



221 G Street, Suite 204, Davis, CA (916) 756-6555
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 2143, Davis, CA 95617

September 15, 1993

TO: Bob Berger
FROM: Don Villarejo, PhD, Executive Director
Length: 871 words

SOME SURPRISING FACTS ABOUT WELFARE
FROM THE ROADS LESS TRAVELED

by Don Villarejo

The anti-immigration sentiment sweeping California today is based largely on the perception that government handouts attract undocumented migrants who then strain our social system.

From Sacramento to Washington, this theme has become the basis for punitive legislation to deny education, health care and other basic human services to undocumented migrants. It recently culminated with a bill in the State Legislature to deny a driver's license to those without proof of citizenship.

But before blaming clogged freeways on migrant traffic, we should travel down the dusty byways of rural California for insights about undocumented migrants, government handouts and who's exploiting whom.

Our route follows farm workers, the occupational group that includes the highest proportion of immigrants in the state. More than 880,000 work in the fields annually: nine in 10 are foreign-

born; eight in 10 are Mexican. Farm employers prefer to hire immigrants, since they are among the few workers willing to endure the back-breaking labor and low pay of agriculture.

About half of all farm worker families live below the poverty line -- including those with multiple wage-earners. Annual earnings of an individual California farm worker average between \$5,000 and \$7,500 per year. And the typical undocumented worker makes one-third to one-half the income of an authorized worker, hardly an adequate income in California's high-rent economy. So it is easy to jump to conclusions about immigrants and reliance on government aid.

But the overwhelming majority of California's farm workers make do without social services, according to a 1993 report from the National Agricultural Workers Survey. As the data-collecting arm of the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act, the survey is the only official government yardstick for measuring the effect of immigration policy on farm labor.

Produced by the U.S. Department of Labor and the University of California, the little-known report drew on detailed interviews of more than 1,800 farm workers in major California agricultural counties during 1990-91. The sample was random, the methodology conservative, and the results startling.

Despite extremely low incomes, only 2 percent of all California crop workers lived in households where any person received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The survey also found just 3 percent lived in households collecting general assistance (welfare). And only 11 percent lived in

households that received food stamps.

Even more telling was that just 4 percent of undocumented farm worker households received any needs-based social services, while 23 percent of citizen farm worker households used those services. Although undocumented workers had much lower incomes than citizen workers -- and thus a greater likelihood of meeting the "needs" test for aid -- they were six times less likely to obtain government assistance.

The study also showed that 40 percent of visa-holding seasonal agricultural workers were migrants, most of whom returned to Mexico after the peak U.S. harvest months. In other words, the "burden" fell on the Mexican economy when those documented workers left California's fields.

Thus, statistics and common sense support some conclusions that are strikingly different than the popular image of migrants: Most seek work, not welfare. And they often endure hunger and avoid seeking medical care because they fear deportation.

If immigration critics are wrong about migrant motives, they are at least half-right in the belief that exploitation is a factor.

That point was underscored in 1986, when powerful California agribusiness interests feared a labor shortage. Then-Senator Pete Wilson advocated a provision in the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that eventually provided amnesty for almost 1 million undocumented farm workers to stay in the United States. IRCA also raised hopes among impoverished Mexicans that entering California illegally -- to accept jobs that citizens refused -- might

eventually bring permanent residency status.

Indeed, as Senator Wilson helped agribusiness solve its labor problem, he opposed employer sanctions that included stiff fines and imprisonment for those who knowingly hired undocumented workers.

Enforcement of that IRCA provision was weak to non-existent under Republican administrations. In a two-year period, the Immigration and Naturalization Service visited only 32 of California's 82,000 farms. Today, Governor Wilson complains about lack of federal action against undocumented immigrants but remains silent on immigration law violations by agribusiness.

Farm employer violations are hardly limited to hiring undocumented workers. The California Institute for Rural Studies recently completed a survey of indigenous Mexican immigrant farm workers which found that fully half had worked a job in the United States that paid below legal minimum wage. One-fourth had worked a job where the employer failed to pay them at all.

Yet political and public scorn continue to fall on migrants, while their mistreatment is ignored. Wilson administration officials frequently refer to vague estimates that undocumented workers annually cost California more than \$2 billion. On a recent national radio talk show, I asked a top official of the state Health and Welfare Agency who repeated that claim to refute the findings of the federal farm worker survey. She was unable to do so.

Neither could the assistant director of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, who called me later to inquire about the

report. He had never heard of it. Nor was he aware that despite all our anti-immigration rhetoric, California's \$18 billion agricultural industry is more dependent on immigrant labor today than at any time in this century.

(Don Villarejo is Executive Director of the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis.)

-- 30 --