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# Migratory Farm Workers: A Problem in Migration Analysis\*

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## ABSTRACT

Migratory workers, particularly migratory farm workers, engage in a type of migration which is temporary, often repetitive, following a seasonal course during the year. This type of migration needs to be conceptually more clearly distinguished from other types of internal and international migration which more or less permanently redistribute population. A fuller exploration of the problems of defining migratory workers is needed at both the conceptual level and at the level at which the concepts are translated into workable survey definitions. The dynamic and causal factors underlying migratoriness probably differ greatly from those underlying the general phenomenon of internal migration. Thus while the volume of internal migration is positively correlated with changes in the business cycle, the volume of migratoriness appears to change in counter-cyclical fashion.

Information is presented on the number of domestic and foreign migratory farm workers in the United States in 1950 and on the composition, the marital status, and on the number of children under 18 of domestic migratory farm workers.

The field of internal migration has long been of interest to several groups in the United States, resulting in differing emphasis on types of migration and in a far from standardized terminology. Demographers have been chiefly concerned with the internal migration that results in a more or less permanent change in residence. On the other hand, groups concerned with the welfare of disadvantaged segments of the population and those concerned with the labor supply for meeting peak seasonal needs in agriculture have been chiefly interested in internal migration that is temporary and often repetitive, following a seasonal course during the year. The several groups have used the word

"migrant" to relate to the particular type of internal migration in which they are interested. The demographers have had the advantage of being able to develop a greater volume of statistics on their concept of "migrants," while the latter groups have had more general publicity focused on their concept of "migrants," frequently identified as migrant or migratory workers. The report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor is the most recent development in a long line of investigations of the problems of migratory workers, and particularly of those in agriculture.<sup>1</sup>

This paper deals only with this latter type of migrant, and within that group, only with those families or individuals who participate in farm

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<sup>1</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, 1951.*



work during at least some portion of the year. The term "migratory" is used to differentiate these seasonal or repetitive migrants as one category of the total internal migrants in the United States. Terminological difficulties, however, continue to harass the researcher because migratory workers include both domestic or internal migrants as well as international migrants. In recent years the number of Mexican nationals—commonly known as "wetbacks"—who illegally enter the United States primarily for seasonal farm work has increased tremendously. The year 1950 marked a new peak in this annual wetback invasion, with the result that in 1950 half of the estimated 1.1 million migratory farm workers in the United States were Mexican nationals who had entered the country illegally.

#### Availability of Statistics on Migratory Workers

Whether the lack of statistics on migratory workers has led to the lack of attention to this segment of migrants on the part of demographers or *vice versa*, the fact remains that no attempt was made to get a national count of migratory workers until 1945, when those employed on farms were identified in a national survey of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. There was no lack of interest in migratory workers among civic and welfare groups in the 1930 decade, when *Grapes of Wrath* and similar writings drew public attention to their plight. At that time, however, the techniques of sample surveys were

in a stage of infancy and not readily available, as at present, for illuminating public problems. Several studies of the Works Projects Administration were focused on migratory workers,<sup>2</sup> in addition to studies that gave more general treatment to depression migration.<sup>3</sup> None of these studies attempted to estimate the total number of migratory workers in the United States. John N. Webb wrote in one of them, "The total number of migratory-casual workers is unknown. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

The 1940 Population Census, some half dozen current population surveys of the Census Bureau between 1940 and 1950, and the 1950 Census identified "migrants" by asking the place of residence at a specified date in the past. In the 1940 Census, the date was five years earlier, but in the 1950 Census and in most of the sample surveys the date was one year prior to the time of the survey. In recent years, the Census Bureau has classified as "migrants" persons who were living in a different county 12 months earlier. Thus migratory workers who follow a regular seasonal pattern of movement and return to the same place at approximately the same time each year are entirely excluded from the currently used Census definition of "migrant." The remaining migra-

<sup>2</sup> John N. Webb, *The Migratory-Casual Worker*, WPA Research Monograph VII, 1937; Malcolm Brown and Orin Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers in Arizona*, WPA, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> John N. Webb, *Migrant Families*, WPA Research Monograph XVIII, Washington, 1938; C. E. Lively and Conrad Taeuber, *Rural Migration in the United States*, WPA Research Monograph XIX, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, 1937, p. xii.



tory workers are not differentiated in Census statistics from the migrants who have made a more or less permanent move.

