

MIGRANT FARMWORKERS: CHARACTERISTICS AND TRENDS

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Introduction

Despite the long-term interest in the social and economic conditions of migrant farmworkers, there continues to be a paucity of information on this segment of the Nation's hired farm work force. This lack of detailed information has led to considerable speculation and generalization about migrant farmworkers. Popular image depicts migrants as a large, homogeneous group of low-income workers with little education and few skills who travel considerable distances to harvest the Nation's farm produce. Their low incomes are generally attributed to their strong dependence on low-wage agricultural work, and their economic problems are complicated by high travel costs, job insecurity, and poor living conditions while in transit. Migrants are generally described as one of the most disadvantaged group of workers in the United States.

This paper uses data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Hired Farm Working Force Survey to look at historical trends in the number of migrants over the last 30 years and to examine the demographic and economic characteristics of migrants in 1983. Some policy implications of the findings are also discussed.

Defining Migrant Farmworkers

The migrant farm work force is a difficult group to measure and there is little consistency in definitions and data collection techniques among Federal agencies or others concerned with these workers. It is generally agreed that migrant farmworkers are persons who leave their permanent place of residence to do temporary or seasonal hired farmwork. Also included are persons who may have no permanent residence, but instead travel from place to place doing temporary or seasonal hired farmwork. Most formal definitions used by data-gathering and program-monitoring agencies and organizations tend to agree on this point. However, further refinements in definition depend on the purpose of data collection, and different definitions and data collection methodologies have resulted in a variety of estimates on the number of migrant farmworkers and their family members.

For example, data from the USDA's Hired Farm Working Force Survey reported 226,000 migrant farmworkers in 1983. Migrant farmworkers are defined as persons 14 years and older who crossed county lines and stayed overnight to do hired farmwork at any time during the year. Also included are persons who had no usual place of residence and did hired farmwork in two or more counties during the year. These data generally reflect the number of domestic migrant farmworkers since the survey probably does not include most illegal aliens who enter the United States each year to do migrant farmwork.

Data collected by the Office of Education and the Public Health Service of the Department of Health and Human Resources are directly related to agency program needs. Under Section 554(a)(2) of the Education and Consolidation Improvement Act of 1981 (E.C.I.A.), State

education agencies are eligible to receive financial support to educate children of migrant farmworkers. The children are eligible if, during the past five years, their parents or guardians travelled across school district lines to secure farmwork. In 1984, approximately 517,000 students were registered under the provisions of E.C.I.A. These numbers reflect a program population which includes children of current migrant workers and formerly migrant workers who have been settled out for up to five years.

Farmworkers and their families are eligible for treatment at migrant health clinics, under the Public Health Service Act, Section 329, if the principal job of a family member was farmwork at some time during the two years prior to application for services. Migrant Health Program officials estimated the total potential service demand of 800,000 migrant farmworkers and their family members in 1978. The Migrant Health Service is currently developing and testing methodology to update these data.

In 1978, the Legal Service Corporation completed a study designed to estimate the number of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States and Puerto Rico (Lillesand, et al., 1977). By combining data from several different existing sources and applying several factors to compensate for double-counting and to estimate the number of dependents, this study estimated that there were 1.6 million migrant farmworkers and their dependents in 1977.

In addition, several studies have been conducted in various States to estimate the number of migrant farmworkers and describe the characteristics of these workers (Glover, 1985; Holt, 1985). The migrant definition and data collection techniques vary widely.

These widely disparate definitions all purport to identify migrant

farmworkers or migrant farmworker families. However, because the data are collected under different criteria and methodologies, users should evaluate each source independently. Several questions should be considered when examining migrant farmworker data from different sources: Do the data include dependents and family members or only migrant workers? What age criteria are used in the data? Are migrants defined in terms of work done during a specific period (for example, any time during the year, during the last two years or the last five years)? Do the data include migrant workers who were employed in canneries or processing plants? Are illegal aliens likely to be counted in the numbers? At what time of the year are the data collected and does this result in either an undercount or duplicated count of workers?

