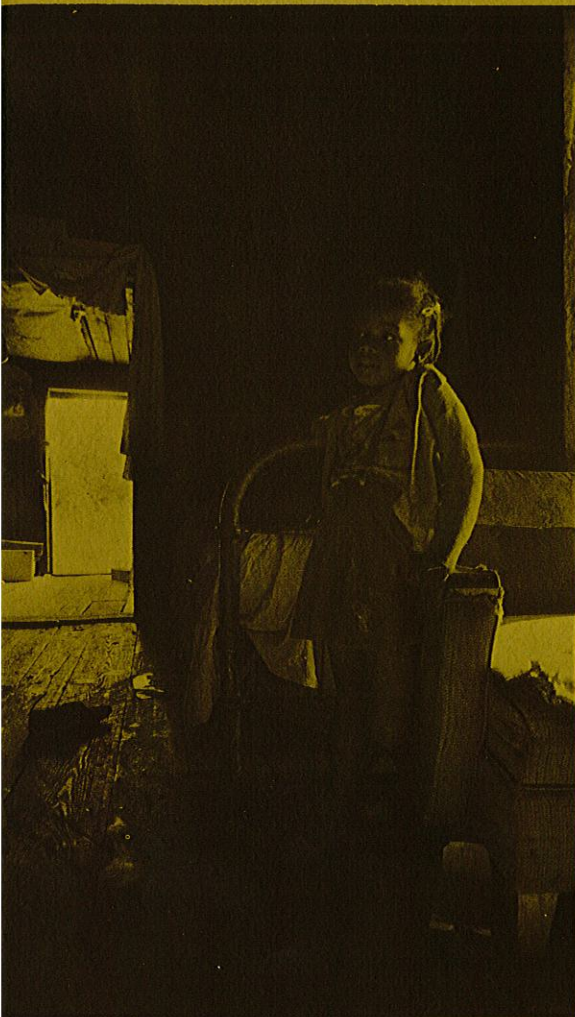
Migrants, already at the bottom of America's social system, tend to perceive mobility out of the stream as nearly impossible. There is a tendency to become trapped by the system, and this is often expressed in conversations which reflect low self-esteem and a sense of personal hopelessness. "You better get used to picking because you're never going to be a school teacher or any other kind of lady. You'll be in the fields for the rest of your life." This kind of response to one's relative status is a response which assumes that the system is closed.<sup>10</sup>

Such low self-esteem seems a normal by-product of a job which is as unattractive as the migrant's. Farm work often requires continuous stooping and lifting, may be dirty and exhausting and can be monotonous and boring. The work is often in an isolated area in which more desirable jobs drain away the labor. Workers may be fed, housed, transported, and worked in gangs with a minimum of thought given to their comfort.<sup>11</sup>

The distinguishing characteristic of the migrant farm laborer is the practice of leaving his home county to work in areas beyond normal commuting distance. The migrant's year, then, is "like a string of beads - a week of employment here, another there, uncertainty tied together with travel in search of work."<sup>12</sup>

Of the 2.6 million persons 14 years of age and over who did some farm work for cash wages during 1969, about 257,000 were domestic migratory workers who left their home county to do such work.<sup>13</sup> There are three large-scale pathways they follow. One is along the Pacific Coast, drawing upon native white and black workers, and Mexican workers, who move from Southern California up to Oregon and Washington and back as the harvesting season itself moves northward, then southward. There is a middle stream - heavily Mexican, but with large numbers of whites and blacks - which starts in the south-central region of Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma and moves northward to a wide area as far west as Washington, as far east as Illinois and Indiana, and as far north as Michigan, Minnesota, and the Dakotas.<sup>14</sup>

The third stream is the East Coast, or Atlantic Seaboard stream. It is composed mainly of blacks, but has some whites too. Starting in Florida in late May and June, its workers move steadily northward, through Georgia, into the Carolinas and Virginia for a few weeks, then into Delaware, New Jersey, and New York, a few going on into New England. These migrants stay north for the rest of the summer and early fall. Then they return to Florida for a winter and spring gathering of crops there, sometimes in one general area (from farm to farm) or sometimes moving from county to county.<sup>15</sup>