In three national enumerative sample surveys of farms made in September 1945, July 1946, and September 1948, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics obtained information from each farmer-employer as to each of his wage workers, including whether or not he was a migratory worker. The data obtained permitted tabulations for migratory workers on a limited number of characteristics, including type of work done in the survey week, wage rate and earnings, time worked, sex and race of worker.<sup>5</sup>

Each year since 1945, the Bureau of the Census has carried in its Current Population Survey special questions for the Bureau of Agricultural Economics on persons who had done any farm wage work in the course of the year. In December of 1949 and 1950, these questions included identification of migratory farm workers. These surveys form the chief source of the data presented in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

#### Difficulties in Definition and Coverage

If a fairly detailed work history is available, as was the case in the earliest WPA study cited, migratory workers can be identified fairly readily and accurately. But the obtaining of de-

tailed work histories is not possible in surveys of employers, as in the BAE surveys, and because it is too time-consuming, it is not feasible in surveys of households, as in the Census CPS. To permit a quick identification, some arbitrary criteria have to be used. Those used by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics have included the crossing of a county line to engage in farm wage work, excluding daily commuting from one's regular home. In the 1949 and 1950 surveys, the actual question (asked only for persons who had done farm wage work during the calendar year) was as follows: "Some workers leave home to hoe or harvest crops in some other county. Did.....do this in 1950?" Instructions to enumerators explained the purpose of the question and provided more explicit guidance on when to enter "yes" and when to enter "no," so that daily commuters and persons making more or less permanent moves would not be classified as migratory workers.

This definition is broader than that used by Webb, who, in his study relating to the years 1933 and 1934, distinguished between "a group of depression transients composed of temporary migrants, and a permanent supply of mobile workmen made up of habitual migrants" (p. ix). After a few more years of depression, however, the depression-produced migrants were not regarded as so temporary. The study of migratory cotton pickers, made under Webb's direction, attempted no such distinction and found that a majority of the migratory workers surveyed had left their

<sup>5</sup> Results of these surveys were published in two papers: Louis J. Ducoff, "Migratory Farm Workers in the United States," *Journal of Farm Economics*, XXIX (August, 1947), 711-722, and "Socio-economic Backgrounds of the Migratory Agricultural Labor Situation," BAE, 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Results from the 1949 survey have been published in *Migratory Farm Workers in 1949*, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 25, BAE, USDA, 1950.



homes to begin migratory work during the preceding year (p. xiii).

Several issues are posed in the problem of definition of migratory workers. Can the same definitions be usefully employed both in times of depression and in times of full employment? Should intentions of the migrant be considered or only the objective record over some defined past period? Should cause of migration be used as a criterion in the definition? These questions need fuller exploration on the part of demographers at both the conceptual level and the level in which concepts are translated into workable survey definitions. In the surveys to be reported, the definitions have involved only objective information as to activity manifested in the preceding 12 months. This approach appears to identify fairly satisfactorily the class of migratory workers intended, although there are exceptions. For example, if a 15-year-old boy whose home was in a city spent a few weeks of the summer working for wages on some relative's farm in a different county, he would be included in our count of migratory workers, although he might not at all share the social and economic conditions characteristic of the great majority of migratory farm workers. On the other hand, a *bona fide* migratory family which kept within the bounds of a large California county would not be classified as migratory, even though the family lived in tents and moved from one farm to another in a succession of farm jobs.

The coverage of migratory workers

in the Census surveys of households and special lodging places is believed to be not so complete as the coverage of less mobile groups. Migratory workers who are on the move at the time of the survey are probably underrepresented, although the fact that the surveys are made in December should minimize this effect. Also, it is likely that the makeshift and temporary housing in which migratory workers frequently live provides more difficult field problems of coverage than conventional, stable homes or apartments. Mexican nationals who are in the country illegally at the time of survey are probably not reported to the enumerator in many cases. Moreover, other groups of persons are specifically excluded from coverage in the survey made at the end of the year. In order of numerical importance, these groups probably rank as follows: (1) Mexican nationals who entered the country illegally—"wet-backs"—and who have gone back to Mexico by the end of the year, either voluntarily or escorted by the Immigration and Naturalization Service; (2) children under 14 years of age, for whom labor force and special questions are not asked; (3) Mexican and other nationals brought into this country legally, under international agreement or other arrangements, who have left the United States by December; (4) and persons who were migratory workers during some part of the year but who by December died, entered the armed forces, or entered an institution. Estimates of the size of the underrepresented and excluded



groups among the domestic migratory farm workers indicate that the 1949 survey provided estimates for about 85 per cent of them.

