

Children of Migrant Farmworkers

Life In Lenawee County Michigan



Photos and Story by Suresh Rangarajan
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Preface

This photo essay stems from my experiences working with the children of migrant farmworkers in Lenawee County, MI. Through a clinical rotation offered through Dr. Lucila Nerenberg of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School, I was able to spend the month of August in 2003 observing the daily lives of migrant farmworker children. In particular, as part of my fourth year medical school curriculum, I had the opportunity to follow the lives of migrant children as they interacted with the numerous educational, health care, and social services that create a patchwork of “safety net” measures to support healthy and productive childhood experiences.



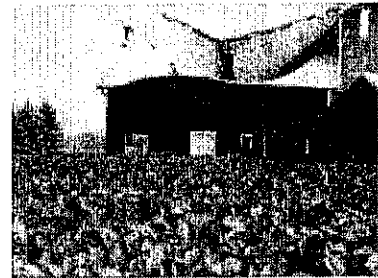
My interest in migrant populations began while in graduate school at the Harvard School of Public Health (95'-97'). During that time, I became active with the Health and Human Right's student group whose mission was to educate both students and the community about domestic and international human rights issues. As part of our activities, I traveled along with a group of student members down to the Rio-Grand Valley of Texas to investigate health conditions and health care of access available to detainees of a major INS detention center. The experience was personally formative for me. During my interviews with detainees, I was struck by the graveness of their life stories. The struggles of exile from economically and politically wrought countries in search of a minimal standard of living and the opportunity for a better life for their children was a common theme. Around the same period in my life, I met my wife, Tara Gruzen. She had an extensive history of working with migrant farm laborers as an investigative reporter in northern California. As part of her work, she conducted an investigative story of living conditions in San Mateo County that resulted in a county initiative to improve migrant farmer living conditions. Since then, she has raised my awareness of the struggles of migrant farm workers and sparked a personal interest in taking a more active role in understanding the social, political, and economic forces that intervene to maintain a steady population of migrant farmworkers across our nation's farms.

My experience in Lenawee County has been extremely revealing. Not only am I in utter awe at the amount of work that farm laborers accomplish each day, I am amazed by the level of commitment demonstrated by employees and volunteers at the various organizations that provide essential services to members of migrant families, especially migrant children. However, I have also struggled with understanding why the life of migrant families seems so incongruous. Despite every attempt to fit the “roundness” of migrant families into the “squareness” of large-scale American farms, the fit breaks down. Once the farming day is over, the farm workers retire to their camps to spend a few hours with their families, or alone if they are single, before returning to the fields at dawn. The camps and farms function as their home and community. I noticed little social interaction between the migrant population and the white resident community in town. On the outskirts of town, I would see an occasional Hispanic grocery store or “grocería” or if I looked hard enough, I could see “peluquería” written on the side of a barbershop. Although health care and social services were combined in town, education of migrant children was kept relatively separate. Migrant children attend school when resident children are out on summer holiday. For most county residents and farmers, the situation of separate or distant existences is workable based on the constant demand for

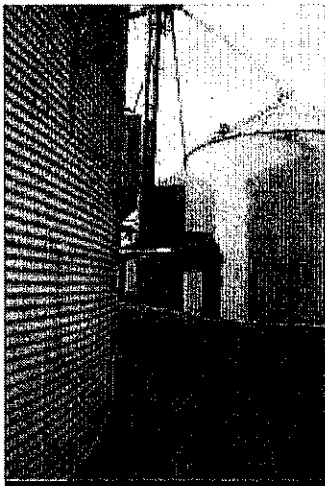
labor on the farms during every day of the growing season. However, the situation does not work for children of migrant farmworkers. I believe that their constant seasonal displacement and lack of integration with resident community children will simply relegate them to the next generation of migrant farmers. My hope is that by focusing this photo essay on migrant farmworker children and highlighting a few organizations that are trying to improve their life chances, we as a society that enjoys the fruits and vegetables of the migrant communities' labor can continue to think of ways of opening up doors of opportunity for these children in the future.

A Brief History of Migrant Farming Across America

Farm laborers have been a part of our nation's rural landscape for well over the past century. In addition to Native American, African American, and poor whites, a flow of Chinese, Japanese, Southern European, Mexican, Central and South American, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian immigrants have provided a continuous supply of cheap farm labor across the United States. In the 1860s, Chinese immigrants, who originally came to the west coast to build railroads and work in mines, began seeking farm employment. By 1880, over 75 percent of all California farm workers were Chinese.¹ However, anti-Chinese sentiment and passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act began a shift of these populations to urban enclaves. In their place, California growers actively began recruiting Japanese immigrants to fill the role of Chinese farm laborers. By 1910, the majority of California fruit and vegetable workers were Japanese.² As with their predecessors, the rising tide of Japanese productivity and efforts to take ownership positions of farms resulted in a series of legislative barriers to both Japanese ownership and leasing of farms as well as Japanese immigration. During the same period, the 1910 Mexican revolution and the Mexican government's



dismantling of traditional communal land ownership, which forced 5 million rural Mexicans - over 97% of the campesino population - off their land resulted a dramatic migration of Mexican laborers to the U.S. west coast and southwestern states.³ Continued violence in their home country and domestic labor shortages during World War I further supported a steady migration of Mexican workers north and to the southwest prior to the great depression.



