Migrant Farm Workers in Southern New Mexico
The purpose of this study was to document the situation of migrant farm workers in southern New Mexico and to estimate the likelihood of future labor shortages. These findings were based on a survey of 109 onion harvest workers conducted during the summer of 1993. Two subgroups of people make up the migrant stream in southern New Mexico. Families have been migrating from southern Texas for the onion harvest for a long time and have been augmented in recent years by single males migrating from Mexico.

The findings support the following conclusions:

- There is no indication of a farm labor shortage in southern New Mexico.
- A substantial social support network helps to facilitate migration into the area.
- Migrant farm workers are first generation immigrants who tend to move gradually into urban employment. About 75% of these workers indicated they liked farm work, but a similar percentage indicated they planned to leave.
- Annual earnings ranged from $2,000 to $13,000, with a median household income of $6,000.
- A plentiful and tractable labor supply is apparently impeding harvest mechanization.
- A continuing immigrant influx is overwhelming the government’s attempts to ameliorate farm worker’s low incomes, suboptimal housing, and poor working conditions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Migrant Farm Workers in Southern New Mexico

Clyde Eastman, Associate Professor

INTRODUCTION

The plight of migrant farm workers was brought forcefully to the nation’s attention in 1960 by Edward R. Murrow’s television exposé *Harvest of Shame*. A follow-up program 30 years later revealed little was changed in spite of legislation and other government efforts (Frontline, 1990). Those television programs followed the migrant stream from Florida into the Midwest, documenting the working and living conditions of farm workers and their families. New Mexico receives a steady, albeit relatively small, stream of migrant farm workers each summer, which also sometimes draws adverse media attention (Sun News, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to document the situation of the migrant farm workers in southern New Mexico. The study examined the origin of these migrants, whether they are likely to keep coming, and whether labor shortages can be expected. The study explored whether farm workers are habituated to agriculture, or if they want to move to other occupations. In addition, the study explored harvest work specialization and types of social services sought.

“Migrant farm worker” is defined in the *Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act* (MSPA) as “an individual who is employed in agricultural employment of a seasonal or temporary nature and who is required to be absent overnight from his permanent place of residence” (PL 97-470, Sec. 3(8)(A), 1983). Previous studies identified two groups of migrant workers in southern New Mexico: migrant families from south Texas and single males from Mexico (Eastman, 1991). Some workers in the latter category are not easily distinguished from resident workers. Nonetheless, migrant farm workers are an important segment of New Mexico’s farm labor force and their situation is different enough from resident workers to merit special attention.

For example, they have the special difficulty and extra expense of finding short-term housing in the proximity of their work sites. Those who can’t find housing often face long commutes, which lengthen their workdays up to four or five hours. Non-residents often have special difficulty in obtaining social services. Migrants far from home lack family support. Small children are often taken to the fields, because there is no one else to care for them. Lonely men often drink heavily.

“Day haul operation” is defined in MSPA as “…the assembly of workers at a pick-up point waiting to be hired and employed, transportation of such workers to agricultural employment, and the return of such workers to a drop-off point on the same day” (PL 97-470, Sec. 3(4)). Day haul operations also provide an important source of labor in southern New Mexico.

This study focused primarily on onion harvest workers, because one migrant group works almost exclusively with this commodity and the other major migrant group is also well represented. Onion harvest winds down in August just as green chile harvest gets under way. Chile harvest peaks in September (table 1). These two harvests, together with transplanting, thinning, and weeding operations, provide the opportunity for nine to ten months of employment for a small group of agricultural workers. However, the season of opportunity is shorter for the majority of New Mexico migrants particularly if they specialize in only one crop.

Primary data for this study were collected by a questionnaire survey of farm workers in Doña Ana and Luna counties during the 1992 and 1993 harvest seasons. Since there is a high turnover among labor contractors and an even higher movement of workers among harvest crews, the most expeditious way to contact migrant farm workers is to contact onion packing sheds or chile processing plants and ask where the harvest crews are working that day.

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1 Department of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business
Table 1. Total estimated seasonal workforce needed by month, 1990.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Chile</th>
<th>Onions processing</th>
<th>Grand total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,769</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>1,010</td>
<td>1,453</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>9,394</td>
<td>1,343</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>15,723</td>
<td>1,343</td>
<td>1,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>13,295</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>9,708</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>4,397</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data compiled by New Mexico Chile Commission.

