

EXCERPTS INDICATING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OF  
AGRICULTURAL MIGRANTS AND THEIR  
FAMILIES

Evidence regarding the mental health status of agricultural migrants and their families is often in the form of complaints about their antisocial behavior and the law enforcement problems created in communities where they work temporarily. Available reports, however, contain considerable data concerning factors related to their mental health. Excerpts from some of these reports are brought together here under the following headings:

1. Reasons for and attitudes toward migration
2. Effect of migration on mental health
3. Characteristics of migrants affecting (or reflecting) mental health status
4. Characteristics of communities affecting mental health of migrants
5. Techniques and recommendations for meeting mental health problems

1. Reasons for and attitudes toward migration

"The willingness of workers...to seek such employment is to be explained almost wholly in terms of lack of jobs in other occupations. For Mexican and Negro workers the opportunities for alternative employment were further reduced by discrimination."

(Reference 1, p. 353.)

"We do not find that people become migrants primarily because they want or like to be migrants..."

"Along the reasons for migrancy, the foremost is that many people find it impossible to make a living in a single location and hence have had to become migratory. ... The migratory workers themselves, and their employers as well, testified at our hearings that migrants want steady jobs and that, given the opportunity to settle down, they do so. It is true that, for some, repeated moving has become a habit. There are

undoubtedly many who, in trying to make a living at unreliable jobs, have become unreliable people. On the other hand, many who are considered by some to be unreliable are praised by others as good workers. ..."  
(Reference 2, pp. 1-2.)

"...only 12 of ...262 households...could be said to move because they wanted to travel. (Colorado study)

"... About nine out of every ten families reporting were motivated primarily by economic distress.

"For every family which had migrated 'for the fun of it.' there were 19 which had done so to earn a living or to get adequate employment, and one which had been tempted by false or shadowy promises of labor contractors or crew leaders. ..."  
(Reference 3, p. 16.)

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"Past Migration Experience and Desires for the Future. Of the total 4,919 workers, 2,412, or 49 percent indicated that 1946 was the first year of farm work in California /1950 survey of agricultural labor in the San Joaquin Valley/; some had worked in earlier years, with 9 percent indicating work prior to 1941. ...

"It is significant that 76 percent of the workers desired to continue to migrate part of the year. Whether this expressed their preference for a way of life, or their judgment as to its being their best economic opportunity is uncertain, but undoubtedly a large proportion genuinely prefer to be migrant farm workers.

"The farm work force each year contains many migrants who are seeking farm work for the first time, and who are primarily unskilled industrial workers. It is understandable that these migrants, with less experience and aptitude for farm work, may be less successful in securing and holding jobs and in earning adequate wages. They are the least reliable supply of labor, for they are quick to leave the farm labor market as soon as industrial employment is available. ..."  
(Reference 4, pp. 99-100.)

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## 2. Effect of migration on mental health

"XIV. The Effect of Migration on Mental Health /Section prepared by the State Department of Mental Hygiene.7

"... Mobility as a recreational outlet is a healthy experience; however, when mobility is imposed upon an individual as a result of economic, social or health factors, it becomes an undertaking that can affect the mental health of the individuals involved.

"Seasonal agricultural workers, whether constant migrants who have been unable to re-establish themselves permanently in a new community, or occasional migrants who move to another location because of better opportunities, are often sensitive of the economic, social, and personal forces in their new environment. This sensitivity often jeopardizes their state of mental well-being and derives outlets in hostility or timidity.

"The migrant agricultural worker is subject essentially to the reactions and emotions of the average individual. A large number of migrants are composed of family groups, many with infants and children of school age. With mobility and migration comes disruption of the family and home life, with consequent ill effects. ...

"The environment of the family and the sense of security that comes from belonging to the family group is one facet of a healthy home atmosphere. However, migrant parents who are not part of a social group either within their own circle or as a part of the community, often do not have that sense of security about life which comes from being wanted or needed. This is particularly illustrated in the migrant's environment through community rejection, and social isolation.

"Economic security is an important factor in mental health inasmuch as financial insecurity can act as a strong disintegrating force upon the family of the migrant worker. ...

"Insecurity of an individual in his social and community relationships detracts from his attainment of good mental health or causes him to suffer poor mental health. Rejection by the community because he and his family are migrants creates feelings of tension and hostility on both sides. The worker is more resentful when he realizes that his labor is accepted and in fact is needed by the community for its financial welfare, yet, he and his family are not wanted as persons by that community. This feeling of hostility on the part of the adult members of the migrant family is in turn reflected in the home atmosphere... The parental attitude of hostility permeates the home; their children assimilate this attitude and harbor resentment toward others also.