In contrast to California, the southeast farm labor originally consisted of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. By the early 1900's, African Americans, poor whites, and Southern Europeans began to migrate to farms near the urban centers along the east coast and to the large farms in rural south as seasonal laborers (those who employment status switched to farming based on demand) to grow and pick fruits and vegetables. Likewise, these same populations in midwestern

urban centers began to migrate out to small family owned farms outside of town during the growing season. However, by the 1930s the advancements in farm technology put sharecroppers and tenant

¹ Rothenberg, Daniel. With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today. p. 31, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles California (Paperback). Originally published: New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1998

² Ibid. p. 32

³ Ibid. p. 32

farmers in the south as well as small family run farms in the midwest out of business and reduced the demand for farm laborers to prepare the soil, plant, and tend the crops throughout the growing season.⁴ As a result, the demand for farm laborers became less for the entire season and more during the harvest and picking cycles. Many farm laborers responded by heading to farms along the southeast and northeast seaboard to match labor demand at different times of the year – the first migrant farmworkers. Others began to migrate as laborers back and forth from larger and more productive farms in the midwest and the great plain states. Thus, prior to the great depression, both a seasonal and migrant labor systems across the southeast, northeast, midwest, and great plains were firmly established. Furthermore, any unmet labor demand from migrant farmworkers was met by the continued eastward migration of Mexican farm labor from California and the southwest.

With the onset of the great depression, a series of mass deportations and immigration barriers to Mexican migrants sought to provide relief for “dust-bowl” refugees in search of work. Close to half a million Mexican immigrants were repatriated back to Mexico. The tide of Mexican farm labor migration was effectively stopped until the World War II wartime economy began to put pressure on the U.S. labor supply. In 1942, the government created a guest worker program that was eventually formalized as the Bracero Program in 1951. Mexicans were once again allowed to work as seasonal workers albeit on federally qualified farms. Between 1951 and 1964, the Bracero program admitted between 4 and 5 million Mexican farm workers into the United States.⁵ The program ended under pressure from existing farm workers in California whose efforts to organize were weakened by a continuing influx of Mexicans immigrants.⁶ However, even with the Bracero program’s termination, the inflow of Mexican workers continued, many of whom enlisted in traveling crews led by contractors that landed across the country including the Midwest.

Since the 1960s, Mexican immigration has been supplemented by a number of other populations from South and Central America, the Caribbean, and Asia to ensure a continuous supply of farm labor. In particular, domestic economic and political injustices in foreign countries have forced a number of populations from Guatemala, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, the Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam to immigrate to the United States. Currently, the population of seasonal farmworkers and their families is approximately 4.8 million in the U.S. In addition there is a population of 1.3 million comprised of migrant farmworkers (workers who travel from one place to another based on harvest and picking cycles) and their families.⁷ Only 2 out of 10 seasonal and migrant farmworkers were born in the United States. The remaining population is immigrants, over 90% of whom are Mexican.⁸

Many researchers have attempted to categorize migrant farmworkers into distinct patterns of migration - western, central, and eastern streams. Although fairly crude and inaccurate, the streams are often used to describe migrant farmworker populations throughout the year. The western stream begins in southern and central California during the winter with migrations through northern

⁴ Ibid. p. 34

⁵ Ibid. p. 36

⁶ Refugio I Rochin, Anne M. Santiago, and Karla S. Dickey. “Migrant and Season Workers in Michigan’s Agriculture: A Study of their Contributions, Characteristics, Needs, and Services,” JSRI Research Report 1, JSRI, November 1989

⁷ Rothenberg, Daniel. With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today. p. 6, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles California (Paperback). Originally published: New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1998

⁸ Ibid. p. 7

California, Oregon, and Washington State. The central stream begins in Texas during the winter and migrates north throughout the midwest, great plains, and southwest. The eastern stream begins in Florida during the winter and then migrates up the eastern seaboard and as far west as eastern Michigan. Thus, in Michigan, we see a combination of both central and eastern streams of migrant workers making their way north for summer picking and harvesting.

Migrant Farming in Michigan and Lenawee County

When Michigan farmers began using seasonal workers around the turn of century, most laborers were low income southern Europeans who left urban life and took to the fields during growing seasons. These workers played a key role in expanding the state's beet, fruit, and vegetable production. By the 1930s, these farm workers were joined by a growing number of migrant workers from the south. Michigan farmers began actively recruiting the latter population from Arkansas and Texas to pick strawberries, cherries, peaches, apples and sugar beets. The Arkansas workers were predominately low-income whites and blacks, whereas the Texas workers were almost exclusively Mexican.⁹ The great depression slowed but did not stop the migration of workers to Michigan farms. Furthermore by this time a system of migration within Michigan had firmly been established. Workers would start in the north picking cherries and then head south to pick blueberries on the western side of the state in early August and a range of other crops across Michigan during early fall. During and after World War II, the rise of corporate canneries such as Green Giant, Libby's, Campbell Soup, Del Monte, Heinz, and Stokely Food Michigan's continued to support the demand for migrant farmworkers.¹⁰ In the early 1950s, Operation Bootstrap, a federal initiative to stem rising unemployment, resulted in another wave of Mexican farm laborer deportations. Michigan farmers responded by organizing Operation Farmlift, a program that flew over 700,000 Puerto Ricans to work in the state's sugar beet industry, especially in the Saginaw Valley and thumb area of Michigan.¹¹ After the dismantling of Operation Farmlift, Mexican migration continued through the late 50's and early 60's with the Bracero program and Michigan farmers began to rely on the annual migration of workers from northeastern Mexico and Texas to Michigan. Since then, migrant farmworkers and a growing number of their U.S.-born offspring continue to serve a critical role in