It was then a matter of going to these fields and obtaining the farm labor contractor’s (FLC) permission to interview workers. No labor contractors or foremen refused access to their workers. There are several advantages to interviewing workers in the field, the main one being that it is possible to interview a number of workers quickly. It is also possible to observe working conditions and worker morale. However, the major drawback of this methodology is that workers are reluctant to criticize FLCs or working conditions in such settings.

SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of human migration range from those emphasizing disparities in economic opportunity to those emphasizing social structural variables. Few observers seriously argue that disparity in economic opportunities is not a major determinant. However, economic variables alone do not satisfactorily explain why very different rates of migration occur from similar communities or why the rate of migration fluctuates from one time period to another (Massey, 1987). One of the oldest theories of migration recognized the “dominance of the economic motive” but also posited the importance of distance, gender, technology, and rural-urban residence. This theory also posited that “each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current” and that migration occurs in identifiable stages. A more recent and extensive review of migration literature appeared in Massey (1987). While also acknowledging the importance of economic incentives, Massey focuses on U.S.-Mexican migration as a social process. He found that the most powerful predictors of whether a household head migrates were land and business ownership in Mexico.

Once begun, migration networks tend to evolve and mature, which make U.S. employment less risky and problematic for those with relatives or neighbors in the U.S. Tienda (1989) picked up the same theme in her essay about the social effects of Mexico on U.S. migration. Briendy (1986) employed a socio-historical approach and work histories of a sample of south Texas migrants. She found that households tended to enter the migrant stream either as newly formed units or later in the family cycle when the children’s labor could be used. Job insecurity (at home) of the primary income earner also influenced the decision to enter the migrant stream.

Mexican workers have been actively recruited into the United States at various points in our history, especially during the Bracero Program of 1942 to 1964 (Massey, 1987). Stoddard (1976) argued that American policy on Mexican immigration has vacillated ever since the national boundary was established.

According to our own labor needs, a cyclical pattern of facile entry followed by involuntary deportation has been noted and documented... This inconsistency of immigration policy in defacto terms becomes one of the most elusive as well as crucial variables in an objective examination of immigration trends... (ibid., pp. 158–159).

Stoddard (1986) has described informal networks which span the border and operate to institutionalize if not exactly legalize immigrant workers. Workers obtain U.S. documents, such as a driver’s license, social security card, and/or union membership, which provide a ‘legitimate’ appearance or facade. He argues that “...a bifurcated legal-illegal category distorts the realities of the immigration process and its complexities” (ibid., p. 11). Studying the impacts of migration, Linder (1992) argues that excess labor supply has overwhelmed the U.S. government’s attempts to improve working conditions with legislation. Poor immigrant workers are quite willing to cut corners and not demand better conditions or wages in order to obtain work.

Fuller (1991) argues that “... temporary farm work is as much a conjuncture of unsolved social and economic problems as it is an employment category” (p. 93). This argument seems to be an accurate description of New Mexico’s migrant situation. These workers seek better opportunities than those available in their home villages in Mexico’s interior. Fuller also argues:

When the workers are found to be poor or destitute, farm wages and employment conditions are often blamed. Actually, the cause and effect relationship, at least at the time of initial entry into farm work, may be more the other way. The people have not become poor from working in agriculture; they have become agricultural workers because they were already poor. Thus, in the sense of providing an opportunity for those not accepted elsewhere, temporary farm work may be regarded as ameliorating poverty rather than causing it. Moreover, it is to be noted in this connection that many individuals and groups have made their way through temporary farm employment and into more acceptable situations, in agriculture and elsewhere. Hence, migratory labor has fortunately not been entirely a dead end. (ibid. p. 93).

Texas is home base for the largest number of migrant farm workers in the nation (Thomas, 1987). It supplies farm workers to at least 25 other states including New Mexico. Whereas the literature on migratory labor elsewhere is substantial, relatively little has been done on Texas-based migrants. Most of the studies on Texas farm workers have been done by state agencies and exist only in difficult-to-obtain, in-house reports or manuscripts. The Thomas study (1987) and Briody’s study (1986), cited above, are notable exceptions.

A companion study of FLCs in this same area of southern New Mexico documented the operations of farm labor contractors (Eastman, 1994). There is a very high turnover among FLCs and workers alike—a labor market instability that serves no one well. Workers are uncertain whether they will have employment from one day to the next, while FLCs complain about workers who shop for better fields each morning. A 1991 survey of wage rates in the southern New Mexico chile industry found that harvest workers earned from $1.93/hr to $16.80/hr with most workers earning $6 to $7/hr (NMASS, 1991).