THE CALIFORNIA  
AND  
PACIFIC COAST  
STREAM

In 1963 the tomato crop in California was entirely handpicked and used a peak work force of 42,400, most of whom were *braceros* from Mexico. In 1969, with a peak of 19,000 workers (without *braceros*), 97 percent of the crop was machine-harvested, and the 1969 tonnage was 40 percent greater than that of 1963.<sup>16</sup>

This is but one example of the progress in mechanization which is primarily due to more and more widespread acceptance and use of proven equipment. Still, machines are a costly alternative to manpower for the owners of small and medium-sized farms, and the capital outlay for equipment continues to rise. Therefore, the labor needs for new lands planted to labor-intensive crops in California are expected to offset the labor saved by this continued progress in mechanization and improvements in production techniques.<sup>17</sup>

The realization by more farmers that a skilled and dependable work force is necessary for successful farming has increased the number of year-round jobs available and enabled many California migrants to "settle out" of the stream. The state's hired year-round work force (which comprises about 32 percent of the total farm labor force in California) increased from 93,100 to 94,300 - an increase of 1,200 - from 1968 to 1969.<sup>18</sup>

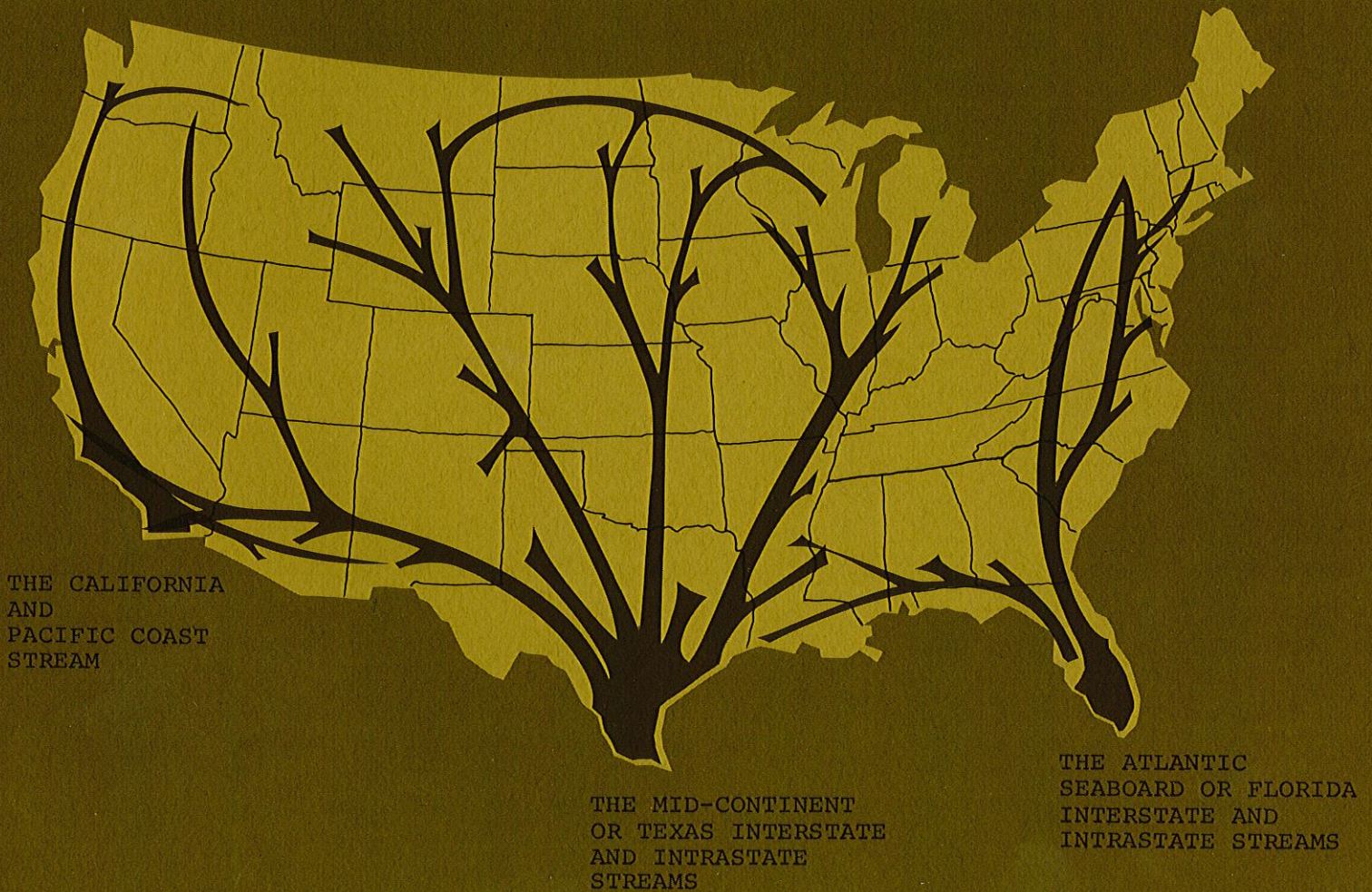
The California Annual Farm Labor Report - 1969, published by the state's Farm Labor Services Division, reports that although many migrants have continued to settle in one location, waves of newcomers appear to replenish the migrant stream. As a result,