the state's vegetable and fruit industry. During the 70's and 80's, the impact of new farm technology on farm laborer demand was balanced by increased demand for Michigan-grown

⁹ Refugio I Rochin, Anne M. Santiago, and Karla S. Dickey. "Migrant and Season Workers in Michigan's Agriculture: A Study of their Contributions, Characteristics, Needs, and Services," JSRI Research Report 1, JSRI, November 1989

¹⁰ Ibid

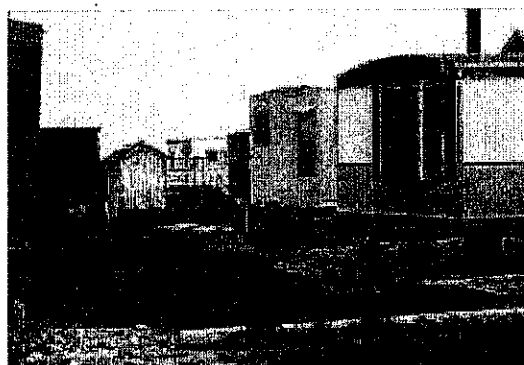
¹¹ Valdes, D. Al norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1990

products. However, over the past decade, the demand for farm laborer has fallen as a number of large migrant farmworker employers have chosen to close down or be bought out by technology-intensive farm corporations.



Lenawee County's migrant farmworker history parallels that of Michigan. During the early 1900's, local farmers entered into agreement with Continental Sugar Company (CSC) to allocate over 6000 acres for sugar beets.¹² Soon after, the company began recruiting large number of Europeans from surrounding towns and cities such as Detroit. Within a few years, the European population proved less interested in sugar beet farming. By the 1920's, CSC broadened its recruitment to adjacent states and

Mexican immigrants from Texas, the later of whom were transported back and forth by train from Texas around the sugar-beet season. Over time, the migration of farmworkers continued while a number of Mexican workers and their families settled out of the migrant stream to either spend the off season on the farm or work a manufacturing job. Between 1920 and the end of World War II, the later population moved to Mexican-American neighborhoods - Sunnyside, the Adrian Improvement Area, and the Drexel Park - on the outskirts of Adrian that were developed by city and county government to "isolate" a growing number of Mexican immigrants working war-time manufacturing jobs in Adrian, the county's industrial center.¹³



Despite these manufacturing opportunities, the migration of farm labor, mostly Mexican or Texas-born Mexicans, to Lenawee farms continued on an annual basis after the war. Farmers diversified from sugar beets to a wide range of fruit and vegetable crops including strawberries, apples,



¹² Peron, Annick. Early Settlement of Mexican-Americans in Lenawee County, 1920-1945. p.2, Unpublished Manuscript, 1978

¹³ Rosenbaum, "Migration and immigration of Latinos into Rural Midwestern Communities: The Case of "Mexicans" in Adrian, Michigan," JSRI Report 19, JSRI, January 1997

asparagus, pickles, cabbage, parsley, cilantro, lettuce, bell peppers, broccoli, potatoes, and pumpkin. By the mid-80's there were over 15 active migrant farmworker farms with camps in Lenawee County. Today, there are only seven registered farms— Applewood, Golden Acres, Iottranch, Judson 1 & 2, Schmidt, and Witt. Together, the migrant farms employ and house approximately 400 farm laborers and their dependents. These numbers do not include a number of undocumented migrant farmers and families on smaller farms scattered throughout the county. In speaking with a local census worker, he stated that the “INS is really not interested in getting between undocumented migrant farmers and farm owners, rather they prefer to focus their efforts on ensuring that undocumented residents do not compete for local manufacturing jobs.” Moreover, not all migrant families live on farms. A handful of migrant farmworkers live in low-income areas of town, such as Kings-Court trailer park. Low-income Hispanics who settled out of the migrant stream in the 1950's and 1960's and poor African-Americans now populate the early “development” areas. In 1980, located downwind of Adrian's industrial factories, the Sunnyside neighborhood was found to be contaminated by an industrial toxin. A massive decontamination effort was initiated after further testing discovered that many residents including children were exposed to the chemical.¹⁴ If you tour the Sunnyside neighborhood today, you will not encounter much except a Mexican diner, a grocería, and a rows of dilapidated houses on a few dead-end streets.