Most of the data reviewed in this paper were obtained from the 1983 Hired Farm Working Force Survey (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1983). This survey was conducted for the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, by the Bureau of Census as a supplementary part of the Current Population Survey. Data were collected from approximately 60,000 U.S. households with about 1,500 containing at least one hired farmworker.

Historical Trends

Over the last three decades, the total number of hired farmworkers declined by almost 40 percent, falling from a high of 4.3 million in 1950 to 2.6 million in 1983. Most of the losses occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, from 1970 to 1983, the number of workers appears to have stabilized at 2.6 to 2.7 million annually.

Similar trends were observed for migrant farmworkers. the number of migrants dropped from 422,000 to 226,000 between 1949 and 1983, a

decrease of about 46 percent. While the numbers fluctuated in the fifties and sixties, they tended to stabilize at around 200,000 annually during the seventies and early eighties (figure 1).

The overall decline in the number of hired farmworkers, including migrants, has been due, in large part, to the adoption of new production and marketing technology on farms. The planting and harvesting of many crops (including cotton and grains) were widely mechanized during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1970's, however, hired worker displacements slowed considerably as large-scale mechanization and technological innovations leveled off.

Large scale mechanization has not occurred in the more labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crops, although machine harvesting of such crops as tomatoes, wine grapes, and almonds has increased in recent years. For tree fruits and nuts, extensive replanting of trees is often required for machine harvesting, and costs for replanting and lost productive years are often difficult to justify. For some vegetables, such as strawberries and asparagus, the technology needed to machine harvest efficiently with minimal product damage has not been developed. Mechanization of the harvest of some fruits and vegetables is possible over the next decade, but labor reductions are not likely to be as great as in the 1950's and 1960's.

Characteristics of Migrant Farmworkers

Migrants do not comprise a large group of farmworkers. In 1983, there were 226,000 migrant farmworkers 14 years of age and over who crossed county or State boundaries and stayed overnight to do hired farmwork. They accounted for only 9 percent of the 2.6 million hired farmworkers in 1983 and less than 1 percent of the U.S. employed work

force.

Demographic Characteristics

Migrants in 1983 tended to be male (86 percent) and had a median age of 32 years. About half were located in the South at the time of the survey in December, but a third (73,000) were in the West. Almost all resided in nonfarm places (94 percent). About 55 percent of the migrants were householders and the remainder were spouses and other family members.

Migrants were twice as likely as all hired farmworkers to be members of minority groups. About 45 percent of the migrants were white, 15 percent were Hispanic and 39 percent were black and others. In comparison, only 27 percent of the total hired farm work force were minorities. The racial/ethnic distribution of migrants varied by region. As expected, Hispanics comprised a larger proportion of the workers in the West than in other regions and blacks and others accounted for a greater proportion in the South. However, the data reported here probably do not include the large number of illegal aliens from Mexico and other Latin American countries who have left the United States by the time of the survey or who tended to avoid survey enumerators and were not included in the data.

Migrant farmworkers have less education than the rest of the U.S. population. In 1983, migrants 25 years of age and over had completed a median 7.7 years of school compared with 12.5 for the general population. Over 70 percent of the migrants had not completed high school and 15 percent were functionally illiterate (fewer than 5 years of school).

Employment Characteristics

Some migrants traveled long distances to harvest crops and in 1983 almost a third traveled 1,000 miles or more one-way to reach their farm jobs. Another third were short-distance migrants and traveled less than 200 miles a year to their farm jobs. Most migrants worked for only one or two farm employers during the year, but 40 percent worked for 3 or more.

Little statistical information is available on the travel patterns or routes followed by migrants. The commonly perceived image defines 3 major migrant streams, one each on the east and west coasts, and one in the middle of the country. However, the uniformity of migrant travel patterns has not been well-documented. As Holt et al. (1977) note, "The maps of migratory streams--Atlantic, Pacific, and Mid-continent--which in the past were so prominent and still are to be seen now and again, embodied more flows of imagination than of people." Figure 2 illustrates the commonly perceived image of the three major migrant streams. In 1978, the Legal Services Corporation conducted a survey of migrant programs and Employment Service Offices across the country to determine the state of origin, last state of employment and next state of destination for migrants in various states (Lillesand et al., 1977). While the data show three broad patterns of migratory travel consistent with the common image, they also indicate considerable deviation from these three major streams (figure 3). The study concluded that if patterns of migrant travel existed at all, they were more complex than the commonly perceived image of three streams.

