

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

JUNE 6, 2019 BY COPDEI

Migrant Farm Workers: Our Nation's Invisible Population



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Between 1 and 3 million migrant farm workers leave their homes every year to plant, cultivate, harvest, and pack fruits, vegetables and nuts in the U.S. Although invisible to most people, the presence of migrant farm workers in many rural communities throughout the nation is undeniable, since hand labor is still necessary for the production of the blemish-free fruits and vegetables that consumers demand

Who are Migrant Farm workers?

Migrant farm workers are predominantly Mexican-born sons, husbands, and fathers who leave what is familiar and comfortable with the hopes and dreams of making enough money to support their families back home; feed themselves; purchase land and a home; and – like many immigrants who came before them – ultimately return to their homeland. While others come from countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other states in the United States their aspirations remain the same. They are young, averaging about 31 years of age. Some arrive as single men, while others leave their families behind while they seek work and others travel and work with their families. For those who travel without their families, once they realize that they will need to maintain their U.S. earning capacity, they would much rather have their families settle with them in the U.S. More than half of all farm workers – 52 of every 100 – are unauthorized workers with no legal status in the United States.

Many farm workers arrive with solid agricultural skills firmly grounded in practical experience and working knowledge of agriculture. This expertise is complemented by a strong work ethic, deeply rooted in their commitment to provide for their families or make it on their own. This is reflected in their willingness to make considerable sacrifices in order to guarantee a more prosperous future for their extended families, their children and/or their siblings. These sacrifices range from separation from their countries of origins, families, and what is familiar to learning to navigate a foreign land where little is known about them and whose customs, language, foods, and ways of life are different from what they know. In many instances this new place brings about feelings of alienation and isolation. No longer is La Plaza – a central gathering place in town for community interaction and fellowship in their countries of origin – available to them. Instead loneliness creeps in for many as they are limited to the boundaries of the farm due in part to limited access to transportation and also to their lack of legal status which reduce their access to neighborhood businesses, services and community activities in general. Fear of being picked up by Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) due to their undocumented status causes many farm workers to go into hiding in the communities that they work and live in and further contributes to the isolation that farm workers routinely experience. So in many ways, Migrant farm workers work in settings that do not mirror those of the majority of the nation's working populace.

In spite of these challenges, for many the hopes and dreams of making more money in the U.S than in their countries of origin is enough to drive them to make this enormous sacrifice. Many experience great pride in the contribution that they make to society through their labor for they realize their work feeds the world. For these farm workers there is also a sense of accomplishment in their ability to support their families in purchasing homes or going to school in their home country. For others, their hopes and dreams do not always materialize to the degree envisioned and promised with 61 percent of U.S. farm workers' income falling below the poverty level. A median income of less than \$7500 a year leave many feeling trapped with no other viable options outside of formwork and with the shame and indignity of returning to their homelands with less than what they came.

Why Do They Come

A host of push-pull factors contribute to the overwhelmingly immigrant farm worker labor pool. Some push factors in farm workers' countries of origin are economic instability, political unrest, population growth, land reform shortcomings in rural areas, and scarce employment opportunities. Push factors that impact immigration patterns vary from country to country and from individual to individual. This is to say that the circumstances that cause an individual to emigrate from Colombia, South America may be different from those that cause an indigenous person from the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca, or Guanajuato in Mexico to come to the United States. A Colombian immigrant fleeing political persecution and civil unrest seeks asylum as a political refugee, while the indigenous Mexican treks across the desert into the US in search of work and income to support their family back home or just to be able to eat.

Pull factors within the United States include the ongoing desire for a low cost labor force to fill jobs no longer attractive to US citizens due to low pay, limited or no benefits and/or substandard work conditions. Other more direct pull factors have included federally enacted and administered farm labor programs such as the Bracero contract labor program that recruited workers from Mexico to harvest crops in the Southwestern United States from 1942 – 1964. Today, larger numbers of Mexican farm workers have moved into other regions of the country, including the Northeast, through a similar farm labor contract program known as the H-2A agricultural guest worker program enacted by Congress in 1952 and more widely used when the Bracero program ended in 1964.

Immigration Status

One of the key dynamics that detrimentally impacts the lives of migrant farm workers is their lack of legal status within the U.S. Unlike other immigrant groups that came before them these workers have not been granted legal status to live in the U.S. The undocumented status of an overwhelming

number of farm workers has given way to increasing injustice and abuse against them. While not always making headlines, reports of injustice and abuse against farm workers abound including those of opportunistic crew leaders, substandard housing, violence against farm workers by community members of the dominant culture, exclusion from labor laws, inadequate housing, pesticide violations, and the inferior education of children of farm workers. Out of fear of displacement and deportation, farm workers often remain unable to protest inadequate conditions or report employer's violation of labor, health or safety laws to state authorities. Furthermore, despite their overwhelming representation and contribution to the agricultural community, farm workers lack political leverage, therefore remaining a disenfranchised population. This lack of legal status sets the stage for farm workers' lack of voice, agency and advocacy – in essence it creates their invisibility.

The Changing Face of Immigrants

As we continue to grow as a nation of immigrants, we need to make an extraordinary effort to understand farm workers in their full context. The legacy and lingering effects of living in a divided society have left us with incomplete, inaccurate and distorted information as to the history, triumphs and contributions of different groups within our society. As a nation built on the sacrifices of many different immigrant groups we must bear in mind that while the faces of immigrants have changed, their pioneering spirit, courage, determination, ability to thrive, and dreams of securing a better future for their children remain the same.

Sources

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