In town, the lives of migrant population and local white residents are still separate. In fact, many residents are unaware that migrant farming exists in their community. Corbett Day, a 29-year resident of Adrian and owner of the Triple D café in downtown Adrian, had no idea that there were migrant farmworkers outside of Adrian. He stated “You should run a story in the local paper, a lot of people would want to know about this.” It is hard to tell whether the reason for limited assimilation between the migrant and local white community is due to underlying racism or simply a lack of understanding. For example, Betty Rodriguez recently opened up The Shop, a small barbershop or “peluquería” on the edge of town that caters to both local residents and the migrant



population. She previously worked at a local mall and recalled that most of the staff were “really rude to migrant farmworker families because they did not speak good English. So, most the migrant people came to me.” Perhaps, those who suffer most from this divide are the migrant children. The Migrant Head Start program, which serves infants, toddlers, and preschoolers ages 0-5, enrolls only Hispanic students. Children older than five participate in non-integrated education during the growing season and spend only a couple months in

integrated education with local resident children in the Fall before migrating back south.

¹⁴ Rojo, E.A. Between Two Conflicting Cultures: A Phenomenological-Participatory Investigation of the Enduring Struggle of A Mexican-American Community. p. 225, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1980

The Start of the Season

In Lenawee County, the demand for farm labor begins to surge towards the end of May and early June. Farm workers will typically present to farm owners with a social security number and documentation of citizenship or residency status. Either a U.S. government authorized green or temporary residency card verifies their residency status. The temporary residency card is valid for three years and can be obtained in Mexico or at one of the United States immigration centers. Within hours, the farm workers and their families are assigned to living quarters. From the few farms that I have seen, these quarters are usually a one-bedroom apartment unit that houses four to five people or a two-bedroom apartment unit or trailer that houses between eight to ten people. In the latter, one room usually contains a kitchen with stove, refrigerator, dining table, an occasional microwave, and a few pieces of used furniture. The other room is a clutter of clothes and mattresses for sleeping. The apartment floors are almost always cement, layered with dust from the fields, and scattered with children's toys. Electric fans are usually the only relief from the summer heat. Most units have running water with sinks for washing dishes. Showers and bathrooms are usually communal and located in a central location.

After setting up house, farm laborers take to the field from sunrise to sunset six days a week. Saturday and Sunday are usually half days. Depending on the farm and crop, laborers are paid with multiple payment methods. For example, workers may be paid by the hour, picked bucket, pound, or acre picked. During my rotation, most farmers were picking "pepinos" or small cucumbers that were paid by the bucket and average size. In total, even with incomes of multiple family members, the total migrant family annual income ranges between \$8,000 and \$12,000, well below the national poverty level.¹⁵

"Safety-Net" Services

Over the years, a number of health, legal, and social services have arisen to address the harsh realities that this transient population must face. Through public and private funding, non-profit organizations continue to support the basic living needs of migrant families including education, health care and nutrition. With the passage of stricter child labor laws, a number of these providers and new organizations have increased efforts to bridge the educational and health gaps that migrant children face. Currently, in the state of Michigan, child labor laws limit the age and number of hours children can work on farms. Children under 14 years of age are not allowed to work on farms, whereas children over 14 are allowed to work on farms during non-school hours for a maximum of four hours per day. However, enforcement of these laws for older children has proved difficult. Farm owners do not have the incentive to verify ages documented on submitted paperwork. The remainder of this photo essay highlights a number of people and organizations that support the lives of migrant children.

Adrian's Migrant Head Start Program

Head Start programs are funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. They are typically offered to preschool children, including children with disabilities, and children of low-income families



¹⁵ Davis, S. "State Children's Health Insurance Program – Immigration Fears and Eligibility Rules Among Barriers to SCHIP," *Closing the Gap*, Office of Public Health and Science - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2000

(including families of migrant and seasonal farmworkers,) in an effort to improve the children's chances in school and in life. Head Start centers provide a secure setting where children can develop their skills under trained supervision. In addition to education, children receive health and dental screenings, take part in daily meals, and participate in structured play activities.¹⁶



In order to address the needs of migrant farmworker children, the U.S. department of Human Services started a number of migrant health start programs to focus on children of migrant farmworkers who are between two weeks and five years of age. In Michigan, the Migrant Head Start program serves more than 1,400 children from over 950 families each year. The program currently operates in 14 locations across the state. The Adrian branch is managed by the Telamon Corporation, a national non-profit company

that focuses on the needs of rural populations and farmworkers, and currently provides service to 55 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers from Spanish-speaking migrant families in Lenawee and Monroe counties.

The Adrian center currently employs 28 staff and relies heavily on volunteers to serve the children's needs. The migrant classes run from June to September and are overbooked. There are currently 25 children on a wait-list to enroll. Every day, three buses may venture over thirty miles each way to drop and pick up students. Once at the school, the children participate in a curriculum tailored to their cultural needs. Education takes many forms including encouraging literacy, promoting creative



thought, artwork, playtime, and structured events such as field trips to the Toledo Zoo. In order to meet the language needs of the children, all classes have at least one bilingual speaker and a selection of both English and Spanish reading resources. Children eat two meals and a snack and take an afternoon nap. Parents are involved in their child's education through parent meetings, health and nutrition education, and teacher and staff home visits.