Also, in contrast to this image, data from the Hired Farm Working Force Survey indicate that not all migrants originate in "home bases"

of Texas, California, or Florida. While about 60 percent of the migrants were living in these three States at the time of the survey in December, 40 percent were not. Also, as previously noted, about two-thirds of the migrants traveled less than 1,000 miles one-way to reach their farm jobs. The patterns illustrated in figures 2 and 3 suggest that migrants generally travel long distances to do farmwork.

Most migrants did farmwork on a casual or seasonal basis for less than 150 days during the year. However, 13 percent or 29,000 did farmwork almost year-round for 250 days or more. Migrants in general averaged 191 days of farmwork. Over half of the migrants also did some nonfarmwork during the year. These workers averaged 105 days of farmwork and 128 days of nonfarm work. Most worked for only one nonfarm employer and the largest proportions worked in service, craft, or laborer jobs.

The earnings of migrant workers were considerably less than those of other workers. In 1983, migrants averaged \$5,921 in total earnings compared with \$14,600 received by all U.S. nonagricultural production workers (figure 4). However, these low earnings reflect the large number of seasonal workers, students, and homemakers, who intentionally work only a few weeks at farmwork during the year and are probably not responsible for the main share of the family support. For example, migrants who did hired farmwork as their major activity averaged about \$9,000 in total earnings. Students, homemakers, and others out of the labor force most of the year averaged less than \$3,000.

It is difficult to evaluate the economic status of workers based on earnings alone. Other factors such as family income and family size should also be considered. In 1983 migrant farmworkers had a

median family income of \$9,000, considerably lower than the median income of \$22,000 for all U.S. families. The median family income for all hired farmworker families was \$14,000 (figure 5). Based on family income and size criteria similar to the official Federal poverty guidelines in 1983, about one third of migrant families were defined as low income, about the same proportion as all hired farmworker families. However, these figures do not reflect the costs of transportation, lodging, or food while in transit.

Primary Labor Force Activity

There is a considerable amount of diversity within the migrant work force and the aggregated data described above does not accurately depict all migrants. Migrants have varied employment experiences and many of these workers are involved in activities other than farmwork during most of the year (figure 6). For example, in 1983, only a third of the migrants (77,000 workers) cited hired farmwork as their primary activity. These workers were highly dependent on agriculture for their earnings, and most had no other source of earnings. They worked longer at their farmwork and had higher farm earnings than other groups, but because of their dependence on farmwork, their total earnings were low. These workers were more likely than others to travel greater distances and over half worked for at least 3 farm employers during the year. They tended to be older, minority members and many were householders who were probably largely responsible for their families' support. In addition, their levels of education and family income were lower than those of other migrants. This group closely resembles the general image of migrant farmworkers often found in the literature.

About a quarter of the migrant farmworkers worked primarily in nonfarm occupations but did some migrant farmwork during the year. This group received only a small portion of their total earnings from farmwork. They did a relatively small amount of farmwork and because of their greater dependence on nonfarm work, these workers had higher total earnings than others. The nonfarm work group appears to be better off economically than the primarily farmwork group and probably used farmwork only for supplemental income. However, many of these workers pieced together several jobs during the year to support themselves and their families. Over 40 percent of the workers in the nonfarm work group had at least three different employers during the year (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1983). Farmwork was only one of a series of necessary income sources for these workers. Overall, these workers appeared to have little resemblance to the common migrant image.

The final third of the migrant workers, was comprised largely of students and homemakers who were in the labor force only part of the year. These workers did migrant farmwork for only a few days or weeks during the spring and summer. Some were earning spending money for their personal use, while others were contributing to overall family income. These workers did a relatively small amount of farmwork during the year and received relatively low annual farm earnings. However, their economic status must be considered in light of other factors. The majority were young, white, and students; few were householders and thus were likely to receive economic support from other family members. Many were simply earning extra spending money during summer vacations. Others, however, were contributing necessary earnings, even in small amounts, to the family income. Those workers

not in the labor force most of the year generally traveled long distances and almost half of this group was between 14 and 17 years of age. This suggests that many of these workers traveled with the family unit and contributed to family support. Some members of this group closely match the general migrant image; clearly others do not.