### Migratory Farm Workers in 1949 and 1950

*Numbers.*—Estimates of the numbers of migratory farm workers of the types covered in the CPS surveys are 422,000 in 1949 and 403,000 in 1950. The apparent slight decrease may be due to sampling error, as the Census current sample was not designed to measure with precision this small segment of the labor force which is unevenly distributed geographically. The need for a larger and more dispersed sample for the CPS becomes high-lighted when the survey is used—as it is to an increasing extent—to provide information on special sectors of the population or the labor force.

Apart from the limitations due to sampling errors, the estimates cited should be used with explicit recognition of the definitions and coverage explained above. They do not represent the total migratory population, which includes nonworking dependents and children under 14 years of age who do work, as well as the excluded groups mentioned. Information secured in the 1950 survey on marital status and number of children under 18 together with rough estimates of the excluded groups indicate that the total number of domestic migratory farm workers in 1949 or in 1950 was about one-half million and together with their nonworking dependents they numbered about 750,-

000 individuals. In addition, about 650,000 foreign nationals were employed at seasonal farm jobs in the United States during 1950. About 85 per cent of these were Mexican “wet-backs” who were apprehended and returned to Mexico by the Immigration and Naturalization Service or who departed voluntarily.

*Characteristics of migratory farm workers.*—Migratory farm workers differ from other farm wage workers in a number of respects, and they differ still more from nonfarm wage and salary workers in the labor force of the United States. Comparisons here are limited to the migratory and nonmigratory farm wage workers of the types covered in the surveys.

Farm wage workers are a young group compared with workers in other occupations, but among them the migratory workers have a much younger age composition than the nonmigratory workers. Among the 1950 farm wage workers, 52 per cent of the migratory were under 25 years of age compared with 37 per cent of the nonmigratory. At the other end of the age range, only 16 per cent of the migratory workers were 45 years of age and over, compared with 26 per cent of the nonmigratory.

Women and girls were slightly more frequent among migratory farm workers—29 and 25 per cent respectively. Negroes were slightly less frequent—24 per cent among the migratory compared with 28 per cent among the nonmigratory. Veterans of World War II constituted 10 per cent of the migratory and 13 per cent of the nonmigratory workers.



A smaller proportion of the migratory than of the nonmigratory workers were living on farms in December when the survey was made. Nearly half of the migratory workers were living on farms, with the remainder about evenly divided between urban and rural-nonfarm residence. Farm wage work was the chief activity in 1950 of nearly half of the migratory farm workers, and nonfarm work was the chief activity of a fifth. The remainder reported their chief activity as keeping house, going to school, or other nongainful activity.

A larger proportion of the migratory workers were single than of the nonmigratory workers, both in the case of males and females (See Table 1.). This is due partly to their younger age composition, although the proportion single was higher among migratory workers for most of the age groups under 45. The proportion widowed, separated, or divorced was about the same for migratory as for nonmigratory farm workers.

*Dependents of migratory workers.*  
—A great deal of public interest has centered in the children of migratory workers. Those who migrate with

their parents often suffer the disadvantage of having their schooling interrupted, as well as the health and social disadvantages associated with migratory life and housing. Even when the father alone migrates, the children at home are usually dependent upon his earnings. To provide a basis for estimating the total number of persons dependent upon earnings from migratory farm work, the 1950 survey obtained information from all men among the farm wage workers who were or had ever been married as to the number of children under 18 years of age they had, regardless of whether or not the children were involved in the migration.

The number of children under 18 of the migratory farm workers covered in the 1950 survey is estimated as about 250,000. This represents an average of 2.0 children for every married, widowed, divorced or separated male migratory farm worker compared with 1.7 children per nonmigratory farm worker. Migratory families with 1 or more children under 18 years of age averaged 3.2 children compared with 2.7 for nonmigratory farm laborer families. The proportion

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF MIGRATORY AND NONMIGRATORY FARM WAGE WORKERS BY MARITAL STATUS, UNITED STATES, 1950<sup>1</sup>

Marital Status	MIGRATORY WORKERS			NONMIGRATORY WORKERS		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.
Total .....	100	100	100	100	100	100
Single .....	54	57	45	38	40	32
Married .....	37	36	40	53	54	49
Widowed, divorced or separated .....	9	7	15	9	6	19

<sup>1</sup> Data relate to persons 14 years of age and over in the civilian noninstitutional population in December 1950.



married or ever-married males with 1 or 2 children was smaller among migratory workers (See Table 2.). The proportion with 3 children was practically the same, but the proportion of families with 4 or more children was about 1½ times as large among migratory farm workers.

