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## Social Backgrounds and Occupational Commitment of Male Wageworkers in Agriculture

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MORE THAN IN any other industry, wage and salary work in agriculture is characterized by a high degree of seasonality and comparatively short job tenure. By contrast, there is little seasonal fluctuation in the number of self-employed in agriculture (apart from that associated with the steady decline in farm numbers). Most of the self-employed are farm operators, and their job tenure exceeds that of the nonagricultural self-employed, not to mention that of hired workers in nonagricultural industries (3, 4).<sup>2</sup> The impermanence of attachments to agricultural jobs is illustrated by the fact that 2.4 million men did farmwork for cash wages at some time during 1961, but only 1.5 million of them did 25 or more days of such work during the year (1). Monthly labor force surveys in 1961 showed that as many as 1.8 million men were employed as agricultural wage and salary workers in August and as few as 1.1 million in December, the average number for the 12 months of 1961 being 1.5 million. In February 1962, 2.0 million men reported that their longest job during 1961 was wage and salary work in agriculture (4, 6).

<sup>1</sup> The analysis reported in this paper was begun in connection with Mr. Cowhig's former duties with the Economic Research Service, and the authors are indebted to that agency for permission to make use of the statistical tabulations it had procured from the Bureau of the Census. The collection and initial processing of the data by the Bureau of the Census was supported by Grant No. G-16233 from the National Science Foundation to the University of Chicago for a project directed by Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan. The paper was completed in connection with Contract No. OE 5-85-072 of the U.S. Office of Education with the University of Michigan for Mr. Duncan's project on "Socioeconomic Background and Occupational Achievement."

<sup>2</sup> Underscored numbers in parentheses refer to items in the Literature Cited, page 135.

This study concerns the approximately 1.2 million men, 20 to 64 years of age in March 1962, whose longest job in 1961 was agricultural wage and salary work. For brevity, we shall refer to agricultural wage and salary workers as "farm wageworkers." In point of fact, as indicated by decennial census data, the vast majority of wage and salary workers in agriculture are classified occupationally as farm laborers and foremen.

Although restricting the universe to men aged 20 to 64 means that we are dealing with a minority of the persons in such employment, it is an especially significant minority. Men 20 to 64 years old comprised about 41 percent of all farm wageworkers in 1961, but they accounted for about 69 percent of all man-days of farm wagework in that year. The same subgroup accounted for perhaps three-quarters of the household heads hired as farmworkers at some time during the year (2). In eliminating the very young, the very old, and those whose longest jobs were in another category, we are dealing with persons whose connection with this type of employment is more than nominal. At the same time--and this is really the crucial point in the study--the men in this group are strikingly differentiated by their degree of commitment to farm wagework as well as by factors leading to such employment.

The reason for making a detailed analysis of backgrounds leading to farm wagework is hardly obscure in a period when the problem of low income is in the forefront of public discussion. In 1961, the median earnings of male wage and salary workers in agriculture (so classified by longest job) amounted to \$785, or 17 percent of the median of \$4,605 for all men who worked in that year. Limiting the comparison to men who

worked full time for the entire year, we find a median of \$2,357 for agricultural wage and salary workers as against \$5,595 for all men (7). Neither comparison pertains precisely to the population studied here, since the income data include men under the age of 20 and those 65 and over, as well as those 20 to 64, while the category of year-round, full-time workers undoubtedly includes only a fraction of those with longest jobs as farm wageworkers. It is evident, nonetheless, that farm wageworkers are at a marked disadvantage economically by comparison with any other major occupation or industry category of workers. Although farm wageworkers are by no means a major segment of the overall poverty problem, it is becoming clear that any sophisticated understanding of that problem requires meticulous study of each of its components. If many farm wageworkers are indeed to be classified as "in poverty," it is well to examine where the men in this line of work came from and the social characteristics that may be related to their propensity to engage in it.