Implications

The wide diversity in the social and economic characteristics of migrant farmworkers is an important consideration in the development of farm labor policies and programs to improve the living and working conditions of the Nation's migrant farmworkers. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 and its replacement, the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, authorized a job training and placement program specifically for migrant and seasonal farmworkers, as well as the provision of supportive services such as child care, medical treatment, transportation, and relocation assistance for farmworker families. These programs have been directed largely toward the educationally and economically disadvantaged farmworkers who depend heavily on farmwork for a large part of their income. Additional efforts designed to improve the living and working conditions of these migrant farmworkers should focus on improving employment stability, wages and benefits, and levels of family well-being, including health, housing, and education of family members (Whitener, 1985).

Other policies should be aimed at all migrants, regardless of their characteristics, attachment to farmwork, or low-income status. Such efforts should focus on employee benefits and workplace

protections generally available to other U.S. workers, including minimum wage guarantees, farm safety regulations, workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance. In recent years, these protections have increased for farmworkers, although most of these Federal and State programs still have special exemptions for agriculture, based on the size of the farm operation.

Farm labor policies and programs designed to help migrant farmworkers are likely to be most effective when based on an accurate knowledge of the migrant population. Although more detailed information is needed on migrants, particularly at the State and local level, data reviewed here suggests that different groups of migrants have different characteristics, problems and needs. This diversity should be recognized in programs and policies designed to improve the living and working conditions of migrants and encourage a more productive agriculture.

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FIGURE 1

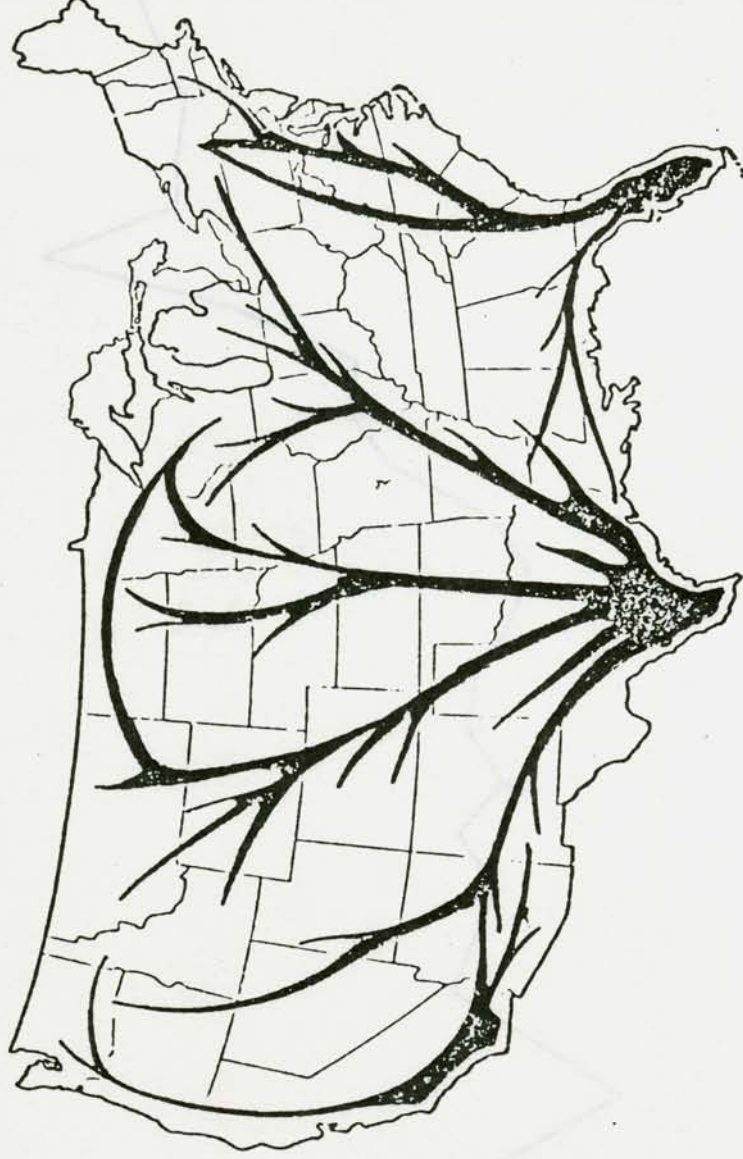
NUMBER OF MIGRANT FARMWORKERS, 1960-83



SOURCE: The Hired Farm Working Force Survey of 1983. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

