



Indigenous Migrant Farmworker Youth

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Sources for Insights on Indigenous Farmworker Youths' Lives

- 1999–2000 Minors in Agriculture study (ethnosurvey methodology, research support from U.S. Department of Labor)
- 2001–2006 New Pluralism Study of Immigrant Integration (USDA rural community research studies-- Woodburn, OR and Arvin, CA)
- 2009 Strategic Review of WIA 167 Services to MSFW Youth (includes analysis of NAWS data on youth for U.S. Department of Labor)
- Ongoing involvement with Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) and Unidad Popular Benito Juarez (UPBJ)
- 2005 Audience Research–La Hora Mixteca (binational survey in California, Baja California Norte, Oaxaca)
- 2008–2009 Survey of California Indigenous Migrants directed by Richard Mines, ongoing research by Lynn Stephen, U. of Oregon

Factors Which Affect Worker Risks in a Transnational Labor System

- Population characteristics and vulnerabilities
- Migration history and dynamics—in migrant-sending villages and destination areas
- Non-formal systems of social and economic interaction with employers, other migrants, and local community
- Formal systems of social and economic interaction—workplace regulation, service agencies, local institutions
- Workplace activities, technology, economic dynamics (e.g. piece rate pay)
- Formal (legal/social) systems to manage or mitigate risks given recognized hazards

Indigenous Youth from Mexico and Guatemala in US Agriculture

- At least one out of five of all US farmworkers are 21 years of age or younger. In 2006–2008 about 17% of these younger farmworkers are indigenous migrants—a total of about 45,000 youth.
- Major migration networks are Oaxacan (Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui) and from Guatemala and Mexican border area of Chiapas (Maya). However, other language/ethnic groups—e.g. Purepecha, Amuzgo, Nahuatl, Otomi—also travel north.
- The overwhelming majority (85%) are young men.
- Almost half are school-age youth (18 and under) but almost half (45%) have only primary-level education and only 3% have more than 9 years of schooling (secundaria). Their mean level of education is 7.3 years.
- Very few speak any English at all. Most speak some Spanish—but proficiency in Spanish varies a great deal—with new migrants from more remote areas speaking less Spanish.

Changing Migration Patterns: Apparent Increase in Family Migration

- In 1999–2000, two-thirds (66%) of MSFW youth were solo male migrants living in male-only households.
- Although the majority of the young indigenous migrants are still solo males, it appears that more indigenous families are now migrating together—since shuttle migration is less and less viable.
- Teenage workers living and working with their families, not on their own, are still a minority—but those who work with family crews have some support. However, as entire families migrate more very young (11–14 year old) youth are working in the fields with their families.
- Family field work also means there are more young women working in the fields and problems of sexual harassment are a growing concern
- In 1999, the median cost of payments to smugglers (coyotes or raiteros) was more than \$1,000. Cost continues to increase as border control tightens—but varies greatly.

The Context of Indigenous Migrant Youth's Lives

- Language/cultural diversity of young indigenous migrants is increasing as migration ripples from established migrant-sending areas to more remote ones (e.g. Oaxaca-Guerrero border)
- “Push” forces on indigenous migration will increase—due to low-quality schools and decay in quality of telesecundarias (WB 2005)
- Youth from more established networks (e.g. San Juan Mixtepec, San Miguel Cuevas) have more diverse migration and work experience.
- Almost all are very recently-arrived—87% were in the US 2 years or less prior to their NAWS interview. Only 2% came to the US as children (<13 years old).
- U.S.-based indigenous migrant organizations (e.g. FIOB and UPBJ) are expanding and strengthening. Advocacy (e.g. legal services) and service (e.g. primary health) groups' awareness of language/cultural diversity is increasing—but not yet adequate or universal

The Contemporary Agricultural Workplace

- The proportion of very young solo migrants in the labor force (<16) has decreased substantially over the decade—in part due to US employers' worries about enforcement of labor laws.
- Also the high costs of border-crossing also make it difficult for the youngest solo migrants to get the money together. Consequently only 9% of current MSFW's worked in the fields before age 16.
- However, the increased cost of border-crossing increases the likelihood of indentured servitude (since less migrants can pay in full up front)
- These teenage workers are evenly distributed between work in vegetables (43%) and fruit and nuts (47%)—with orchard work being substantially more dangerous—e.g. citrus thorns in eye, ladder falls, equipment injuries.
- The more recent, more inexperienced, marginal indigenous teen workers cannot easily secure work mixing or applying pesticides, and are less likely to be working with power equipment.
- Young workers' exposure to tobacco appears to be decreasing.

