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Latinxs in the South

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### Investigating Latinx Migrants' Agricultural Work in North Carolina

The southern region of the United States has become a recently investigated phenomenon, one that has been described as an ongoing “Latinization.” North Carolina has become an attractive state for many Latin American migrant agricultural workers, often in search of a larger job market and affordable housing for settlement. Although it may sound like the South is becoming more like the Southwestern part of the US, the experiences of these farmworkers also differ from those decades before. Unlike the Southwest and California, the southern United States had not experienced an influx of immigrant workers, especially such a large portion from Latin America. Recent migration patterns by both seasonal farmworker families and migrant farmworker families has brought forth challenges for these agricultural workers as well as their local residential communities. The well-being of these farmworkers, a vulnerable population, is multi-facet with components varying from the immigration, housing, social and economic pressure, and health problems commonly experienced. Oftentimes these migrant populations’ work is noticed in food markets; however, farmworker’s and their living and working conditions continue to be invisible and overlooked.

The history of massive Latinx immigration into the United States is not unheard of. Beginning during World War II, many Americans joined the war or the booming manufacturing industry leaving an agriculture labor shortage. The Bracero program between the US and Mexico permitted single men over the age of eighteen to partake in the program to alleviate the

farmworker shortage.<sup>1</sup> Most of the braceros were received by larger growers in California and Texas; a majority of braceros were enticed to join the program by economic pressure. However, just as migrant worker programs and immigration policies expanded opportunities, they also retracted them for Latinxs among the upcoming decades. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provided amnesty for undocumented migrants with a special program for undocumented farmworkers, while also discouraging further undocumented migration into the US.<sup>1</sup> Labor demands in the Southwest and California decreased and introduced new markets in the South. The movement of Latinx migrant and seasonal farmworkers into the South is distinguishable from that in the Southwest region of the United States. The past few decades has seen a drastic demographic change in the South as more Latinx occupy residence, even if temporary, across states. North Carolina had not recorded a massive influx of immigrants until the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Between 1990 and 2000, the state experienced an increase of over 270% in foreign immigrants, with Latin Americans making up about 56% and Mexicans making of 64% of those Latin American.<sup>3</sup> In 2014 North Carolina's Hispanic population was approximately 819,000, with 44% foreign born.<sup>4</sup> The state of North Carolina is the sixth in largest migrant agricultural labor.<sup>5</sup> Several of these agricultural labor opportunities are found in rural areas, especially the eastern part of the state. A mass portion of the influx of these Latinx workers can be attributed to established kinship networks.<sup>6</sup> These are mobilizing groups, often friends or family, trusted to provide reliable information and connections to these job markets. Yet, more agriculture workers mobilize in smaller groups now than before. Today, a considerable proportion of these migrant workers are mobilized in the United States' H-2A visa program. Around 9,000 of about 46,000 migrant agricultural workers have an H-2A visa in

North Carolina.<sup>7</sup> The visa program permits US agricultural employers to contract temporary foreign workers in order to cover shortages of agriculture workers.

Migrant farm workers' living and working arrangements in North Carolina are organized by employers, following codes set by the US Department of Labor's H-2 visa program. Housings provided by these agriculture employers are often referred to as camps. The set control employers have over housing and working conditions have been compared to the creation of a "total institution."<sup>8</sup> The "total institution-like" environment challenges workers' ability to differentiate between home and work aspects, often due to lack of separation and privacy. Under the H-2A visa program, free housing is provided by the employer which may be met through older homes and mobile homes in general close proximity to their workplace.<sup>7</sup> Same employer H-2A recipients tend to live together, sharing sleeping quarters and common areas like kitchens and sanitation facilities. Some migrant farmworkers described the living conditions as inadequate, overcrowded, and unsanitary. Common exterior housing issues include the overflow of trash cans, scattered litter, and rodents. Many farmworkers report interior problems that include mold, soiled furniture, interior damage such as holes in walls or floors, and infestations of insects and rodents.<sup>7,9</sup> Interior problems also included safety hazards like lack of fire extinguishers or working smoke detectors, and no first aid kits or trained first aid responder. Many of these issues are exacerbated as the season develops, with increased occupants and lack of space. The North Carolina Department of Labor's Migrant Housing Act (MHA) is meant to enforce housing regulations to follow safety and quality standards. However, most migrant farmworkers' housing is subject to standards that may or may not be enforced by employers, resulting in the common substandard conditions and MHA violations.<sup>9</sup> Housing standards have improved over the years but substandard housing for migrant farmworkers still tends to be

prevalent. Many of these substandard housing characteristics were based on registered labor camps in North Carolina, similar or inferior characteristics are expected in unregistered camps and housing for farmworkers without H-2A visas.