statistical differences between the years 1968 and 1969 show only a 3.1 percent drop in the average monthly number of intrastate and interstate migrants. The estimated monthly average number of migrant workers in 1968 was 29,200. Of these, 16,900 were considered intrastate; 12,300 were interstate. In 1969, the estimated monthly average number of migrant workers dropped to 28,300. Of these, 16,300 were intrastate migrants and 12,000 were interstate migrants. The peak employment month in California is September. In 1968, employment for this month reached 62,800 (34,500 intrastate migrants; 28,300 interstate). In 1969, employment for the same month dropped to 61,300 (35,200 intrastate migrants; 26,100 interstate).<sup>19</sup>

According to reports of various County Farm Labor Representatives in California, those workers who still migrated last year tended to stay at home base longer and make fewer moves on the road, partly to provide continuity in schooling for their children. Also, farm labor officials are now urging workers to check with local farm labor offices for more jobs before moving on. Many migrants have found out that, formerly, they had left areas where work opportunities continued.<sup>20</sup>

The problems of the migrant workers who are either no longer "migrating" or who have "settled into the poverty of Southern California without adequate employment and housing" have been described in the 1967 report on the War on Poverty.<sup>21</sup>

TRAVEL PATTERNS  
OF SEASONAL  
MIGRATORY  
AGRICULTURAL WORKERS



THE MID-CONTINENT  
OR TEXAS INTERSTATE  
AND INTRASTATE  
STREAMS

The 1969 production of Texas' fourteen leading crops was below the 1968 production due principally to hot, dry weather during the growing season that reduced yield and production of major crops. As a result, while the first six months of 1969 showed an increase in farm worker employment over 1968, the last six months showed employment having declined from the same period in 1968.<sup>22</sup>

Migratory worker employment in Texas occurs mainly during the

pre-harvest cotton and sorgham grain activities and wheat harvest in West Texas. During the months of June - August there was about the same number of migratory workers in 1969 as in 1968, but less cotton production in 1969 reduced the number during the September-December period. The following employment table gives a comparison, by months, of Texas intrastate and interstate migrants in 1969 with similar categories for 1968.<sup>23</sup>

Migrant Employment - Statewide

(In thousands of workers)

Month	<u>Intrastate</u>		<u>Interstate</u>	
	1969	1968	1969	1968
January	.1	.1	0	0
February	.1	.1	0	0
March	.3	.2	0	0
April	1.5	1.3	0	0
May	2.6	2.2	0	0
June	10.0	9.5	.6	.6
July	20.3	19.4	.8	.2
August	14.5	13.9	.2	.2
September	4.3	6.4	.1	0
October	5.0	5.9	.1	.4
November	4.4	5.8	.1	.4
December	7.3	12.0	.1	.1

Reports in the Texas Farm Labor Annual Report - 1969 indicate that the state's agricultural industries are becoming increasingly concerned about the supply of laborers as recruitment of farm workers is becoming more difficult. Improved wage rates and some improvement in housing conditions have helped to keep older migrants in the farm labor force, but many of the younger migrants are leaving due to Adult Migrant Education, programs sponsored under the Manpower Development Training Act and the many other state and federal poverty programs. As these programs continue or others are developed, more of the available migrants will leave the farm labor force.<sup>24</sup>