### Concluding Observations

Some of the conceptual differences between internal migration which more or less permanently redistributes population and migratoriness have already been mentioned in this paper. In the concluding comments I should like to suggest in a tentative way some further differentiation needed of the migratory problem within the general phenomena of internal and international migration. Various studies of internal migration clearly indicate a general positive correlation between volume of migration and business cycles. Abundant employment opportunities stimulate migra-

tion while depression conditions reduce migration.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, while quantitative evidence is incomplete, there is evidence that the number of migratory farm workers decreases in times of prosperity and increases under depression conditions. In other words, the volume of migratoriness changes in counter-cyclical fashion. This in turn suggests that the "push" factors tend to predominate in the complex of causal factors behind migratoriness, while the "pull" factors may be relatively stronger in the case of general internal migration or population redistribution. It is rec-

<sup>7</sup> H. S. Shryock, Jr., and H. T. Eldridge, "Internal Migration in Peace and War," *American Sociological Review*, XII (February, 1947), 28-39.

H. S. Shryock, Jr., "Internal Migration and the War," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, XXXVIII (March, 1943), 16-30.

BAE, *Farm Population Estimates, United States and Major Geographic Divisions, 1910-46* (June, 1946), 18 pp. (mimeo.) and *Farm Population Estimates, January, 1949* (June, 1949), 8 pp. (mimeo.).

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF MARRIED MIGRATORY AND NONMIGRATORY MALE FARM WAGE WORKERS BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN UNDER 18, UNITED STATES, 1950<sup>1</sup>

Marital Status and Number of Children	Migratory Workers	Nonmigratory Workers
	Per Cent	Per Cent
Married males—total	100	100
With no children	33	32
With 1 child	12	20
With 2 children	12	18
With 3 children	12	11
With 4 or more children	31	19
Married, widowed, divorced or separated males—total	100	100
With no children	39	37
With 1 child	13	18
With 2 children	11	17
With 3 children	11	10
With 4 or more children	26	18

<sup>1</sup> Data relate to persons 14 years of age and over in the civilian noninstitutional population in December 1950.



ognized that in any type of migration there is an inseparable admixture of "push" and "pull" factors.

### Note on Deriving Estimate of Domestic Migratory Workers and Their Dependents

Several assumptions are required to obtain estimates of the total number of persons dependent wholly or partly on earnings from migratory farm work from the available data on age, marital status, and children under 18 years of age of male migratory workers who were or had been married. The assumptions chosen are on the conservative side so that the resulting estimate actually represents a minimum type of estimate.

Among the migratory farm wage workers 18 years of age and over, 103,000 males and 48,000 females were married. The first assumption made is that all married females were wives of migratory males, so that the total number of husbands and wives involved is  $2 \times 103,000$  or 206,000. ~~The number of children under 18 years involved is  $2 \times 103,000$  or 206,000.~~ The number of children under 18 years of age reported by these husbands was 235,000. In addition, divorced, widowed, separated males 18 years of age and over (19,000 males) reported 8,000 children under 18 years of age. (No data were

obtained on the number of children for previously married females.) The next assumption is that all migratory farm wage workers under 18 years of age were the children of fathers who were also migratory farm wage workers in 1950, except for 15,000 of the 16 and 17 year old boys. Thus 70,000 out of the 85,000 migratory farm wage workers under 18 years of age are assumed to be included in the 243,000 children under 18 years of age reported by migratory fathers. Thus we get a total for male workers 18 years of age and over who were married, their wives and children, males 18 years of age and over who had been previously married (19,000) and their children under 18 years of age amounting to 468,000. In addition, there were 109,000 male migratory farm workers 18 years of age and over who had never been married and 39,000 single and previously married females 18 years of age and over. The sum of these groups plus 15,000 unattached males 16-17 years old is 631,000 an estimate on the low side of the domestic population directly dependent upon migratory farm work for at least a part of their income. Because each assumption imposed was on the conservative side, the actual number might be between 700,000 and 800,000.