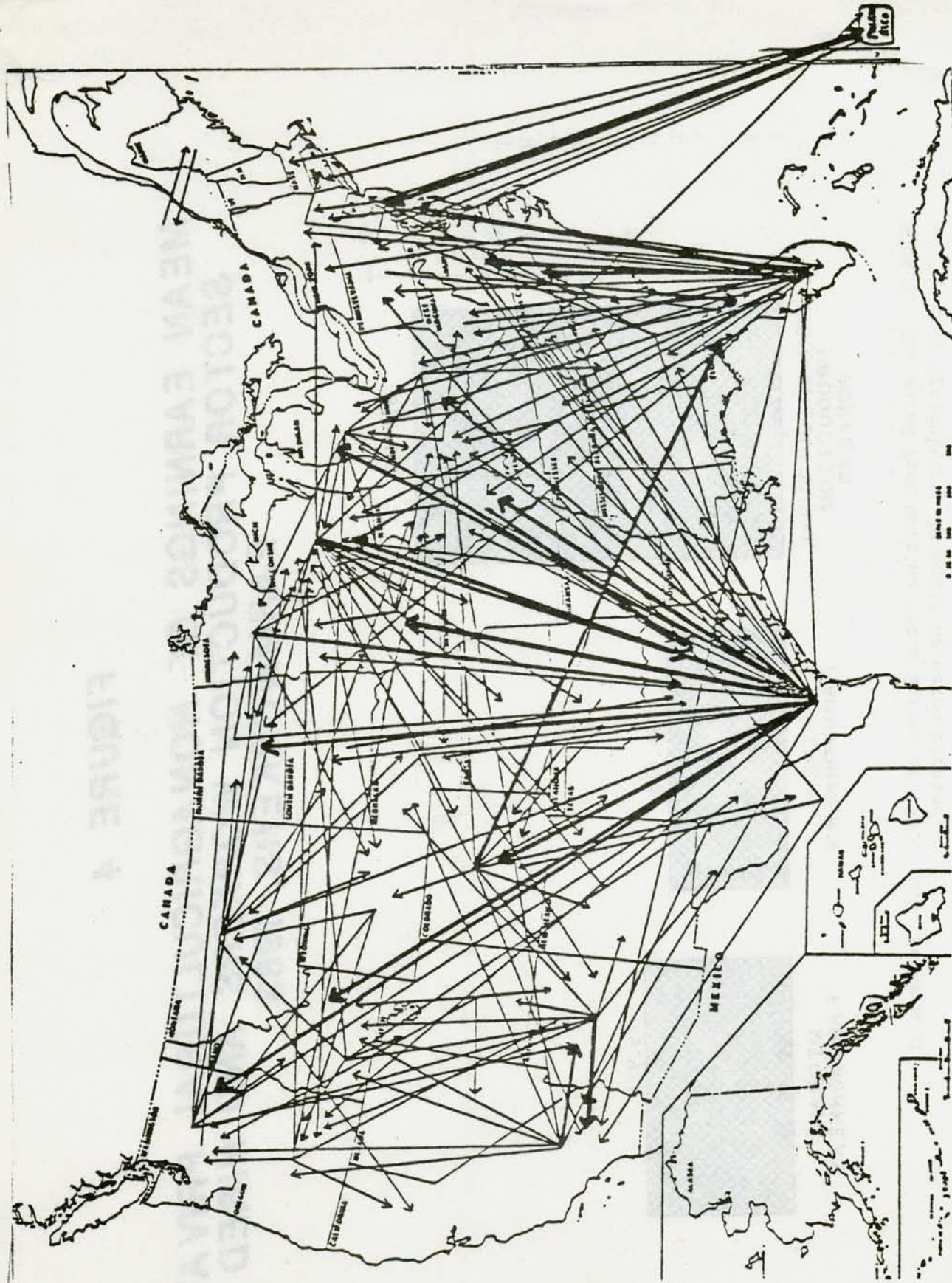
FIGURE 2

SCHEMA OF NATIONAL FARMWORKER
MIGRATION PATTERNS



Source: National Migrant Information Clearing House, Juarez-Lincoln Center,
Austin, TX, August, 1974.

