

RESOURCE PAPER ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH
OF DOMESTIC AGRICULTURAL MIGRANT FAMILIES

9/11/59

The Overall Picture

There are an estimated 500,000 domestic migratory farm workers in the United States. This number is about one out of every eight persons who did any farm wage work in 1957.¹ The migratory worker is one who temporarily leaves his home and moves in search of farm work to other communities that are too far away for him to return home at the end of the day. He may move once or several times a year; he may travel a few hundred or several thousand miles, carrying all or part of his family with him. Usually he will spend about five months 'up the road,' though some workers are away from home base even longer. Since 1949, women workers have constituted one-fourth to one-third of the total number.²

Accurate figures on the number of children in migratory farm families are not available. The best estimate to be had comes from the U. S. Department of Agriculture: 320,000 under age eighteen, in 100,000 families. Almost half of these children were found to accompany their parents as they moved from job to job.³

Migratory workers are essential to the seasonal harvesting of fruit, vegetable, and fibre crops in all sections of the country. Every state but nine uses at least 1,000 workers at the peak work season.⁴

¹ The Hired Farm Working Force of 1957, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Bulletin 208, June, 1959; pp. 2, 27-29.

² ibid, p. 29

³ The Hired Farm Working Force of 1954, U. S. Department of Agriculture, March, 1956; p. 8.

⁴ "Estimated Peak Employment and Period of Employment of Migrant Labor in Agricultural Activities, 1956," U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Employment Security (March 1, 1957).

There are two major reasons for agricultural migrancy in this country. The first lies in the character of American agriculture. Increasingly farms are becoming industrialized, acreages enlarged, crop specialization more widespread, and production ever more highly mechanized. Together these factors produce a situation in which small permanent crews with complex machines are able to do the work of planting and cultivation but must be supplemented by large numbers of hand laborers during the harvest season.

A second and perhaps more important reason for agricultural migrancy is the fact "that many people find it impossible to make a living in a single location and hence have had to become migratory. Technological displacement, business recession and consequent unemployment in industry, drought and crop failure, radical changes in the sharecropper system, lack of education and vocational training--these are among the basic factors responsible for migrancy. . ."⁵ In short, the migrant moves because he must!

Seasonal demands for mobile labor will continue to be heavy for many years to come. Changes in technology and the structure of agriculture will have the net effect of enlargement of family-operated farms and will increase their need for seasonal workers. Our growing population, the rising standard of living, and rapidly changing food habits call for ever greater production of fruits and vegetables, many of which can still be harvested only by hand. Also, high-level industrial employment promises to continue to drain local farm labor sources, necessitating continued importation of workers from other localities.⁶

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Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1951; p. 1f

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"Summary of Prospects for Reducing the Need for Migratory Farm Work," O. J. Scoville, U. S. Department of Agriculture. (Summary of informal presentation to representatives of the National Council of Churches, Washington, D. C., June 11 and 12, 1956.)

Map +
C. Table

Though migrants are used in farming every month of the year, the heaviest season of migration for the nation as a whole is June to October. States consistently using the greatest numbers of workers during peak employment are: Texas (113,000), California (63,000), Michigan (48,000), New York (29,000), Arizona (22,000), Florida (21,000), and Oregon (20,000). New Jersey, Washington, Wisconsin, Kansas, and Virginia each employ more than 10,000 migrants yearly.⁷ These workers are concentrated on 125,000 farms or about two percent of all farms in the United States.⁸ The degree of concentration is further emphasized by the fact that only twenty-two counties (out of over 3,000) in the country make use of 10,000 or more workers at a given time.⁹

Three basic migration patterns are readily discernible and are well established. Along the Atlantic Coast there is a movement of 30,000-40,000 workers out of Florida up the Eastern seaboard to New York and sometimes into New England. A small part of this stream filters into the Great Lakes states. These workers are primarily Negro, though since 1953 an increasing number of Spanish-Americans (of Puerto Rican and Texas-Mexican background) have entered the East Coast stream. They usually travel in crews numbering as few as ~~twenty~~ ^{ten} to twenty-five hands, or as many as 200-300 and accompanied by a sizeable number of dependent children and older adults. Crew members operate under a crew leader who recruits them, supplies transportation, contracts work for them, arranges housing, and may provide food and other services as well. In return, the crew leader receives a percentage of each worker's earnings, either in direct deductions or in commissions from the growers to whom he furnishes labor.

⁷ op. cit., (footnote 4 above).

⁸ Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, p. 7.

⁹ Public Health Service Publication No. 540 (map), U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

A second stream, largest of the three, is the one originating in south Texas and sending workers into thirty-one different states. As many as 125,000 workers annually have been involved in this movement, slightly more than half of them going into the Mountain, Great Plain, and Great Lakes states. The others move within the bounds of Texas. Texas migrants are usually of Spanish-American descent; they travel in complex family groups - parents, their grown children, and grandchildren. Sometimes they form crews like their East Coast counterparts. During the winter they work in the vegetables in the Valley or in cotton in the Panhandle; during the summer they follow the sun northward.

Merging into this central U. S. stream are several thousand ~~whites~~ 'Anglos' from south central states. Some of these are small-farm owners; many are displaced sharecroppers.

Indians

The third major stream originates in California. Most of these workers remain within the state, though an appreciable number move up the coast into Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. These workers are predominantly Spanish-American. This western stream involves as many or more workers than the East Coast stream.¹⁰

The Migrant Child's Situation

Because the migrant worker is so chronically transient, his children are rootless and have difficulty developing a sense of belonging. So frequently considered non-residents, migrants are often deprived of many of the social benefits the rest of us take for granted--regular schooling, church membership, or medical care in times of emergency. Their parents are, for the most part, denied the protections of legislation enjoyed by other types of workers--workmen's compensation, minimum wage and hours guarantees, and the right to

¹⁰ "The Structure of the Farm Labor Market and Migration Patterns" by William H. Hengoff in Proceedings of Consultation on Migratory Farm Labor, 1957, U. S. Department of Labor; pp. 32-33.

unionization and collective bargaining. They fare somewhat better with respect to Social Security.

The migrant child's life is one of physical poverty. His father or mother, ~~like other hired farm workers in America~~, has very low annual earnings. In 1957 the migrant farm worker's average income was \$859, including nonfarm wages; he averaged 131 days of work that year,¹¹ having lost numerous days in travel, in bad weather, and in standing by--for days and often weeks--waiting for delayed ripenings of crops. Two-thirds of migrant farm workers averaged less than 150 days of work of all types in 1957.¹² Often the young child is compelled by family need to work with his parents!

Seen against this background, we realize that the plight of the children and youth of domestic and agricultural workers is one of general deprivation.

¹¹ The Hired Farm Working Force of 1957, p. 33.

¹² ibid., p. 29.

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