"It is apparent...that the children of the migrant farm worker are susceptible to the influences that affect their parents. During the early years of the child's life there can be imprinted the feelings of insecurity, hostility, and inferiority that will affect his actions in later life. These may be expressed in terms of delinquency, erratic work habits, unhappiness in marriage, or retreat from adversity. Such children do not usually achieve emotional maturity in adulthood, and are impeded in attaining successful social and economic status."  
(Reference 4, pp. 278-280.)

"... It was the opinion of investigators [Colorado study] that much of the indifference, seeming lack of responsibility and abuse of property could be traced to the constantly changing character of relationships. The object hopelessness of constantly finishing one job and moving out to look for another was reflected in each interview. It made planning for children's schooling akin to wishful thinking. Even going to a physician for pre- or post-natal care did not make sense, as there would be a different doctor in attendance at a later date. Use of health facilities and social participation seemed similarly pointless when there could be no continuity in relationships. ..."  
(Reference 3, p. 15.)

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"Into whatever community the migrant goes his status is the lowest in the social scale. His labor is welcome but he is not. He and his family are feared as possible sources of physical and moral contagion, and even more as possible public charges should they become stranded there. In no sense does the migrant "belong"--he has no political rights and his civil rights have proved to be more theoretical than real on the rare occasions when he has tried to assert them. He and his family seldom participate in the normal social life of the communities through which they pass."  
(Reference 1, p. 3. 63.)

3. Characteristics of migrants affecting (or reflecting) mental health status

Community problem created by migrants most frequently reported in four Maryland counties studied by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics was "law enforcement."  
(Reference 5.)

"Disinterest on the part of migrants [in having their children attend school]

It would be inaccurate to imply that all migrants want their children to be in school. A relatively small but substantial number..prefer their children to be out of school. Reasons

stated for this are various, and because confidence is hard to gain, reasons given are not always clear. Sometimes it is to add to the small family income; sometimes it is to take care of the home; sometime it is to avoid the rebuffs of resident children or adults; sometimes it is because the children do not feel adequate to deal with people not of their own culture, or who do not speak their language. More often it is because the parents themselves have little education and do not understand its benefits for their children, much less for society." (Reference 6, p. 9.)

"... Hired farm laborers are not, on the whole, one single distinct class, but are overlapping and intermingled with the low-income groups of farm operations...and with non-agricultural wage workers, especially those in rural areas.

...

"Farm labor is also heterogeneous culturally. ... In fruit and vegetable farming both in California and on the Atlantic Coast, racial antagonisms and differences play a significant role in further splitting the hired farm labor force." (Reference 7, pp. 34-35.)

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"The migrants are a heterogeneous group from the standpoint of racial and cultural backgrounds. /California report./ The 'Okies' still seem to predominate, and they vary from the sturdy, self-reliant and hard working family which carries neat equipment and helps the farmer keep a clean camp, to the more shiftless, careless, indifferent family which cannot be counted on for a full day or a full season of work, and which assumes little responsibility for its own self-support. Lack of education, apathy and indifference make this group an unfortunate problem during the 'relief' season. Many of this group linger in the valley when unemployed, except for a brief trip home, using their earnings in cotton to make the trip.

"The migrants also include many Mexican families from Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. These are usually quiet and efficient hard workers and are preferred for many operations such as fruit picking. They tend to return to their home states when the work is done. The children of these families receive very little formal education and hide when the crew is approached in the archard or vineyard. Most of these Mexicans speak only Spanish although a crew member among them usually speaks English and takes the initiative in making contacts for jobs.

"...increasing numbers of southern Negroes are appearing in the migrant groups, some of them making the trip from the South crowded into trucks. In smaller numbers, the migrant groups include Gypsies, Hindus, and Japanese.

"... Large numbers of single men and families who have had difficulty in getting and keeping steady work in metropolitan areas since the war, come to the San Joaquin Valley and other agricultural areas during the periods of seasonal farm work. They include Mexican, Negro, and White families.

"In addition to the Mexican Nationals who have, or are working on contract under the International Agreement with Mexico, there is a large unknown number of Mexican citizens or 'wetbacks' working illegally in California.

...  
"The presence of these illegal workers affects the farm labor force in various ways. There is no doubt that they displace domestic farm workers in some operations... It is believed that their presence in nonagricultural jobs displaces some American workers who may, accordingly, be forced into the farm labor market, adding to the surplus of farm workers. ..."  
(Reference 4, pp. 100-101.)