A recent national study of impacts of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) found that there have been no general shortages of farm labor resulting from IRCA (Martin, 1995). IRCA “legalized many more workers than expected, providing employers with access to a larger, legal work force” (ibid. p. 464). That also is the case of the El Paso/southern New Mexico sector of the border (Eastman, 1994). Migrants come into the area to take advantage of the seasonal employment. Families typically stay only two or three months to harvest onions, while single males typically stay six to eight months and work with several crops. These migrants supplement a substantial unskilled work force of year-round residents.

FINDINGS

A sample of 109 migrant workers provided data for this study. Fifty-two indicated they reside in the United States year-round, while 57 reside part of the year in Mexico. Two were born in the United States, 17 were naturalized citizens, and 90 were resident aliens. Nearly all had documents. A few undocumented workers mingle into harvest crews, but constant Border Patrol surveillance limits that opportunity in southern New Mexico. Twelve had no formal education and only nine had more than six years. One was a high school graduate. Only two spoke English well, 39 spoke some English, while 67 spoke essentially no English. These characteristics are consistent with samples of resident farm workers in southern New Mexico (Eastman, 1991). Very few farm workers are born in the U.S. People who grow up in the United States speak English well and have enough education to obtain more stable urban employment.

Fifty-one of the 109 workers interviewed came as individuals and the rest came in family units. Twenty-five came in households of five or six members. Typically, all or all but one of the family members worked in the fields. It was common for children ages 13 and 14 to work along with their parents. Nine households in this sample reported having children aged 8 to 12 years that work. One of farm work’s major attractions is that it provides summer employment for all the adults and near-adults in the family.

Only 11 people (10% of the sample) were more than 45 years old. One-third of the sample had been coming to New Mexico less than three years, while one-third reported coming more than four years. One individual reported coming 49 years! This turnover is due to the hot, hard nature of onion harvest and the seasonality of the work. Many workers leave agriculture, when they can find more stable and easier work. Fifty-one respondents found work through their labor contractor, 39 relied on family and friends to help them find jobs, and 19 found work on their own. Forty-nine respondents specialized in onions; 69 others worked more than one commodity. One reason why families from south Texas tend to specialize in onion harvest in New Mexico is that the season coincides with their children’s school vacation. They move to New Mexico in late May or early June as school lets out and leave by mid-August just in time for the start of a new school year.

Families rent apartments, houses, or mobile homes for a median rent of $260 per month. In about one-third of the cases, the labor contractor helped them find a place and in several cases advanced them rent money. Single men typically rented beds at $2 to $2.50 per night, but they also made a variety of other arrangements. No family expressed any dissatisfaction with their housing quality. However, there was a common lament about the cost of housing, especially on top of the

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house payments they were making on their permanent residences. In this sample, no growers provided family housing. Federal regulations make farm worker housing expensive to provide and very difficult to maintain. Consequently, few New Mexico producers provide housing even to single workers.

Estimates of total annual household incomes ranged from $2,000 to $13,000, with a median of $6,000. While almost every household would qualify, only 38 respondents (34.9% of the sample) reported applying for assistance of any kind and only 33 respondents reported receiving Food Stamps. Some migrants reported being hassled when applying for Food Stamps. They are sometimes told this assistance is being reserved for local residents.

When asked whether they had ever talked to a farm worker union representative, 27 respondents indicated they had with only six indicating any interest in joining. When asked whether they liked farm work, 76 said “yes,” and 33 said “no.” However, 77 indicated they planned to leave farm work, while 32 indicated they had no plans to leave. When asked what kind of work they would like to enter, 17 mentioned construction work, seven mentioned plumbing, seven mentioned tractor driving, six mentioned truck driving, and five mentioned mechanics. A wide variety of other occupations also were mentioned by one or two respondents. The workers who had no plans to leave are, at least outwardly, resigned to their situation. Their answers also may underestimate their interest in leaving, because of where the interviews occurred. The fact that only one-third of the sample reported coming more than four years indicates a substantial turnover in this labor force.

Agricultural producers were aware of their workers’ situation and became quite concerned about their future labor supply as immigration reform was debated in the U.S. Congress in the early 1980s. They feared losing the large pool of seasonal labor, which was in substantial part undocumented before IRCA. They expected legalized workers, in particular, would leave agriculture for urban employment. The foregoing finding supports that expectation. However, the movement has not been very rapid, probably for two reasons. First, these workers have very limited capability in English and few skills to offer urban employers. Secondly, the economy has not been robust enough to provide many job opportunities for unskilled workers. Moreover, in spite of IRCA, the labor pool is constantly being replenished by new immigrants.