### Source of Data

The statistics in this study are derived from the February and March 1962 Current Population Survey (CPS) of the Bureau of the Census and a questionnaire supplement thereto, "Occupational Changes in a Generation" (OCG), administered in March to men 20 to 64 years old (8). About five-sixths of the eligible respondents completed the questionnaire. The classification of men by longest job in 1961 was made on the basis of the February CPS sample, approximately three-fourths of whom were also interviewed in March. The data, therefore, pertain to about three-fourths of the OCG respondents, who were themselves a subgroup of the sample eligible in March.

Sampling errors are somewhat higher in this study than for most officially reported occupation data derived from CPS and published in the monthly and special reports on the labor force issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Sample inflation factors for OCG tabulations make allowance for nonresponse to the OCG questionnaire. In this paper a very

rough allowance for the loss due to nonoverlap of the February and March panels has been made by multiplying tabulated population estimates by 4/3, although this procedure is not strictly justified by the sample design. In this way we reached an estimate of 1.24 million men 20 to 64 years old with longest jobs as agricultural wage and salary worker in 1961 (based on the tabulated estimate of 930,000). Since the total civilian noninstitutional population of such men was estimated at about 45 million, we obtained a "recruitment rate" of  $1.24/45 = 2.8$  percent of men with this work experience. Recruitment rate in this paper means farm wageworkers as a percentage of all men in the OCG sample.

### Differential Recruitment and Commitment

Two items of background information are virtually unique to the OCG study: Occupation of the head of the respondent's family (usually his father) at the time the respondent was "about 16 years old," and the respondent's own "first full-time job after you left school," not counting part-time jobs, jobs held during school vacations, or military service.

Table 1 describes recruitment to farm wage-work in terms of these two measures of occupational origins. First, in the columns headed "percentage distribution," we have the proportions of all farm wageworkers who have the specified origins. A bare majority of these workers had fathers who were engaged in farm occupations, assuming, for convenience (the number involved is small), that "not reported" implies a nonfarm occupation for the father. Only one in nine farm wageworkers, moreover, had a father who was a farm laborer at the time the respondent was age 16. Hence, a large majority of farm wageworkers, even though we cannot specify the size of that majority with precision, represent recruitment via downward intergenerational occupational mobility: That is, the great majority of men 20 to 64 years old employed as farm wageworkers in 1961 had fathers who were employed in higher status occupations. This conclusion rests on the assumption, borne out by census data on income, that farm operators



Table 1.--Percentage distribution and recruitment rates of men 20 to 64 years old in the civilian noninstitutional population reporting wage or salary work in agriculture as longest job in 1961, by father's occupation and farmworker's first job, March 1962

Occupational classification	Percentage distribution by--		Recruitment rate <sup>1</sup>	
	Father's occupation	First job	Father's occupation	First job
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>
All occupations.....	100.0	100.0	2.8	2.8
White collar.....	8.3	13.8	1.0	1.5
Manual and service.....	31.9	37.3	2.1	2.0
Farmers and farm managers....	39.4	5.9	4.5	5.5
Farm laborers and foremen....	11.2	36.4	12.0	7.5
Not reported.....	9.2	6.6	3.1	3.1

<sup>1</sup> Farm wageworkers as a percentage of all men in OCG sample with the designated occupational background.

and persons in most nonfarm occupations (even those in the manual category) enjoy higher socioeconomic status than farm wageworkers. Downward mobility, rather than the "inheritance of poverty" which figures so prominently in current public discussion, is the prevailing route to farm wage-work.

If we consider first job as the benchmark for recruitment, we again find a heavy influx into farm wage-work from nonfarm career beginnings--51 to 58 percent, depending on how the "not reported" are distributed. Of those who did enter the labor force in the farm sector, however, 36.4 percent began as farm laborers.

Using a particularly stringent definition of self-recruitment (recruitment from a background of farm wage-work), but one not inconsistent with the "inheritance of poverty" thesis, we computed that only 8.1 percent, or 1 in 12, of the men employed as farm wageworkers both had fathers who were farm laborers and took their own first jobs as farm laborers (data not shown in tables).