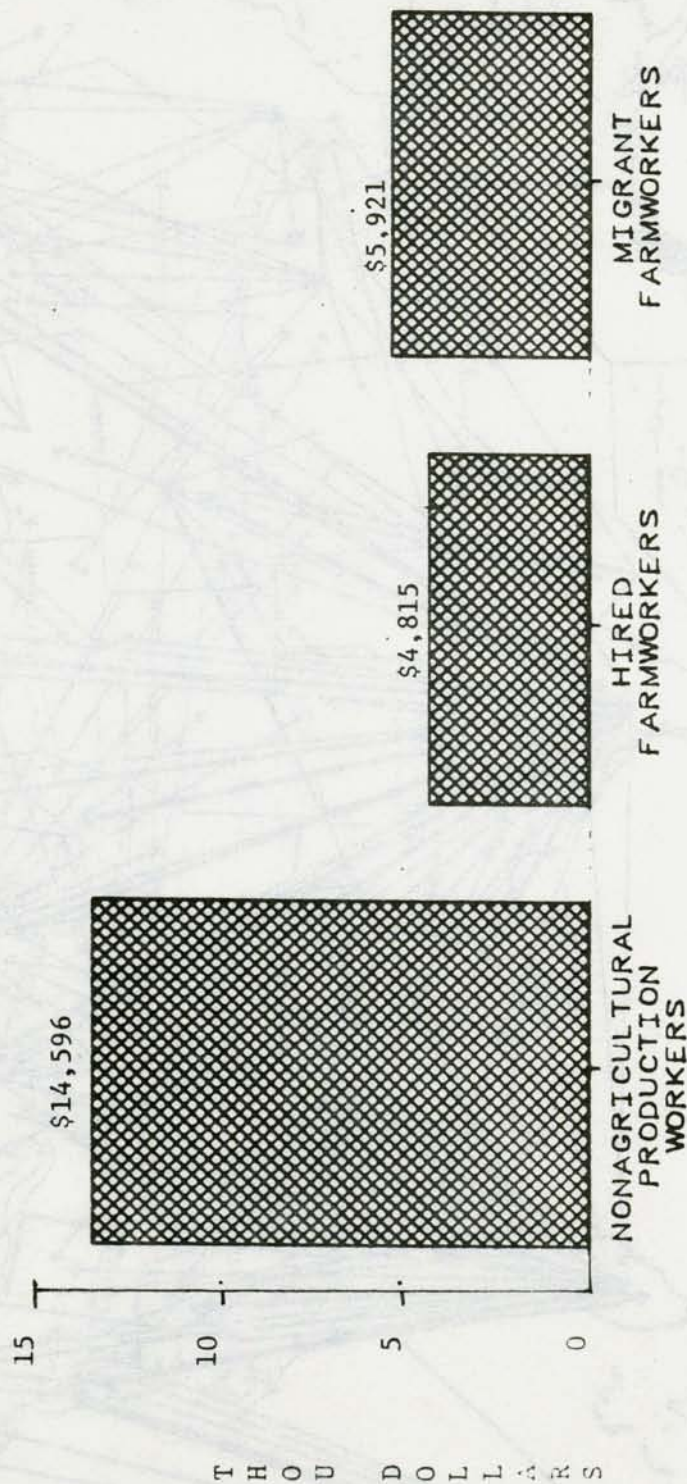
FIGURE 3



SOURCE: Lillesand, David, Linda Kravitz, and Joan McClellan. An Estimate of the Number of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. A report prepared for the Legal Services Corporation. May 1977.