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"One of the major difficulties to be hurdled is the cultural attitudes of the migrant who has a Mexican heritage. His ideas and patterns of conduct are different than the Anglo-Saxon standards. For example, he has a very loose sense of time. Appointments made with the dentist, doctor, or X-ray unit are kept within an hour or two--a very exasperating irritation to busy people who are contributing their time. Any programs planned for people with a Mexican background needs to consider also their strong family feeling, their intense pride, and their language difficulties..."  
(Reference 8, p. 630.)

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"Feeling of pupils that they do not belong anywhere." (Cited as problem in getting migrant children into school.)

...  
"In addition to differences in living patterns, most migrants do not possess the cultural traits which enable them to make themselves acceptable to residents. They have had little or

no opportunity to learn the common courtesies and niceties which are our cultural foundation; many of them are from a different culture. Many speak a different language; some do not understand nor speak English. In addition, conditions under which they live make it hard to 'keep clean and neat,' qualities much cherished in our society.

"Because of these differences in the community,...the migrants become suspicious of the residents, who are of course strangers to them."

(Reference 6, p. 7, B-2.)

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"The reasons for...nonattendance...are many. In addition to constant mobility and employment in the fields are frequent lack of adequate clothing, and poor health; for the Spanish-speaking children..., the handicap of language; for practically all migrant children, the lack of environmental experiences in the homes that lead to a desire for education; and perhaps most important, discouraging school experiences. Migrant children may suffer social discrimination as 'the pickers,' a reflection in the school children and teachers of community attitudes of distrust and derision. Because of time lost in moving and working, migrant children tend to be retarded, and suffer from the discouragement of being placed in classes with much younger and smaller children. ..."

(Reference 9, p. 22.)

"The fact of migrancy also makes it difficult for children to develop an interest in or a sense of the value of education. School attendance in a community is so brief that their interests and needs usually go undiscovered. As a result, what interest they may have in the school may be further decreased."

(Reference 6, p. 6.)

#### 4. Characteristics of communities affecting mental health of migrants

"...in every community where they go, these children and their families are strangers and are looked upon with the suspicion usually accorded strangers. ...attitudes against them are multiplied by the fact that their living patterns are not like those of most community residents. ..."

"Because of these differences..., suspicion grows and rumors of bad habits and disease spread without attempts to get at the facts.

(Reference 6, pp. 6-7.)

"Migrants belonged to practically no organizations except the church. Church members were not encouraged to participate in church services or events in Colorado.

"Discrimination against migrants was marked. It was evident in schools, commercial recreation facilities, restaurants, churches, law enforcement, and retail food stores which raised their prices for migrants."  
(Reference 3, p. 5.)

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"Exclusion of the migrants from normal community life is an evil which marks them as a group apart."  
(Reference 1, p. 391.)

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"Residents tend to separate migrants from themselves in domicile and law, in thought and feeling. They assign special places to migrants seeking shelter, or leave them to go where their poverty and condition force them. ...

"The lines of segregation are further sharpened, particularly for Negroes, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans by differences of skin color, stature and language."  
(Reference 2, p. 4.)

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"One of the problems related to the continued employment of migrants in Michigan agriculture is their lack of acceptance into the life of the communities in which they are temporarily residents. The migrants are in but of the community. While this affects the families as a whole, it is particularly unfortunate for the children who compose so large a portion of the migrant groups. The conditions of home life...are complicated by the work of the mothers and by the crowded quarters.  
...

"In no community has a community recreational program been developed which has been successful in bringing interest to Spanish-speaking people. ...these workers must seek their pleasure in family gatherings at the drab little company houses, at the weekly free show, or at the beer tavern."  
(Reference 8, p. 917.)

"There are limited recreational facilities available to seasonal agricultural workers in the principal cities of the valley, and practically none in the outlying rural areas."  
(Reference 4, p. 67.)



5. Techniques and recommendations for meeting mental health problems

"... There is evidence that when migrants are made to feel welcome and particularly when their children are made welcome and happy, they are reluctant to leave and they make greater effort to fit into the local community. Among the tokens of friendliness which they (and all other members of our society) respond to are: gestures of friendliness, information as to how to secure medical services, how to reach the church, how to enroll children in school, where to send the children to play, etc.

"Among the techniques used to overcome indifference and intolerance, two were reported as being effective: involvement of people in doing something which or for the migrants, and publicity about migrants.

...  
"In communities which receive a large number of migrants it was believed of value to have a committee which represents the entire community. The function of this committee could be to secure facts about the contribution of the migrants to the community and about living conditions among migrants in the community, to work to improve living conditions wherever possible, and to help migrants become integrated into the life of the community even though their period of residence is short.