Youth Wages and Earnings

- The younger workers (14–17) interviewed in NAWS had worked on the average 66 days in the year before they were interviewed—but the amount of work they get varies greatly.
- The older workers (18–21) had managed to work almost twice as much—an average of 127 days in the prior year.
- Almost all of the MSFW youth (89%) are now paid on an hourly basis, not piece rate—good news from an occupational health perspective. The piece rate workers averaged more (\$8.52/hr.) than the hourly workers (\$7.21/hr.)
- During the 2006–2008 period, the hourly wages these workers received increased by 20%—from \$6.58 in 2006 to \$7.94 in 2008.
- In 1999–2000 youth were sometimes making less than minimum wage in crop-tasks paid by piece rate (e.g. strawberries, blueberries, table grapes). The shift away from piece rate has probably been good (though not from migrants' perspective)
- Earnings remain well below the poverty level due to underemployment and fluctuate unpredictably—e.g. due to weather, market conditions, social relationships changing. No consistent differences in pay related to ethnicity.

Indigenous Youth Perspectives on Occupational Health

- Farmwork is not difficult or dangerous!
- But migration is!
- Living is!
- Although the labor recruitment system is transnational and linked to social networks, mutual support may or may not be available.
- Although the labor market has been transnational for more than half a century, the social universe and legal environment of the U.S. is still a mystery to many indigenous migrants.
- Future prospects are unknown—dreams, fears, and hopes swirl around in consciousness!
- Farmwork is NOT how one spends part of one's time—it is an entire lifestyle: working conditions and living conditions are one and the same!

A traveling group of paisanos arrive in Immokalee, Florida, winter 1999....

- Five Tzeltal-speaking highland Maya youth from San Antonio Las Rosas, a town with a population of 486 persons, Immokalee, a town bursting at the seams with about 13,000 farmworkers
- We meet the group at the homeless shelter where newly arrived migrants are dropped off—the youngest a 15-year old and his 16 year-old brother.
- They had paid \$1,900 each to be transported to Florida, but even so, were apprehended on their 1st attempt and had to subsist in Sonora for a week till they got across on their 2nd try.
- They are very limited in Spanish, extremely apprehensive because the brother who had been north before had been gone for 2 hours looking for a place to live—where was he?
- We drove them to the house of a woman who had let them leave their traveling bags (re-purposed feedsacks) on her porch—where was that house? Would their belongings still be there?

Celestino, Mixteco migrant from Baja California to Oregon

- We met him at Campo 84—about 3 miles from Portland airport. He had wandered in the night before, traumatized, and fellow Oaxacan (Triqui) workers let him stay with them though there was at that point little work. He showed us his terribly blistered feet.
- He had been left for dead in the Sonoran desert but wandered on alone for several nights, resting under bushes during the day, before staggering into the home of a Papago Indian who gave him water, let him rest, and then charged him \$100 for a ride to a well-known transfer point where raiteros take migrants west to California or east to Florida, Georgia, or Tennessee.
- He had been forced to beg a ride from a fellow Mixtec who transported migrants from Madera to Oregon—but then hitchhike and walk the last 20 miles through suburban and urban Portland.
- His vow was never to migrate again—to stay in the U.S.—since he had miraculously survived (though a woman in the group had died)

“Making do” --but at a high cost

- We met “Adrian”—a Chiapaneco teenager at a well-known “transfer point” in southern Arizona where coyotes drop off their pollos for raiteros to pick up and transport across the US. He was hungry and broke.
- Adrian had left Caborca, Sonora with a group of 13 co-workers to come north for better earnings. His subgroup—5 people—were chased by the Border Patrol but he and another young migrant—a Michoacano escaped.
- Luckily, Adrian’s co-worker had some experience and got them to the transfer point but the delay meant their raitero contact had already left (with the \$ paid up front) so Adrian was broke.
- After we bought them dinner, one of the raiteros hanging out offered to give Adrian a ride for free—but with the deal being he’d be “sold” to a Tennessee farm labor contractor. It was the best (only) deal.

Elena, 16 years old

Mixteca from San Juan Mixtepec

- Elena liked school and had stayed at home with her grandmother after her parents migrated north; she finished 2 years of preparatoria before dropping out to come north.
- She migrated north with her brother—crossing the Sonoran desert in February and immediately on being reunited with her parents began working in early-spring strawberries in Santa Maria, CA.
- When we interviewed her she was homeless— camping with her parents by the Fresno River while working in the raisin grape harvest.
- On their return to Santa Maria, the family would be able to settle into their home again—a one bedroom apartment in a crowded and decaying (but friendly) apartment building.
- She is one of the fortunate ones.

A Teenage Couple Traveling West....

