

Migrant Farmworkers: Pursuing Security in an Unstable Labor Market



Based on Data from the
National Agricultural Workers
Survey (NAWS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S. agricultural producers depend on migrant farmworkers to meet the industry's highly seasonal labor demand. Migrants, most of whom migrate from other countries, comprise 42% of the farm labor force and are critical for harvesting and other short-term tasks. Without migrant farmworkers, many agricultural employers, particularly those in the fresh fruit, nut and vegetable industries, would not find enough workers to produce their crops.

Faced with agriculture's dependence on short-term jobs and the marginal compensation and few benefits such jobs offer, workers employ several strategies to make ends meet. For most workers in short-term farm jobs, migration is a key component of this strategy. Follow-the-crop migration allows workers to string together short-term jobs in different locations to extend their period of employment. Back-and-forth migration permits workers to live during the off-season in an inexpensive location, usually Mexico, or in an area that offers U.S. non-farm work.

The vast majority of migrant farmworkers were born abroad, most in Latin America. After passing through several migration stages, most migrants who remain in U.S. agriculture settle in one farm work location. This phenomenon has led to the "Latinization" of rural areas with labor-intensive agriculture. Another large group of migrants find relative stability by continuing to migrate between one location in Mexico and one farm area in the United States. In addition, large numbers of migrants leave U.S. farm work for other work in their home country or for U.S.-based, non-farm jobs. This continual outflow results in an unstable labor market that requires constant replenishment with new workers from abroad.

The continual outflow of workers is a consequence of the difficulties of making a living from U.S. farm work. Most migrant farmworkers live a marginal existence, even after they stop migrating and settle in one location. The majority of migrants and former migrants live in poverty, endure poor working conditions, and receive no government assistance. Thus, only those migrants with few alternatives stay in farm work. This leads to a maturing labor force composed mostly of workers with low levels of education and lacking English skills, whose improvements in working standards are continually undermined by new workers willing to work for less.

The poor living and working conditions of migrant and formerly migrant farmworkers are the result of farm labor practices that shift production costs to workers. In particular, the farm labor system relies heavily on temporary jobs, often uses the highly competitive subcontracting market for labor management, and frequently recruits workers in a way that results in a chronic oversupply of labor. Each of these practices reduces employer costs at the expense of worker earnings. As a result, migrant workers, their families and communities, rather than producers, tax-payers and consumers, bear the high costs of agriculture's endemic labor market instability.

The high outflow of farmworkers to non-farm work in the United States and the constant replenishment from abroad means that the agricultural labor market serves as an entry point for low-wage, low-skilled immigrants for the entire U.S. economy. To slow this influx of new entrants and stabilize the farm labor market requires diverting the costs of instability from the migrants back to the employers, taxpayers, and consumers who benefit from their labor.