

### **Migrant Farmworkers: Pursuing Security in an Unstable Labor Market**

*Susan Gabbard, Richard Mines, and Beatrice Boccalandro  
Office of Program Economics, Office of the Assistant Secretary  
for Policy, U.S. Department of Labor, Research Report No. 5,  
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*Migrant Farmworkers: Pursuing Security in an Unstable Labor Market* is the latest research report based on the on-going National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. Now in its sixth year, the NAWS is the largest—and certainly the most representative—national survey of farm workers ever undertaken in the United States. Each year since its inception in 1988, the NAWS has interviewed approximately 2,500 randomly selected agricultural employees. The latest report analyzes the data gathered from subjects interviewed between January 1989 and June 1991.

According to the NAWS, about 42 percent of those employed in seasonal agricultural services are “migrant” workers; that is, they travel at least 75 miles for work. Nationwide, this percentage translates to roughly 670,000 migrant farm workers, though the total population migrating is much larger, since many family members accompany these laborers as they travel from crop to crop.

In some crop categories and in certain geographic regions, migrant workers make up the bulk of the labor force. For example, the survey found the majority of vegetable, fruit, and nut farm workers migrate, as do the majority of seasonal farm employees in the Northeast, Southeast, and Northwest.

In California, slightly fewer than half (47 percent) of all agricultural workers migrate to secure seasonal jobs. The finding is a surprising one, since a 1983 survey found that, at the time, only 39 percent of the agricultural labor force was migrating to piece together year-round employment. This data provides clear evidence that migrancy

among California farm workers increased during the 1980s.

The NAWS also found that the vast majority of migrant farm workers travel from their hometowns to a particular work site, and then return when the job is done. In fact, these “shuttle” migrants outnumber circular migrants—those who follow the crops from place to place on a seasonal route—by almost three to one. Four out of five shuttle migrants travel between a foreign country (mostly Mexico) and the United States; only a relative few migrate from a permanent U.S. home to another location for work.

The report presents a wealth of new data on the composition of the nation’s hired farm labor force. While approximately two-thirds of the current seasonal agricultural labor force is foreign-born, the figure is 88 percent for those now entering this type of work. As the foreign-born proportion grows, immigrant laborers will increasingly replace and displace U.S.-born workers. This trend coincides with the current upsurge in anti-immigrant sentiment, and the surrounding debate on the role of immigrants in our society.

In one of the most valuable sections of the report, the authors present some possible implications of their findings. Roughly summarized, they find that though migrant farm workers seek to attain a lifestyle of stable long-term agricultural employment, they rarely succeed. In the authors’ opinion, the structure of farm labor demand itself undermines the workers’ efforts to achieve even limited success because it emphasizes temporary jobs, encourages sub-contracting for labor management, and recruits workers in a manner that results in a chronic oversupply of labor.

For anyone interested in migrant farm workers, this new report is required reading.

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## RESOURCES

*By Don Villarejo*

### **GRADUATION, cont. from page 1**

In addition to attending weekly training sessions, the promotores were actively involved in this year’s Festival de la Salud by promoting it within their communities, providing referrals and conducting surveys at the event, and drafting a letter of recommendation to the advisory committee with suggestions for improving next year’s festival. By listening to and communicating health care problems, the promotores function as the

ears and voices of their communities.

At group meetings, the promotores pool information on community resources and brainstorm to resolve problems identified by individual members. The next phase of the training will encompass building organizational and leadership skills, analyzing community dynamics, and targeting specific health issues such as individuals’ medical rights, women’s health, and domestic violence.

In the future, the promotores will focus on taking direct action in their communities to resolve the health obstacles farm workers so frequently face. Possible directions include developing child care networks, and improving clinic confidentiality and hours of operation.

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—Lynn Kusnierz  
*(Jill Shannon contributed to this story.)*