FIGURE 4

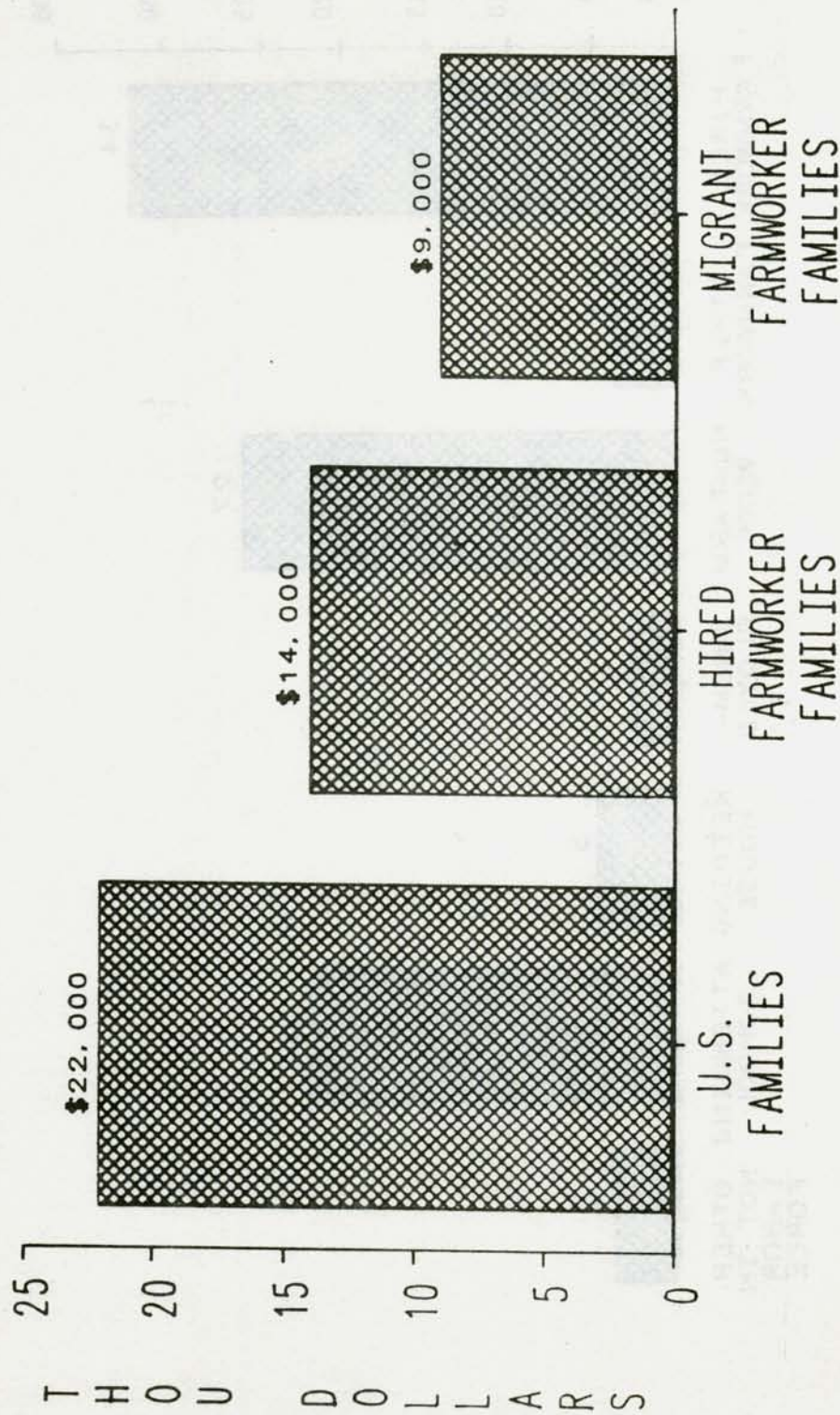
MEAN EARNINGS OF NONAGRICULTURAL PRIVATE SECTOR PRODUCTION WORKERS AND HIRED FARMWORKERS, 1983



SOURCE: The Hired Farm Working Force Survey of 1983. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