Evidence of a declining migratory labor force in Texas can be seen by comparing available figures for the years 1967 and 1969. The Texas Employment Commission reported that there were 86,500 workers who out-migrated from Texas in 1967.<sup>25</sup>

The report indicates that the 86,500 workers were part of a moving population of 115,000 people, going off to 38 different states.<sup>26</sup> The Texas Employment Commission's 1969 report indicates that there were 76,000 workers (part of a moving population of 93,000 people) who out-migrated from the state in 1968.<sup>27</sup>

It is often difficult to distinguish between interstate, intrastate, and seasonal workers. Most migrants who out-migrate from Texas also work in the state before, after, and during travels. In the 1968 reports of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Farm Labor Statistics Office identified some 25,000 to 30,000 intrastate migrants in Texas.<sup>28</sup> In 1969 the Texas Employment Commission reported only 20,300 workers who migrated within the state.<sup>29</sup>

The combined totals of interstate and intrastate migrants as reported by the Texas Employment Commission indicate that some 96,300 workers were involved in migratory labor in the state in 1969. The Commission indicates that the need for migratory labor will continue to decline due to the consolidation of farms, increased mechanization, and other contributing factors. The Commission also recommends that migrants, especially the youth, be encouraged to prepare themselves to cope with the reduction in job openings in farm work by securing better education and better training.<sup>30</sup>

THE ATLANTIC  
SEABOARD OR FLORIDA  
INTERSTATE AND  
INTRASTATE STREAMS

The 1969-1970 reports released by the Florida Bureau of Employment Services and by the United States Departments of Labor and Agriculture indicate a decline in migratory labor in the Atlantic Seaboard states. In 1967, an estimated 40,000 migrant workers traveled north from Florida, according to official reports.<sup>31</sup> The Florida Annual Farm Labor Report-1969 indicates that for the year 1969 some 33,770 people, of which only 27,193 were laborers, worked their way up the Middle Atlantic states to New York and New Jersey.<sup>32</sup>

This gradual decrease in the number of migratory workers reported by Atlantic Seaboard states can be seen by comparing the peak number of migrants employed in five particular states along the East Coast during the years 1968 and 1969. Figures used in the chart below are based upon reports of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor<sup>33</sup> and the 1970 reports of the U.S. Department of Labor.<sup>34</sup>

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PEAK EMPLOYMENT (AND MONTH) OF  
MIGRATORY WORKERS, 1968 AND 1969

STATE	MONTH	1968	1969
		PEAK NO. EMPLOYED	PEAK NO. EMPLOYED
Virginia	July	4,400	4,300
Maryland	August	2,600	1,800
N. Carolina	July	8,900	8,700
New York	Sept.	14,800	12,800
New Jersey	August	12,100	10,700

Further evidence of this decline can be seen by comparing the average monthly number of migrants in such states as New York, New Jersey and Florida for the years 1968 and 1969.

MONTHLY AVERAGE OF MIGRATORY WORKERS

STATE	1968	1969
New York	4,192	3,817
New Jersey	4,642	3,758
Florida	12,058	10,683

As one of the largest surplus commodity producing states, Florida becomes a demand state for migrant labor beginning in September and usually reaching a peak by February. Some of this demand is met by the return to Florida of seaboard crews, but interstate workers are recruited from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. This small stream from the southeastern states (approximately 9,500 workers in 1969) works primarily in the citrus and winter vegetable harvest.<sup>35</sup>

The trend toward mechanization in Florida and along the East Coast continued in 1969. Potatoes, radishes, bush beans and Southern peas are now harvested entirely by machinery. Mechanization is gradually increasing in such crops as tobacco, corn and celery.<sup>36</sup> Although some of the labor displaced by mechanization is absorbed into other jobs, educational and training programs for migrants have not been able to keep down the rapidly rising number of unemployed among migratory workers.