The influx of Latinx migrant populations in North Carolina has caused foreseen changes in its communities. Some residents of these highly influenced areas like in eastern North Carolina had to face changes in the “job market and social institutions.”<sup>6</sup> The Southern identity has been challenged by the newcomers, especially rural areas as they work around the cultural diversity. Residents were first accommodating towards the first wave of Latino migrants; however, individuals along with politicians grew anxious of their growing numbers and became less hospitable.<sup>6</sup> For rural areas in North Carolina, there was little comfort for Latino migrant workers due to the lack of ethnic enclaves in their proximity. For many farmworkers’ the closest sense of community is within their workmates or limited communication back home. Like some braceros, migrant farmers faced economic pressures in their home country and searched for financial opportunities. It costs a considerable amount for visa applications for Latin Americans, especially for those lacking financial resources and no guarantee of the visa being issued. Thus, the growing reliance on kin who have been able to establish themselves, often through financial support, recommendations to employers, or other means. Many farmworkers are paid either by hourly wages or by piece-rates by crops, in North Carolina some children reported making \$8-\$9 dollars.<sup>10</sup> The Fair Labor Standards Act established wages for many of full-time and part-time workers and child labor standards. Even so, many farmworkers are exempt from these minimum wage laws. Farmworkers are certainly at “high risk for economic hardships,” with a prevalence of food insecurity, lack of employee benefits, seasonal unemployment, and low pay.<sup>8</sup> East Carolina farmers earn about 35% less than the national average farm worker yearly salary of

\$11,000.<sup>5</sup> Among these, the undocumented workers' wages are subject to less protection than documented workers.

In North Carolina, youth have joined the agriculture workforce alongside adult farmworkers in effort of gaining an income; however, while there is economic gain there is a loss in safety. The migrant farmworker population is among the most vulnerable groups based on legal, economic, and social status. For many Latinx immigrants, their temporary status or undocumented status leaves them subject to work places discrimination and harassment, especially young children and women. The agriculture industry itself is dangerous, with seven times the rate of injuries and fatalities compared to the national average.<sup>8</sup> Although the Fair Labor Standards Act stands, the lack of federal regulations has permitted youth farm workers between 10-12 hours of work during the summer.<sup>11</sup> Some continue to work throughout the school year either before or after classes. Some youth workers were able to reach overtime, still earning less than adult workers. Youth may have accompanied their parents into the fields as young children and may end up feeling compelled to work in the fields. Farmworkers are subject to long hours under extreme heat, heavy lifting, lengthy time in awkward positions, exposure to toxic chemicals, and working with dangerous equipment.<sup>10</sup> Workers are limited to short breaks and oftentimes do not have hydration stations in close proximity, in turn threatening their health. Migrant farmworkers faced several health concerns that are exacerbated by lack of health insurance, employee benefits, and immigration status. Occupational health risks for farm workers often include musculoskeletal pain like joint and back pain, heat-related illness like hyperthermia, long-term exposure to pesticides, and nicotine from tobacco.<sup>10, 11</sup> Pesticides often cause short-term effects like rashes, nausea, vomiting; delayed and long-term effects may include birth defects and cancer.<sup>12</sup> Although agricultural labor costs laborers their manual labor and

physical energy, it also takes a toll on the mental health for these Latinx workers. Farmworkers are generally an underserved group with high risks for physical and mental health problems. A study conducted on North Carolina Farmworkers used the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale reported a “prevalence of depressive symptoms at 40%.”<sup>8</sup> Other factors inducing these high levels of psychological distress include discrimination, poverty, crowded conditions, and for some legal status. There have even been studies on male farmworker’s levels of aggression in labor camps located in eastern North Carolina.<sup>7</sup> Female migrant workers face even larger risks due “limited education, poor working conditions, substandard housing, and frequent mobility.”<sup>8</sup> Farmworker women are more likely to suffer from depression than men and often considered more vulnerable to gender inequalities and harassment. Poor mental health by adult figures can also negatively impact their families, especially young children. For migrant farmworkers, obtaining mental health services are challenging often due to language barriers, health insurance, and often lack of service in rural areas of North Carolina.

In the past few decades the southern United States has experienced a new wave of immigrants, a considerable proportion as farm workers. The wave has caused further investigation of the migrant farmworkers and changing demographics in North Carolina. Southern migrant farmworkers’ experiences are often compared to migrant movements in the Southwest and California from previous decades, yet they are distinguishable on their own. These southern migrant farmworkers migrated under different government administration, facing new legislation and obstacles. The influx of Latin American immigrants has caused drastic changes to the social environment in North Carolina along with affecting the lifestyles of North Carolina’s migrant farmworkers. Today, these migrants, their work, and experiences are becoming recognized at a larger extent, especially during national emergencies.



#### Resources:

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