This picture of the makeup of farm wageworkers by occupational origins is complemented by relating the numbers in farm wage-work to the total number included in the survey. Of all men covered in the OCG survey, 2.8 percent held their longest job in 1961 as farm wageworkers. We refer to a figure

of this type as the "rate" of recruitment. In the last pair of columns in table 1 we see wide variation in the rate by categories of origin. The lowest rates are found for white-collar origins, and just slightly higher ones for nonfarm manual labor origins. Rates higher than the general average are observed for men with farm origins, especially those with fathers or first jobs classified as farm laborers. Yet the highest rate, 12 percent, implies that less than one in eight men whose fathers were farm laborers were recruited to longest jobs as farm wageworkers in 1961. Evidently the tendency to "inherit" this low-status occupation is slight.

Approximately 1.3 percent of all men in the OCG sample had both fathers and first jobs in the farm laborer category (data not shown in tables). Although this combination of origins might appear to be especially conducive to farm wage employment in 1961, the rate for this subcategory was only 16.6. Thus, just one in six men with the occupational background that would seem most likely to lead to this kind of work actually accepted such employment, while the remaining five-sixths underwent some degree of upward mobility.

Both the analysis of the background composition of farm wageworkers and the comparison of rates of recruitment to this occupation indicate that there is much mobility into and

out of this category. This conclusion is contrary to what one might have supposed on the basis of the "inheritance" thesis. At the same time, some backgrounds are much more conducive to farm wage employment than others and to commitment to this type of work.

Our tabulations permit a limited analysis not only of longest job in 1961, but also of the occupational classification as of March 1962, based either on the job held at that time or the last previous job of men then unemployed. Nearly all (97 percent) of the men reporting farm wagework as their longest job in 1961 were still in the experienced civilian labor force in March 1962. Only three in seven (43.3 percent) of those reporting an occupation in March 1962 were farm laborers and foremen; the remainder had moved from farm wagework to some other pursuit at this period near the seasonal low of farm employment.

The propensity to move out of farmwork, however, differed sharply by background. Among the slightly more than one-half of farm wageworkers in 1961 whose fathers were in farm occupations (farmers or farm laborers), 62.3 percent continued as farm laborers in March 1962, while only 23.3 percent of those with nonfarm origins continued in this line of work. Similarly, when the 1961 farm wage-

workers are classified by first job, we find that 67.8 percent with first jobs on farms were farm laborers in March 1962, as contrasted with 25.7 percent of those with nonfarm first jobs (including first job not reported). Farm employment, therefore, markedly augments the commitment to farm wagework.

Differential commitment can also be inferred from data on place of residence in March 1962 (table 2). Here and subsequently, we use the term "farm background" to distinguish the man whose father had some kind of farm occupation from the one whose father's occupation was in a nonfarm category or was not reported. An overwhelming majority (81 percent) of farm wageworkers with farm background lived in rural residences in March 1962, while only two-fifths (40.5 percent) of those with nonfarm background lived in rural areas at that time. In terms of both occupation and residence, therefore, men with nonfarm backgrounds doing farmwork in 1961 were much less committed to farm pursuits than those with farm background. It has long been known that much farmwork is done on a casual basis. The present analysis shows that the casual component of the farm work force is much more likely to be recruited from nonfarm origins than the noncasual.

Table 2.--Percentage distribution of men 20 to 64 years old reporting longest job in 1961 as agricultural wage or salary worker, by background and by residence in March 1962

Residence	Total	Background	
		Nonfarm	Farm <sup>1</sup>
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>
All places.....	100.0	100.0	100.0
Urbanized areas.....	24.0	40.1	8.3
Other urban (under 50,000).....	14.8	19.4	10.4
Rural nonfarm.....	30.8	25.0	36.4
Rural farm.....	30.4	15.5	44.9

<sup>1</sup> Father's occupation reported as farmer, farm manager, farm laborer, or farm foreman.