# close-up

## MIGRANT STATISTICS

22

Any official reports and compiled statistics concerning migrants in the United States must be construed as often less than reliable. Because poverty groups and marginal employees are often unwilling to deal with many official government agencies, it is difficult to arrive at accurate numbers of employed migrants in this country at any given time. Another factor which adds to the unreliability of migrant statistics is the reluctance of "marginal" crew chiefs and employers to make reports which may place extra restrictions upon them.<sup>37</sup> And, still a third factor which adds to discrepancies in figures is the fact that it is often difficult to distinguish between the "actual workers" and the number of non-working people (wives, children, etc.) who travel with crews.

Because of the question of reliability of estimates, and the questions relating to the continued flow of the migrant stream, the author has sought to update the figures from two migrant rest camps discussed by Dr. Ralph Segalman in the Army of Despair (see footnote 28). These two camps are the Sikeston, Missouri Migratory Rest Camp and the Hope, Arkansas Farm Labor Center.

HOPE, ARKANSAS  
FARM LABOR CENTER

The Hope, Arkansas Migrant Farm Labor Center, opened in 1959 to provide up-to-date labor information to farm workers enroute to the Midwest, was expanded in 1964 to an overnight rest stop. Data obtained from the Hope Information Center Overnight Station are shown in the following chart.<sup>38</sup>

Year	Total Number Passing Through Hope, Arkansas Labor Center
1965	17,905
1967	41,676
1968	48,593
1969	55,652
1970	56,513

These figures tend to substantiate the fact that even though overall figures indicate a reduction in the total number of migrants in this country, migrants are still on the move, and perhaps there is less dilution of the Mid-Continent Stream than in other areas. These figures, however, may be misleading in that the total for 1970 represents two stops for many migrants - one stop going north and a second stop returning home to Texas. Reports from the Hope Center also indicate 22,752 non-workers served by the center. This represents 40.3 percent of the total 56,513 migrants<sup>39</sup> who contacted the center during 1970.

Five states were the destination of most of the migrants who passed through the Hope Center. Those states, the numbers traveling there, and a comparison for the years 1969 and 1970 are found in the chart below.<sup>40</sup>

State	Number of Migrants Traveling There	
	1969	1970
Texas	28,318	28,482
Michigan	12,746	12,214
Illinois	4,409	3,578
Indiana	3,948	4,773
Ohio	4,034	5,394

SIKESTON, MISSOURI  
MIGRATORY REST CAMP

The following chart shows the total number of people who passed through the Sikeston, Missouri Migratory Rest Camp from 1961-1969. The figures for 1960-1967 are taken from Army of Despair (see footnote 28), and the figures for 1968-1969 are from reports obtained from the rest camp.<sup>41</sup>

Year	Total Number Passing Through Sikeston, Missouri Rest Camp
1961	12,795
1962	13,176
1963	12,748
1964	13,490
1965	12,952
1966	12,829
1967	12,265
1968	11,848
1969	11,440

The Sikeston Camp was closed in November 1969 for failure to meet state sanitation and health requirements. The 1968 and 1969 figures, however, indicate a diminishing number of migrants who passed through the camp. It is estimated that 49 percent of the travelers are workers and a bit over 50 percent are nonworking wives, children and non-working aged.<sup>42</sup>

# indications

THE EFFECTS OF  
MECHANIZATION

The marvels of technology open the door to a host of human problems. Inadequate planning and a lack of coordination at all levels of government have left serious human adjustment problems in their wake. Whether machines cause unemployment of farm workers or whether mechanization is the effect of a shortage of farm labor are matters of disagreement for many observers of the farm labor scene. This controversy was evident at the "Colloquium on Agricultural Manpower Implications in a Changing Fruit and Vegetable Industry," sponsored by Michigan State University's Rural Manpower Center in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor.<sup>43</sup>

the supply remains inflated as a result of the continual inflow of people, legal and illegal, from northern Mexico. The crux of the manpower problem is to reduce a supply of workers who consider agriculture their primary job. There are few nonfarm job opportunities in south Texas. The displaced workers will have to move to urban centers with already overcrowded ghettos unless industry is subsidized to move to south Texas.<sup>44</sup>

26

Some colloquium speakers focused attention upon the problem of labor shortages; other speakers asserted that machines are replacing hand labor and directed their attention to labor surpluses. An example is the conclusion of Dr. Paul Miller, Department of Economics, Texas A & M, who reported on his research into the mobility of farm workers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas:

