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MIGRATORY FARMWORKERS IN NEW YORK
CHANGES, 1953, 1957 AND 1958

A Progress Report

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The number of migratory farmworkers in New York State has declined in recent years. The 1957-58 business recession and increased use of machinery were major factors contributing to this change.

Between 1953 and 1958, marked improvements were made in machinery used to harvest fruits and vegetables in New York State. Especially important was the transition of the mechanical beanpicker from the experimental stage in 1953 to the point when in 1958 about 113 were in use. Mechanization of the bean harvest presents some labor-supply problems in the fall harvest of fruits because migrants leave some areas earlier than usual when bean-picking work is not available.

The proportion of the total camp population made up of workers and the percentage of workers who are males has remained about the same. The age distribution of migrant workers is generally similar for the three study years.

Although turnover in New York's migratory farm labor force continues to be high, the percentage of workers who are experienced in crop work and the percentage of workers with previous migratory work experience in New York is increasing.

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Samples for both worker surveys were drawn from lists of all labor camps registered with the New York State Health Department during the previous year. However, the worker interviews were limited to domestic Negro migrants and therefore, all generalizations based on the worker samples are applicable only to the Negro workers and their families. Domestic Negro workers comprise an estimated 80 percent of all migratory agricultural workers in New York State. The 1953 survey in 39 camps in 15 counties throughout the State resulted in information on 650 workers and 257 nonworkers for a total of 907 migrants. In 1957, interviewing took place in 52 camps in 18 counties of the State and resulted in information on 942 workers and 244 nonworkers, or a total of 1,186 persons. Interviewing for the 1958 study involved 76 camps in 27 counties and resulted in information on 805 workers and 205 nonworkers for a total of 1,010 migrants.

The sample for the 1958 operator survey was the same as that for the 1958 survey of Negro workers, except that interviewing was not limited to camps housing Negro workers. This sample included 111 camps and operators of 102 camps were interviewed. Four camps were dropped from the sample because they had been closed for two or more seasons. Operators of five of the camps could not be contacted during the interview period.

The three surveys were made by the New York State College of Agriculture under cooperative or contract arrangements with the Farm Economics Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

CHANGES IN SIZE OF MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

Operators of each of the farm labor camps in the 1958 sample were asked to give information on the peak number of workers (Negro, Puerto Rican, and other workers) housed in their camps during 1957 and the peak number that had been, or would be, housed in their camps during 1958. If changes were indicated, the operators were asked the reasons for such changes. The information obtained shows that:

Numbers of migratory workers in New York declined considerably between 1957 and 1958. The information supplied by the camp operators indicated that there were 17 percent fewer workers in the sample camps in 1958 than in 1957. This reduction resulted from a reduction in the number of workers housed in some camps and from failure to open for the 1958 season of a small number of sample camps that were in operation during 1957. The amount of decline is doubtless overstated, as the sample did not include camps opening for the first time in 1958. There seems to be little doubt, however, that the size of the total migratory work force in New York declined

Operators of migrant labor camps indicated that they expect to employ fewer migrants in 1959. The number of workers in 1959 will doubtless depend upon crop and weather conditions existing during the season. For the sample as a whole, camp operators and employers expected to employ approximately 10 percent fewer migrants in 1959 than they employed in 1958. A number of operators, however, indicated that they expected to increase their use of migrant help in 1959.

CHANGES IN COMPOSITION OF THE NEGRO MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

It is important to know whether the composition and characteristics of the migrant labor force are stable, whether trends in a particular direction are underway, or whether there are wide year-to-year fluctuations which arise entirely from conditions that exist only during a particular year. As summarized below, comparison of the data for 1958 with the information from the 1953 and 1957 studies shows stability in some characteristics, trends in some respects, and fluctuation in still other characteristics.

The proportion of the total camp population made up of workers remains very nearly the same. Workers made up 80 percent of the 1958 camp population as compared with 79 percent at midseason 1957. This difference is small; it is noteworthy only in that the change is consistent with the pattern that has seen the percentage of migrants who are workers increase from 72 percent in 1953 to the present 80 percent.

The percentage of workers who are males also remains at about the same level. In 1958, 73 percent of the Negro migrant workers were males. This increase of only 1 percent over 1957 is very small as compared with the increase from 58 percent in 1953 to 72 percent in 1957.

The age distribution of the total migrant camp population was generally similar for the study years 1953, 1957, and 1958. In general, the age distribution of the 1958 resident camp population (workers and nonworkers combined) indicates that the differences between 1953 and 1958 were more or less chance fluctuations and did not indicate consistent patterns of change. In 1958, 18 percent of the resident camp population was under 14 years of age as compared with 19 percent in 1957. Both years are considerably below the 23 percent reported in 1953, which indicates a probable trend toward fewer children in camps.

Except for children under 14 years of age, no consistent patterns of change are indicated. The proportion aged 14 to 19 was 16 percent in 1958

EARNINGS AND DAYS WORKED

Many migrants who do crop work in New York State work only part of the year and many others do crop work on a part-time or temporary basis. They work at other employment, keep house, or attend school during some part of the year. The figures on earnings given below are for all employment and so include wages from nonfarm as well as from farm work. Also, the average earnings include those of both men and women and of workers of all ages. It is known that men have higher average and daily earnings than women and that adults average more than teen-age workers.

The amount of work performed is decreasing. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged 184 days of employment during the 12 months preceding interview. Workers in the 1957 sample averaged 188 days, and the 1953 workers 208 days. The decrease reported in 1958 reflects several factors, including the effect of the winter freezes in Florida during December 1957 and January 1958 and the general employment levels of 1957-58.

Average annual earnings are increasing. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged \$1,262 in wages during the 12 months preceding interview, as compared with \$1,205 for the 1957 workers. Although a comparable figure is not available for the 1953 workers, an analysis of the distribution of these workers by income categories indicates that their average annual earnings were well below either the 1957 or 1958 averages.

Little change is found in total earnings from work in New York locations. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged \$340 in wages from work in New York locations as compared with \$319 in 1957 and \$324 in 1953.