

# Migrant-Bashing Down on the Farm

■ **Immigration:** It's a myth that crop workers are a drain on social services. They don't even receive protection of the law.

By **DON VILLAREJO**

The anti-immigration sentiment sweeping California 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 proposals to deny education, health care and other basic human services to undocumented immigrants. The State Legislature has even passed a bill to deny a driver's license to those without proof of citizenship or legal residency.

But before blaming clogged freeways on undocumented immigrants, we should travel down the dusty byways of rural California for insights about who's exploiting whom.

Our route follows farm workers, the occupational group that has the highest proportion of migrants 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 because they will endure the backbreaking labor and low pay.

About half of all farm-worker families live below the poverty line, including those with multiple wage-earners. An individual California farm worker will average between \$5,000 and \$7,500 per year, hardly an adequate income here. 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 (IRCA), 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. The sample was random, the methodology conservative and the results startling.

Despite extremely low incomes, only 2% of California crop workers lived in households where any person received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Just 3% lived in households

collecting welfare and only 11% in households that received food stamps.

Even more telling was that just 4% of undocumented farm-worker households received any needs-based social services; such as AFDC, while 23% of citizen farm-worker households used those services.

The study also showed that 40% of visa-holding seasonal agricultural workers were migrants, most of whom returned to Mexico after the peak U.S. harvest months.

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

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

In 1986, when powerful agribusiness interests feared a labor shortage, then-Sen. Pete Wilson advocated a provision in the IRCA that eventually allowed 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 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 nonexistent under the Reagan and Bush administrations. In a two-year period, the Immigration and Naturalization Service visited only 32 of California's 82,000 farms. Today, Gov. 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. In a recent survey of Mexican immigrant farm workers, the California Institute for Rural Studies found that fully half had worked a job in the United States that paid below the legal minimum wage and one-fourth had worked a job where the employer failed to pay them at all.

California's \$18-billion agricultural industry is more dependent on immigrant labor today than at any time in this century. Yet political and public scorn continue to fall on migrants, while their mistreatment is ignored.

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