Migrant Head Start has agreements with local medical providers such as the Family Medical Center of Michigan in Temperance to provide preventive health care including immunizations, lead screenings, routine blood work, and mental health assessments. Once a year, the Department of Pediatrics of the University of Michigan also staffs a well-child clinic during which a trained physician evaluates each child's growth and development. Common conditions such as skin rashes and ear infections are



¹⁶ Telamon Corporation website (www.telamon.org)

quickly identified and treated. Other less common conditions such as hernias, undescended testes, retinoblastoma, and hip dysplasias are examined for and if identified, referred to specialized providers.



Kindergarten through High-School

According to Maria Arellano, a former migrant farmworker and Blissfield district schoolteacher, the Latino migrant community places a high value on the education of their children. Parents actively encourage their children to study, with the hope that they will break out of the migrant stream. However, migrant children face a number of barriers to education. Foremost, the continuous dislocation of migrant families means that children will typically enroll in three to four different schools per year. Upon arrival in Michigan, migrant farmworker children in Lenawee County may enroll in a summer migrant program for six weeks to help prepare for the fall school year, only to depart early or switch to another program as their family moves midway through the growing season for a new crop. Moreover, many high school students choose not to enroll in summer programs because they feel that they will not get credit for their work. In most cases, the credits from the summer migrant education programs are not transferable to schools in Texas, Florida, or other home states. As a result, most high school age students typically take to the fields to help earn wages for their families during the summer months. Likewise, a number of these children chose not to enroll in school in the fall for the same reason.

The Portable Assistance Study Sequence (PASS) program has tried to address this issue of transferring credits. PASS is a nationally recognized program targeted for migrant secondary school students who want an alternative means of earning course credit. Within PASS, each student works semi-independently with an instructor who meets them periodically. Each semester consists of five study units complete with unit tests. Through PASS students can earn full or partial credits that are transferable to other institutions across Michigan and in different states. Unfortunately, the program is extremely administratively intensive. Teachers must be certified to teach the course and school district workers must track and coordinate transcripts for migrant children from schools across the county.

Students who choose to join the fall school year from late August to late September with local Blissfield or Deerfield district resident children face a number of additional barriers to education, especially if they do not speak English. The Blissfield and Deerfield schools do not offer English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. As a result, many of the migrant students are unable to follow lesson plans. Given the situation, educators try their best to integrate migrant children, but the truth is that these children do not have time to bond with local non-Hispanic students nor can they participate in after school activities because they have to work in the fields in the afternoons.

Adrian Perez, twenty-four year-old volunteer at Community Action Agency's Clinica Rural, graduated high school and made it out of the migrant stream. I had a chance to speak with Adrian and find out what growing up as a migrant child and going to school at the same time in Lenawee County was really like.

My parents came across the border from Mexico before I was born in Texas. For as long as I can remember, my family was on the road. Both my parents were migrant farmworkers. Picking and moving was a way of life. My first childhood pictures are those playing in the fields while mom and dad worked. We lived in Texas, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio before I started elementary school. My mom was strict about education. She knew that education was the only way that I would get out of migrant farming. She pushed me from the beginning. She's a strong woman. Even today, she'll tell you the same thing. One time I remember a summer when the



harvest on a farm here in Lenawee County was really good. The grower made the migrants work late into the night. He had a huge row of lights on his tractor. The migrants would pick a row and the track would move up. One night, after fourteen straight days in the field, my mother had had enough. She turned around and told that farmer on the tractor that she wasn't gonna work no more, flipped her bucket, and took a seat. The farmer was pissed. He came down off the tractor and threatened to hit her. My father stepped in and said if he hit her, he would kill him right there. Soon, the other pickers turned the buckets and took a seat. The farmer's wife heard the yelling and came out to see what was goin on. My mother told her that she can't work no more. She hasn't had time to wash her or her childrens' clothes in two weeks. Needless to say, life on that farm has never been the same. Since then, farmerworkers have had a half day off every week. I guess the farmer realized that he was wrong. I also think he respected my mom after that because she didn't give her a hard time or come to our door yelling "mojados" in the morning to wake us up. Since then, I think his wife has helped change him. He's actually a nice guy now.

So, my mom kept me in school. I can't remember how many elementary schools I went to because there were too many. Same with middle school. I remember going to six high schools. My parents started coming back here every year then. I managed to graduate through a module-learning program. If you worked well on your own, you could get through. I also tried to do well because I was scared that if I didn't the school system would find out that my parents did not have papers and deport them back to Mexico. I would usually work in the fields before school in the morning and after school from about 3:30 until dark. There wasn't really much time to do homework. It was tough. But as a teenager, working in the fields wasn't that bad because there were girls. You knew that if she talked to you while picking, she wasn't after your money. The most exciting part of the day was running for that shower, especially if you had a date. There were only two stalls for all the workers and children. Everyone would run to catch the first and only two hot showers. If you didn't wait and get one, you would be itching all night.

After graduating high school, I got out of migrant farming by joining the United State's Marine Core. I knew that I would make good money and that if I worked for Uncle Sam my parents were safe from getting ship backed to Mexico and I would have a good shot a getting a job later on. I guess I was one of the lucky one's. My mom was right; education was the key, which is what got me out.