During harvest season, hundreds of workers cross the Santa Fe Street Bridge from Cd. Juárez to El Paso, starting about 3 a.m. to board buses for the long ride to harvest fields as far away as Deming and Hatch. The corner of El Paso Street and Sixth Street is the first intersection after the U.S. Customs complex at the end of the Santa Fe Bridge. Several score of men sleep on the sidewalks of these two streets; most awaken and join the bridge crossers as the labor market comes to life after 3 a.m. Contractors and crew leaders mingle among clusters of workers telling them what work is available and the rate of pay that day. Workers shop, and FLCs cajole. One or two buses pull up and are quickly loaded with workers who are obviously waiting for those particular buses. Most, however, fill more slowly and several make numerous passes through the area trying to recruit workers. Between 4 and 4:30 a.m., most buses depart. At 5 a.m., a few employers are still trying to fill out their work crews. Groups of men with plastic lunch bags in hand are still milling about on both streets as buses warm their engines to leave. The market sometimes closes with both unemployed workers and understaffed crews.

These workers meet the definition of day haul workers, i.e., because they assemble at a pick-up point and return to that point on the same day. Many also meet the definition of migrant farm workers because they are employed seasonally and are absent overnight from their permanent residence. While nearly all these workers have some kind of residence or place to sleep in Cd. Juárez, many live far enough from the international bridge to make commuting there every night infeasible. They get on a bus between 3:30 and 4:30 a.m., ride to a field as far as three hours away, work six or seven hours (typically), and then ride back to El Paso arriving at 6 or 7 p.m. Many sleep on the sidewalk rather than make a long commute to a distant residence in Cd. Juárez. In the face of this regimen, many workers work a few days and then take several days off.

CONCLUSIONS

There were no indications in these data of any impending farm labor shortage in southern New Mexico. Studies around the country indicate that a very substantial labor pool was legalized by IRCA and that limited alternative employment opportunities are likely to provide an adequate farm labor supply into the foreseeable future (Martin, 1995). Nothing was discovered to suggest that the El Paso/Las Cruces labor market will vary from national trends.

New Mexico’s migrant farm workers are first generation immigrants. They are generally not the sons and daughters of farm workers. The three-fourths of this sample who like farm work are resigned to their immediate situation, but a similar proportion also expect to move on. As Fuller (1991) observed in California, many of the first generation and essentially all of the subsequent generations in southern New Mexico are able to move on to more stable urban employment. The same point was clear in New Harvest, Old Shame (1990). In Florida, immigrant waves—each wave usually from a
new country—replace one another with regularity. In New Mexico, successive waves come from one country—Mexico.

The recent NMASS study of wage rates in New Mexico agriculture found that workers earn $6 to $7 or more per hour in harvesting chile. On an hourly basis, earnings are well above the minimum wage of $4.25. However, these seasonal farm workers do not often work eight hours per day, nor five days every week. There are many weeks when there is no work at all. The annual earnings reported by this sample range from $2,000 to $13,000, with a median household income of about $6,000. This income level would qualify almost every household for Food Stamps, if they are otherwise eligible. Only about one-third of the sample reported applying for them.

A plentiful, tractable, and relatively cheap labor supply impedes harvest mechanization of both onions and chile. Substantial mechanization will probably be required to support better incomes, more stable employment, and better working conditions. However, greater labor efficiency will inevitably result in substantially fewer jobs than are currently available.

These workers were certainly motivated by economic need, but many also have a substantial social network or support system. Many knew and contacted the FLC before they came. Some received assistance in finding housing from FLCs or family members. While it is relatively easy to get around southern New Mexico knowing only Spanish, migrant workers do encounter some hostility.

These farm workers were poor before they became migrants. Conditions were not good where they came from. Consequently, they are more willing than domestic workers to accept difficult work, lower wages, and less than optimal working conditions. This helps explain why so much federal legislation has not yielded more results. As long as immigrants continue to pour in, the United States is in effect assuming the unresolved social and economic problems of its southern neighbors. U.S. employers have little incentive to raise wages or improve working conditions and benefits. Forces in the labor market are overwhelming the government’s efforts to ameliorate a socially undesirable situation (e.g. MSPA, 1983). Linder (1992, pp. 65–93) makes the same point very forcefully.

REFERENCES


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