Mechanization is reducing the demand for lower skilled farm workers. But the most serious problem is that the reduction has not occurred at a continuous, predictable rate. Capital has been applied to labor-intensive crops in both a discontinuous and spotty fashion. This, in turn, has caused gaps in migratory labor demand. At the same time, the birth rate among Mexican Americans in south Texas is 50 percent higher than the national average. Simultaneously,

Mr. Richard Lyng, Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture, speaking at the colloquium, talked of the need for wider public responsibility toward the farm worker:

Government institutions should not do anything to delay or impair such changes. On the contrary, for the benefit of all, government should assist in speeding up the rate of change. At the same time, government has an important role in assisting those who are adversely affected--the unskilled, untrained workers who have been depending upon harvest work. Massive re-training and job programs are a must.

Further, it is important that the need for government policies of this type be clearly understood by everyone, taxpayer and recipient alike. The taxpayer must realize that it is in his interest to support programs assisting farm workers who have become obsolete. It is equally important for the worker himself to realize that the government stands ready to help him in adjusting to the changing need for his services.

My conclusion then is that although the political implications of mechanization of the harvesting of fruits and vegetables are many, they are not new. The impact on our political institutions is going to be a strengthening of the pressures that have come from the continuous reduction in manpower needs on the farm. Although the demands these changes make upon the government are many and varied, the greatest challenge is in the need to adopt a clear public policy at all levels which assist those who are displaced by technological achievement.

Farmers and agriculturalists must share in this effort, but cannot be expected to solve the problem alone. The public, as a whole, benefits greatly from such technical advancement. The entire public must further marshal its resources to solve the problems mechanization creates for an important few.<sup>45</sup>

THE RURAL TO  
URBAN MOVEMENT

28

The sweeping mechanization of farming and the restructuring of the farm industry has caused a steady move of the rural population to cities over past decades. The report of the President's Advisory Committee on Rural Poverty indicates that rural low income areas have lost population for several years because of the exodus of rural farm people. The nation's population has grown to over 200 million persons from about 4 million in 1790. In the process, it has switched from 95 percent to less than 30 percent rural. In 1910 a third of the nation's population was on farms; today this figure has dropped to less than 6 percent. Projections are that farm employment will decrease in all regions through 1980, and eventually only those farm workers with high skills will be required.<sup>46</sup>

In The Southern Roots of Urban Crisis, Roger Beardwood points out that southern blacks comprise a large percentage of those leaving rural areas:

On cotton plantations, tobacco lands, and corn-fields, machines have been steadily replacing thousands of hired hands and sharecroppers. And as the large farmers become more efficient, small white and Negro farmers abandon their land because they lack the money and knowledge either to compete with their large neighbors or to switch to more profitable labor-intensive crops.<sup>47</sup>

The ghettos of the North are grim and noisome stews that boil over when summer heat ignites old frustrations. Yet more than a million Southern Negroes have taken the trail north in the past decade.<sup>48</sup>

Of those black people who have left the South, some have found a better life; some have not. And, despite continuing migration, some 7,100,000 blacks of working age will be living in the South in 1975 - 12 percent more than in 1960. About 3,900,000 will be working or looking for work. New jobs must be created - with a higher percentage of them open to blacks. And business and political leaders must find ways to ease rural people's transition from one way of life to another with education and job training.<sup>49</sup>



# conclusions

## CONCLUSIONS

Although smaller than in recent years, the migrant streams still start out from Southern California, from Texas, and from Florida, following the inevitable pathways. The plight of migratory farm workers is perhaps better known now to the public; yet, despite current efforts by government and the private sector, the migrant labor population is no less a problem in terms of need.

Indeed, today's farm worker will not survive the technological revolution in agriculture unless he is given the opportunity to broaden his capabilities and master new skills. The machine and the big farm are increasingly bigger threats, joined now by the threat of competitive migrants who have fewer and fewer fields to seek out. For employment, the migrant now will need skill and flexibility, and he must be able to adapt himself to a new situation. Otherwise, dispossessed workers and their families will either sink into deeper poverty in rural America, or become a burden on already ill equipped cities.

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