Not all migrant children in Lenawee County are as fortunate as Adrian. For many families, the reality of an extra pair of productive hands hits as their children reach teenage years. By the time children reach high school, the economic pressure to drop out of school or only go to school a few days a week often wins out over the chances of a full education.

Health Care Insurance and Services

Unfortunately, only a portion of migrant children is enrolled in the state's Medicaid and MICHild insurance program. With the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, many immigrants, even legal ones, lost eligibility for government benefit programs, including Medicaid and children health insurance programs. Children or pregnant women who obtained legal permanent resident status (i.e. a green card) on or after August 22, 1986 were barred from enrolling in federal means-tested programs for their first five years in the U.S.¹⁷ As a result, some migrant children who do not meet citizenship or documented residency requirements, have a green card or five years of residency in U.S., failed to qualify. Moreover, the welfare reform act required state agencies to report any immigrants who were in the U.S. illegally. Thus, although many migrant farmworker children are U.S. citizens, some immigrant families where some, but not all members are legal residents, have chosen not to enroll their children in public insurance programs to avoid adverse immigration consequences for the others.¹⁸ In addition to immigration issues, there are a number of practical barriers to insuring migrant farmworker children. Foremost, children's health insurance enrollment is on a state-by-state basis. Many migrant families simply cannot afford the inconvenience and lost wages incurred to enroll their children through a time-consuming application process every time they enter a new state.

Chris Rojo of Adrian Migrant Head Start requires all parents whose children begin Head Start to enroll in the MICHild health insurance program, but enrollment through the Family Independence Agency usually takes a couple of months. Parents will try and enroll their child in early June, only to receive coverage in late August. By that time, most parents are preparing to move to another state. Moreover, a number of providers of health plans associated with the children's insurance program are not taking new patients, making it very difficult for migrant families to find caregivers. The Family Medical Clinic of Temperance and one local provider have in part responded to this issue by offering walk-in service to migrant families.



Those families waiting for insurance or without insurance rely heavily on local emergency department care or free care clinics. The Community Health Department's Community Action Agency (CAA) serves as the primary coordinating facility for Lenawee County's migrant farmworker families. Located close to downtown Adrian, the facility offers WIC, well child care, a pharmacy (limited), family planning (limited), and dental care (limited). In addition, Dr. Bachmeyer of Tecumseh Family Practice travels to Adrian every Wednesday

afternoon to take scheduled and walk-in appointments with migrant families and low-income county residents. However, many of his migrant patients who present for initial visits in his free primary care clinic are soon gone and cannot follow up on their care. The continuous displacement of migrant farmworkers makes coordinated follow-up care and laboratory studies for migrant families difficult and frustrating, particularly for adults and children with chronic diseases such as

¹⁷ Davis, S. "State Children's Health Insurance Program – Immigration Fears and Eligibility Rules Among Barriers to SCHIP," *Closing the Gap*, Office of Public Health and Science - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2000

¹⁸ Ibid



hypertension, diabetes, and asthma. Pharmaceuticals prescribed through the clinic are supplied by a combination of samples and prescription drugs, the latter of which is typically funded jointly between the agency and local pharmacies. Similarly, the agency and local providers also fund laboratory work, imaging studies, and diagnostic test jointly.

As part of its mission to serve migrant workers, the CAA also administers the Clinica Rural. Along with CAA staff

and community volunteers, Dr. Sheila Gahagan, other University of Michigan Medical School faculty and residents, and Dr. Bachmeyer travel every Thursday evening during the season to different camps to deliver health care to adults and children. Working alongside a mini-van stocked with medical supplies, the team typically treats adults for skin and eye irritations from pesticides and children for allergies, asthma, and ear and respiratory infections. Children are also evaluated for nutrition and development. If a child shows signs of malnutrition or developmental delay, they are referred back to CAA's primary care clinic. Likewise, adults with hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, and other chronic



conditions are referred as well. Elda Rivero who serves as CAA's coordinator for the clinic states that equipment, supplies, and a mobile van with a private examination area are the clinic's limiting factors. In addition, according to Rivero, the team relies on the county health department for tuberculosis testing. In 2002, there was an outbreak of tuberculosis in one of the camps to which the health department responded, however this year "no one has been tested."



The Clinic Rural does not provide mental health and substance abuse services to adults and children, an area of concern for children who endure multiple dislocations and episodes of family hardship during the year. Rather, the approach by local providers with migrant families has focused on prevention. In 1995, Berta Lopez, MSW (University of Michigan 81'), Dr. Lucila Nerenberg, and group of providers interested in health education started Vidas Sanas or "Healthy Living" to conduct psychosocial health education for migrant farmworker families. With support from the community mental health department, the group focuses on a new mental health or substance abuse issue each season. Last year, the team focused on depression with videos, presentations, and 1-on-1 assessments and counseling. This year the team has focused on alcohol abuse and drinking and driving. Over the past few months, the team has visited a number of camps with Lenawee County police officer Justin Frost and Dr. Lucila Nerenberg, a psychiatrist from the University of Michigan Medical School with a specialization in mental health and substance abuse issues. Together, parents and children of all ages are



educated on why a person would be stopped for driving under the influence of alcohol, how a person is tested for alcohol intoxication, and the legal consequences of driving under the influence. In addition, Dr. Nerenberg reviews the short-term effects of drinking on blood alcohol level and long-term medical implications of alcohol on the human body, such as alcohol induced liver cirrhosis and its dangerous combination with chronic hepatitis B and C.



restorative procedures such as fillings. When he does see children for a dental check-up, they typically already have multiple cavities.