## Differential Recruitment by Background

Given the fact that farm wageworkers are recruited disproportionately from men with farm origins, it is appropriate to inquire what other characteristics render men especially liable to this kind of work experience. Table 3 describes the population under study in terms of various social characteristics. Again, the data are arranged to permit analysis from two complementary points of view: The composition of the farm wageworker population (first three columns of table 3, headed "Percentage distribution"), and the rate of recruitment to this line of work, relative to the total numbers in the OCG population (last three columns, headed "Recruitment rate"). Both the composition and the recruitment rates are affected by farm background.

Age.--Although the age limits on the OCG universe serve to eliminate the teenagers whose commitment to farm wagework is likely to be especially casual, we infer from the fact that three-eighths of the workers with non-farm background are under 25 that their connection with agriculture is highly transitory. Some, but not all, of these young men appear to be college students doing farmwork during college vacations. Among men with farm background, the high rate of recruitment to farm wagework at age 20-24, followed by the precipitous drop at ages 25 and over, suggests that even this segment includes many with only temporary involvement in farmwork.

Color.--A heavy majority of farm wageworkers, regardless of background, are white. Yet the number of nonwhites is disproportionately high, as can be seen from the differential rates of recruitment. Nonwhite men with farm origins are especially likely to have been farm wageworkers in 1961, since the specific rate of recruitment for this category reaches the comparatively high figure of 12.6 per 100.

Siblings.--A majority of farm wageworkers come from families with five or more children, but the same is true of all men in this age group. Hence the rate of recruitment from large families, irrespective of farm back-

ground, is only slightly above the general average. It is curious (and possibly due only to sampling variation) that men with one to three siblings are less prone to do farm wagework than only sons. The higher rate for only sons among men with farm background may suggest some unusual attachment to farm work on their part.

Family background.--Men from broken families have a slightly greater probability of entering farmwork than those growing up with both parents. Such an effect could well be due, indirectly, to other socioeconomic factors related to family status.

Residence history.--Men living in rural areas at age 16, whether or not their fathers were in farm occupations, are more likely to be in farm wagework than those from urban areas. Since farm background, in the sense of father's occupation, is controlled in this analysis, it appears that residence has an independent effect. Despite the higher rate of recruitment of men from rural areas, fewer than three-fifths of all farm wageworkers lived in rural territory at adolescence. Recruitment to farm wagework occurs at a slightly higher rate for nonmigrants than for migrants. (Migration is defined here in terms of the respondent's report that at age 16 he lived in a different community from the one where he lived in March 1962.)

Father's education.--About half of all farm wageworkers reported that their fathers completed less than 8 years of schooling. Bearing in mind the educational standards prevailing in the previous generation, however, it is not surprising that the recruitment rate for this level of father's education, once father's occupation is held constant, is only moderately higher than the general average.

Respondent's education.--More decided differentials are observed for this immediate measure of educational background. Liability to 1961 experience as a farm wageworker was appreciably enhanced for men with non-farm background having 8 years of schooling or less and for men with farm background having less than 8 years. Especially low recruitment rates from both origin sectors are noted for men with any college training.



Table 3.--Percentage distribution and recruitment rates for men 20 to 64 years old in the civilian noninstitutional population reporting wage or salary work in agriculture as longest job in 1961, by background and social characteristics, March 1962