...  
"...At the same time, the rest of the community should learn about the migrants. Through round table discussions, conferences, radio programs, newspapers, and other means, facts about migrants should be made known, and there should be numerous opportunities for expressing and modifying attitudes toward migrants. Agencies in the community or in centers servicing the community, as well as the employers, should have opportunity to cooperate in helping the community understand the migrants, their contribution to the community, their need for community life, and the need to educate their children."

(Reference 6, pp. 10-11; in addition, much of the report deals with means for helping children feel welcome and self-respecting and means for overcoming negative attitudes of their parents toward school attendance.)

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"Local children [Waupun County, Wis.] as well as migrants participated in all the activities, for this was the regular summer program for this playground..."

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"The mixing of groups made a natural community setting, drawing the newcomers in. It avoided the onus of charity done in a special way for a special group, thus holding them outside the community itself. It compelled the migrant children to use all the English they possessed, and it taught some Spanish to the city children. It built up strong friendships and broke down the shy separateness with which most of the migrant children began the summer. Soon they were suggesting games and learning to participate in a natural manner.

...  
"The Saturday-night fiestas or parties were...the highlight of the recreational activity. ... By the end of the season several of the young men from the camps helped run games and operate the movie projector. In other ways the migrant group evidenced an increased sense of responsibility for the program and its conduct.

...  
"In Mount Pleasant Michigan, a committee on migrants has planned extensive recreational and educational programs and has involved the migrants in the planning. ..."  
(Reference 8, p. 629, 917.)

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"XIII. Recreation  
Recommendation

It is recommended that counties, cities, and school districts jointly organize recreation programs...and that public and private community agencies request technical advisory services...in order to expand and intensify recreational services in an orderly manner, for seasonal agricultural workers and residents of the San Joaquin Valley.

...  
"Comment

...  
"An adequate recreation program contributes to the mental health of the individual and increases the probability of a healthy community. This contribution is extremely important as related to the partial transition of the migrant worker from a transient crop follower to a semipermanent, partially assimilated resident of existing or developing valley communities. ... The need for security within an established community, as well as a sense of belonging, makes expanded recreation facilities both necessary and desirable. Proper recreational programs are of particular importance to the healthy normal development of children."

"XIV. Mental Hygiene and Community Integration  
Recommendations

1. Local veteran, religious, civic, social, welfare, farm, and women's groups are urged to sponsor community projects, provide community education, and interpret to the community the desirability of integrating itinerant seasonal workers. The use of forums, solicitation of migrant workers to participate in all community projects, and increased news publicity in local papers can help accomplish this important responsibility.
2. Incoming agricultural workers should be provided with a pamphlet which describes community resources, facilities where medical assistance and information can be rendered, and contains an expression of the workers' importance to the economy.

"Comment

"The consideration of the emotional well-being and good mental health of the seasonal farm worker underlies the basic factors involved in this problem. ...the establishment of interpersonal relationships with the farm worker, whether or not he is a migrant, is an important responsibility of the community involved. The acceptance by established residents of the farm worker as a component and necessary part of the society and economy will tend to overcome many of the artificial barriers that have been erected. If the farm worker and his family are made to understand that they belong to the community and to the agricultural industry of which they are a part, it will tend to satisfy their emotional needs, and give them a feeling of belonging to something identifiable.

"There is a definite problem of acculturation of the various individuals who make up the migrant farm labor group. They need education, information, and training, to acquaint them with community services--health, welfare, and education--that are available in the areas in which they reside temporarily.

...

"...When children attend school regularly as to become identified as individuals and recognized as such by their fellow students and teachers, they develop that important feeling of belonging and stability of human nature so essential to normal life. ...

"... By being deprived of normal activities which other children of the same age are permitted to enjoy through school and other social programs, the child of the migrant family develops a feeling of hostility towards his parents and toward the the other children in the community of whom he is envious.

"The area of training and educating migrant farm workers to learn how to work together as a group, and how to work with other groups in a common cause, is another important consideration from the mental hygiene standpoint. This is frequently accomplished through organized recreational activities... There are avenues through civic organizations, religious groups, and adult education classes that could be developed...in the integration of the farm worker into normal activities. It will also be helpful in overcoming their attitude of suspicion and skepticism toward outsiders, that is, those who are not a part of their own particular segment of society. This will, in turn, bring about an assimilation of the migrant family into the community as a whole."  
(Reference 4, pp. 52-54.)

References:

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