Interestingly, Dr. Cox's relationship with migrant farmers began during his childhood. When he was 14, he worked alongside migrant farm laborers as a tomato picker. During those hot summer days, he learned first hand about the plight of migrant workers against poverty. Since then, his life has been different than most dentists. Dr. Cox believes that "there is always time to give," and offering free care to migrant farmworker families has become a natural part of his



practice. For him, the challenge with migrant farmworker families is outreach. The demands of farm labor are so intense that few parents have the time to bring their children to his office. Fortunately, when they do, he also has some new help with University of Michigan Dental School Graduate, Dr. Yee, who now works alongside him in providing dental care to migrant farmworkers and their families.

Nutrition

Despite the plentiful harvest among Lenawee County farms, migrant families suffer from the malnutrition secondary to poverty. Many families struggle to provide their children with the balanced diet necessary for proper mental and physical development. Most families qualify based on income status for food stamps through the local Family Independence Agency. Migrant Head Start has had a significant impact on nutrition to children under the ages of five. In addition, a number of other organizations have reached out to migrant families in Lenawee County to provide both nutrition education and direct food



supplements to migrant families. For example, in collaboration with the Michigan Family Independence Agency and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Michigan State University Extension administers the Family Nutrition Program to migrant families who are eligible for food stamps. Awilda Dominguez regularly visits families at camps to discuss nutrition education including food safety and security, shopping behavior, and dietary quality. She also presents the same information at other forums such as the Adrian Migrant Head Start, Blissfield Elementary School, Migrant Summer Program and Migrant Health Promotions. For families enrolled in the local WIC program, Dominguez presents Project Fresh, an educational presentation that discusses the health consequences of poor nutrition, reviews the food pyramid guide for meal planning, and suggests healthy cooking techniques. After the presentation, families receive food coupons to Adrian's farmers market. In addition to Dominguez' work, MSU extension also offers migrant families an Expanded Food and Nutrition Program as well as a breast feeding class on an individual case basis.



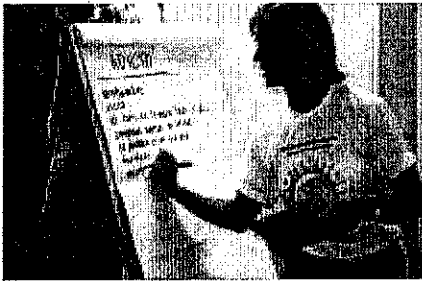
Another organization, Children's Resource Network focuses on the nutrition needs of children five to 17 years of age. Under the leadership of Gloria Corbett with private funding from local church groups and the USDA Food Service Program, the Children's Resource Network deliver approximately 90 meals each day to children of migrant families in Lenawee and Washtenaw counties. Volunteer drivers regularly pick up food at St. Peters church in Tecumseh in the afternoon and head out to the migrant camps every weekday during the

growing season. In addition, they also distribute after-school and household staple boxes to families. An after-school box typically includes non-perishable items that kids can use to make a meal for themselves such as peanut butter, raisins, trail mix, tuna fish, cereal, snacks, and juice. A household box may include the same items plus canned sweet potatoes or corn, prunes, and dried mashed potatoes. Migrant families may also stop by the church to pick up USDA subsidized frozen meats and other perishable items.



Environment and Auto Safety

Although legislative changes to child labor laws and minimum housing standards have significantly reduced the number of traumatic injuries to migrant children in the fields and in the camps, children continue to face a number of environmental hazards both at home and on the road. Inside the home, infants and children are often kept in swings or fixed chairs to avoid both floor dust from the heavily pesticide-sprayed fields and hazards associated with crammed living. According to Chris Rojo at Migrant Head Start, families are in desperate need of playpens and cots. "We see a lot of children whose necks, legs, and hips are underdeveloped because their parents can't put them on the floor." She also stated that a number of children suffer from asthma, skin allergies, and bug bites from sleeping on floors. Outside of living quarters, children are often left to entertain themselves. Some camps had swings and playground areas but in most cases children are left to play in camp parking areas.



In many cases, the effects of exhaustion, isolation, and economic deprivation of migrant farmworker family members leads to a number of social pathologies commonly associated with disenfranchised populations. Specifically, many migrant farmworkers or members of their families suffer from substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and interpersonal violence. Migrant Health Promotions has

some of these issues by training women migrant farmworkers from each of the camps to be lay health advisors. Over an eight week course, these women will receive training in identifying and helping migrant family members with stress, alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, sexual assault, juvenile and gang violence, and mental health issues.