Characteristic	Percentage distribution			Recruitment rate <sup>1</sup>		
	All men	Nonfarm back-ground	Farm back-ground <sup>2</sup>	All men	Nonfarm back-ground	Farm back-ground <sup>2</sup>
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Total.....	100.0	100.0	100.0	2.8	1.9	5.2
Age (years):						
20 to 24.....	26.1	37.6	14.9	6.5	5.4	12.9
25 to 34.....	22.0	20.5	23.6	2.6	1.5	6.8
35 to 44.....	20.7	18.9	22.3	2.2	1.4	4.5
45 to 54.....	15.1	10.2	19.8	1.8	0.9	3.8
55 to 64.....	16.1	12.8	19.4	2.6	1.7	4.3
Color:						
White.....	71.2	78.3	64.2	2.2	1.6	3.9
Nonwhite.....	28.8	21.7	35.8	7.8	4.8	12.6
Number of siblings:						
None.....	6.4	8.5	4.4	2.7	2.0	7.9
1 to 3.....	30.3	37.2	23.6	2.0	1.5	4.5
4 or more <sup>3</sup> .....	63.3	54.3	72.0	3.4	2.2	5.4
Family background:						
Intact family.....	79.5	73.2	85.6	2.7	1.7	5.1
Broken family <sup>4</sup> .....	20.5	26.8	14.4	3.2	2.6	5.8
Residence at age 16:						
Rural.....	57.9	33.7	81.5	4.7	3.4	5.4
Other or unknown.....	42.1	66.3	18.5	1.8	1.5	4.3
Migration status:						
Nonmigrant <sup>5</sup> .....	52.1	48.7	55.4	3.3	2.0	7.5
Migrant.....	47.9	51.3	44.6	2.3	1.7	3.7
Father's education:						
Not reported.....	11.4	10.9	11.9	2.8	1.8	5.2
Less than 8.....	50.2	42.6	57.7	4.0	2.6	6.4
Elementary, 8.....	16.6	14.8	18.3	1.9	1.2	3.6
High school, 1-3.....	7.7	10.9	4.5	2.2	1.9	3.5
High school, 4.....	9.7	14.0	5.5	2.2	1.8	5.3
College, 1 or more.....	4.4	6.8	2.1	1.4	1.2	3.9
Education:						
Less than 8.....	30.4	22.7	38.0	5.6	4.0	7.2
Elementary, 8.....	22.7	20.3	25.1	4.6	3.6	5.9
High school, 1-3.....	18.0	18.5	17.4	2.6	1.8	5.2
High school, 4.....	19.2	23.5	15.1	1.9	1.4	3.5
College, 1 or more.....	9.7	15.0	4.4	1.1	1.0	2.2

<sup>1</sup> Farm wageworkers as a percentage of all men in OCG sample with the designated characteristics. <sup>2</sup> Father's occupation reported as farmer, farm manager, farm laborer, or farm foreman. <sup>3</sup> Includes a small number who did not report number of siblings. <sup>4</sup> Did not live with both parents "most of the time up to age 16"; includes family status not reported. <sup>5</sup> Lived in same community or same rural area at age 16 as in March 1962.

## Comment

The patterns of recruitment, in summary, consist of differentials revealing factors which enhance the likelihood that a man will have his primary work experience during a given year in farm wagework. These factors operate in the same general way for men with non-farm origins as for men with farm backgrounds, although the overall and specific rates are uniformly higher for the latter. Characteristics leading to higher than average rates of recruitment to farm wagework include youth, nonwhite color, rural residence in adolescence, lack of geographic mobility, and low level of educational preparation. There is no doubt that men with a combination of social disadvantages appear in disproportionate numbers in farm wagework--a line of work which is unfavorable in terms of remuneration and opportunity. At the same time, the composition of the farm wageworker category as a whole reminds us that many men find their way into this kind of employment even without such obvious predisposing factors. Not all men in this low-status pursuit are there because of gross social disadvantages, nor is there any overwhelming probability that a man will become a farm wageworker whatever his configuration of social characteristics.

It is generally agreed that the low incomes of farmworkers constitute a social problem and a significant part of the target in the war on poverty. Our evidence is, however, that many individuals are able to move out of this job category. Only a small minority of farm wageworkers apparently were "destined to poverty almost from birth--by their color or by the economic status or occupation of their parents," even if we assume that having this kind of work experience in a given year creates a strong liability to the status of being poor (5). Much of the work done for wages on our Nation's farms is done by men with no lifelong commitment to such employment or, indeed, no such commitment lasting beyond a season. The analysis of dif-

ferential recruitment and commitment to farm wagework is consistent with current efforts to distinguish the transitory and remediable elements of the poverty problem from those more resistant to change.

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