FIGURE 5

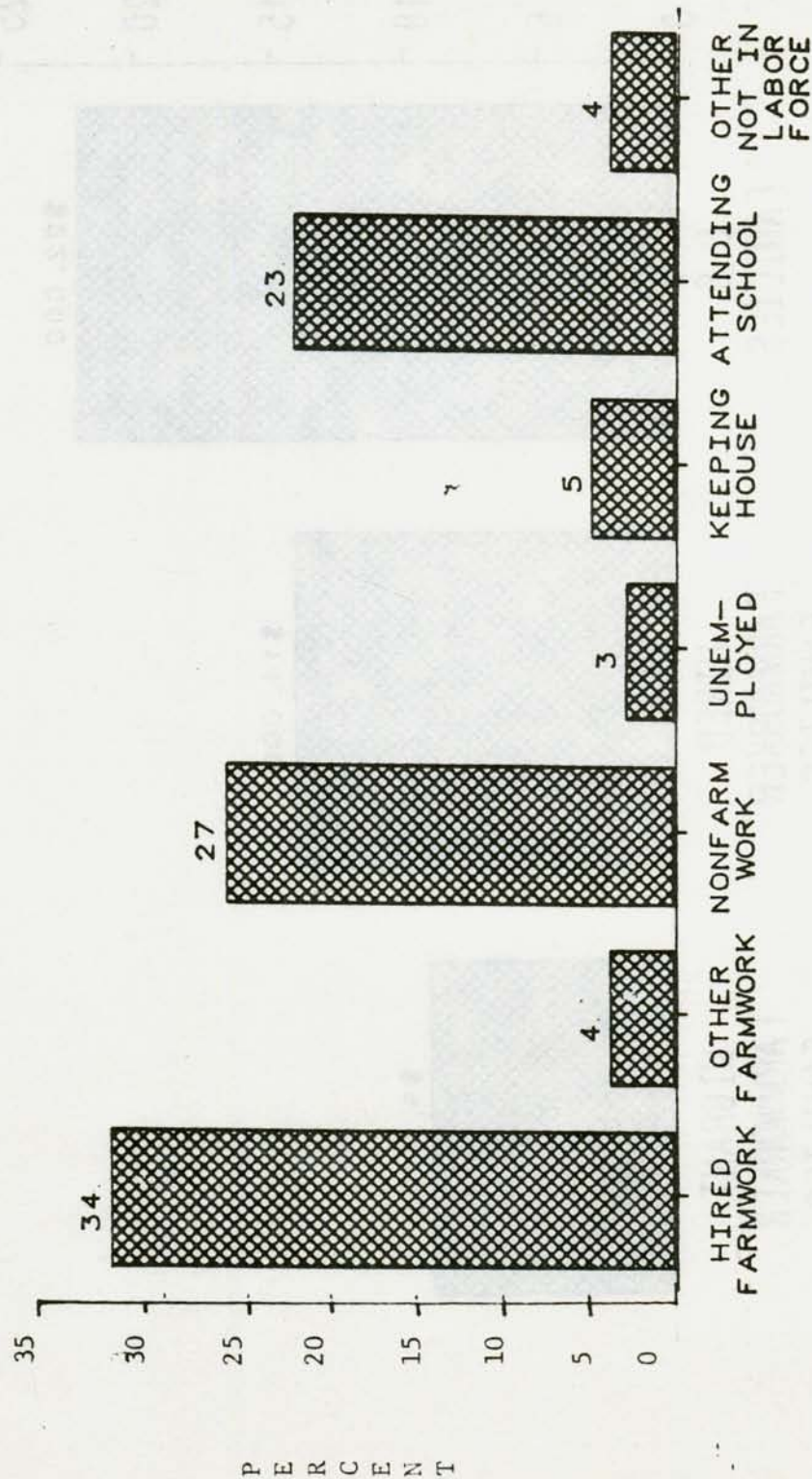
**MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME OF U.S. AND
HIRED FARMWORKER FAMILIES, 1983**



SOURCE: The Hired Farm Working Force Survey of 1983. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

FIGURE 6

PRIMARY LABOR FORCE ACTIVITY OF MIGRANT FARMWORKERS, 1983



SOURCE: The Hired Farm Working Force Survey of 1983. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.