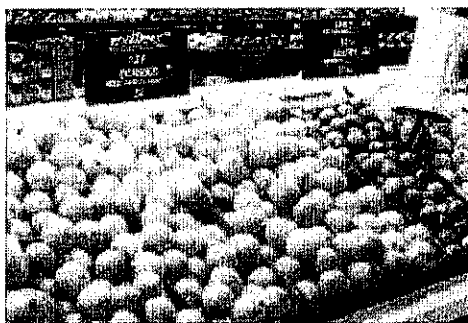
When migrant families leave camps, auto-safety becomes a life issue. Children are at particular high risk. Parents often take their infants and toddlers on the road without a car seat. I saw a number of infants and toddlers sitting happily on the "bump" between the two front seats or strapped into a passenger seat with an adult seat belt. Moreover, motor vehicle injury risk rises dramatically when migrant families migrate back and forth from the

south. In some of these cases, car seats for children are simply not used due to space limitations. It is common to see overloaded and mechanically unsafe cars packed with upwards of seven passengers making the journey from Michigan back down to Florida or Texas. Thus, given the high risk of auto-related trauma for children, it is important that organizations not only help by providing migrant families with car seats, but also education on the risks of not using one before it is too late.



Conclusion

My favorite part of grocery shopping has always been the produce section. As a child, I was always fascinated by every shiny and perfectly shaped apple and bell pepper, and if I was lucky, I would see my mother get sprayed by one of those automatic misters that come on every few minutes. At that age, I had a lot of questions for my



mom, but never did I ask her, "Where do

fruits and vegetables come from?" I simply assumed that Farmer Jack picked all the fruits and vegetables that packed the aisles. Although she eventually took me cherry and apple picking at "U-pick" farms in Michigan as I grew older, I am a little embarrassed to say I then assumed all those big combines you see on farms harvested all of our vegetables. I, like Corbett Day of



Adrian Michigan, had no idea that almost all of the fruits and vegetables grown in this country are picked by migrant farmworkers. I am sure Corbett and I are not alone in our ignorance.

The disenfranchised migrant farming population has been a hidden part of our nation's landscape for the past century. A closer look at the history of migrant farm labor and our country's fruit and vegetable production is not only fascinating but also extremely revealing. The conclusion that migrant farmers are simply escaping economic and political injustices from their own countries to work on American farms is wrong. Throughout history, U.S. and Michigan farming industries have actively courted and recruited migrant farmers and their families to meet the demand for human-intensive farm labor – work that local residents did not want to do. Moreover, while less expensive manufacturing labor is causing many U.S. manufacturing companies to shift their production overseas, cheap farm labor from migrant workers is keeping American farms in business and allowing them to stay competitive in foreign markets.



On a personal level, I am left with a deep admiration and respect for the migrant farmworker community. Together, they manage to survive an incredibly tough and unpredictable life. They stick together on the road and in the camps. Spring and Fall they all load up their cars and caravans to the next crop in the next state. When I walk into a camp and see the conditions that these families, especially their children, live in I feel sad. But when I look into the eyes of a farmworker at the end of a day, I see something very special. I see a sense of satisfaction in a hard day's work. When they laugh and smile with each other and greet all the children after 15 hours of picking "pepinos" in a hot summer field, I see community. They make the best of everything. They do not complain because they realize the futility of it. Many of them feel that the life of migrant farming chose them, but does not have to choose their children. If you attend a Migrant Head Start parent meeting, you will soon realize that these families hope that their children's future will be different.

Ms. Arellano is right. The migrant Latino community values education. All of them would be proud if their children leveraged an education into a non-farming job. The challenge for providers of the many educational, health, and social services to migrant farmworker families is to give these children a fighting chance to break out of the migrant stream. Each child needs only the necessities – a safe and clean living environment, an adequate and balanced diet, a bilingual education with a coordinated curriculum, access to health care, and basic injury prevention – to grow up and become a productive member of mainstream American society.

Acknowledgments

Twenty-years from now, this month of medical school will stand out for me. Not only will I remember the incredible sights and smells while on my motorcycle along the way to Adrian and the experience of interacting with migrant farmworkers, I will never forget the commitment demonstrated by staff and volunteers of the many organizations that support the migrant farmworker community in Lenawee County. Thus, in addition to thanking Dr. Lucila Nerenberg for organizing this rotation and the migrant families for allowing me the privilege to attempt to document a segment of their lives, I must thank the members of the numerous organizations with whom I have had the opportunity to work. In particular, I would like to thank Chris Rojo and her staff at Migrant Head Start, Berta Lopez, Lucila Nerenberg, and Melanie Lozer of Vidas Sanas, Elda Rivero and staff/volunteers at Community Action Agency, Dr. Bachmeyer of Tecumseh Family Practice, Gloria Corbett and her husband of Children Resource Network, Sarah Skinner and Eric of Migrant Health Promotions, Dr. Cox and Dr. Yee at the migrant dental clinic, and Awilda Dominguez of MSU extension.



I would also like to thank my father-in-law, Max Gruzen, who taught me that photography is not about getting the picture, but rather it's about getting the story and my wife, Tara, for sparking such a strong interest in me in migrant farmworker life. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this entire work to my newborn son Ari Dev Rangarajan born on August 24th, 2003 – two days after the completion of this rotation. I pray that he will have all the opportunities to succeed in life as I did and one day realize how fortunate we are relative to some of our neighbors nearby.

Suresh Rangarajan
August 2003