- 19 year-old David and his pregnant wife, Marta, came north to join her parents working in Santa Maria, CA. After an uneventful and affordable Sonoran desert crossing for \$250 they paid another \$250 get from the Papago reservation north to the Chandler Heights area and \$300 to get across the Mojave to California.
- There were 17 of them hidden in the back of a shortbed pickup truck with a camper shell on it and covered with a thick carpet. They were lying on their backs, one body up against the next, and told not to move or make any noise.
- They were in this position for the 15 hours the trip took—without moving, without food, or water. They thought that they would suffocate.
- David said, “El raito fue lo peor, mucho peor que la cruzada.” (“The ride was the worst part; worse than crossing the border.”) It turned out the raitero had not even taken them to Santa Maria. He left them in Taft, 100 miles or so short of their destination.

Settling into migrant life in the U.S.

- Antonio, an 18 year-old Mixteco, from near Tlapa, Guerrero, first worked in New York City restaurants as a 14 year-old washing dishes
- Now in south Florida, he shares a trailer with 9 friends. He tells us, “Living in Immokalee, one comes to perdition...People get into drugs. My friend didn’t used to drink or smoke, now he does everything”.
- Antonio says his sisters in NY worry about him, but he doesn’t go out at night any more because it is very dangerous. However, we see him two days later, red-eyed sitting with a group of drinking men having missed the 5AM shape-up and, thus, earning nothing toward his \$25 weekly share of the trailer rent, nothing to send home.
- From other young men we heard of the crewleader/pimps who would bring prostitutes to a household to be shared by 10-15 men and of Immokalee’s nickname in Spanish (“Piedrokali”— “rock town”)

Getting to Work is Indeed Dangerous: Risks of Migration

- A 2006 GAO report tabulated 472 border-crossing deaths in 2005—most of them in the Tucson sector (where most MSFW indigenous youth cross) with the leading cause of death being heat exposure
- No comprehensive tabulations of migrants' deaths in traffic accidents while being transported by raiteros within the US is available—but they are a significant hazard, due in part to overcrowding, lack of seat belts, exhausted drivers
- Criminal violence—migrants assaulted and robbed on the Mexican and the US side of the border are a health risk. So are assaults in farmworker towns where indigenous migrants in particular are preyed upon by local gangs.
- Day-to-day transportation from home to workplace is dangerous—but enforcement can make a difference (CHP crackdown after 13 killed in Fresno County accident)
- Indentured servitude/slavery continues as a consequence of informal systems financing migration (pollo bought and sold)

Anxiety and Social Isolation While Growing Up Are Dangerous

- Many of the solo migrant teenagers we talked to were lonely and depressed. They missed their families, their novias. Indigenous migrants had grown up in small, socially-cohesive villages making US life still more disorienting.
- Virtually all the solo migrants we talked to were anxious about their ability to make ends meet and still send money home. Because they were newly-arrived and more marginal getting was more uncertain for them
- Some have been traumatized by crises—in border-crossing, transportation, conflicts with local youth (who prey on migrants)
- For some—particularly those living in households of young male workers without any family members—depression encouraged drinking, drug use.
- Risky sex—with prostitutes who have multiple partners and men having sex with men (though little is known about prevalence) and lack of knowledge about HIV is a dangerous combination.

Workplace Environment and Living Conditions Remain Problematic

- The youngest, most recent migrants do relatively safe work. But serious risks remain. In May, 2008 a pregnant 17 year-old died from heat exhaustion near Merced, CA and, overall, six farmworkers died of heat-related causes during the year (23 in the 2005–2008 period).
- Crowded sub-standard housing persists—with a mix of problems but some social benefits from established farmworker families renting out space to young solo migrants and couples who are paisanos
- We heard of significant but non-fatal youth injuries in citrus (thorn in eye, broken leg from being backed over by a goat-loader). The biggest problem was not the injury but access to medical care—since Workers' Compensation requirements are uneven.
- I am not aware of cases where impaired communication with indigenous youth migrants has clearly been the cause of a work-related injury—but this deserves, nonetheless, to be a concern.
- Supervisors' and co-workers limited knowledge of health/safety issues has been a factor in several of the heat-related deaths and needs to be addressed

Strategic Implications for Improving Young Indigenous Farmworkers' Health

- Focusing only on the immediate agricultural workplace as a way to improve occupational health is not enough.
- “Occupational health” must be understood as related to all facets of the social and economic universe in which transnational recruitment, transport, and management of US farmworkers takes place.
- “Occupational health” oriented interventions will have only modest impact. Overall changes in immigration policy and immigrant social policy are needed to bring about significant change
- Existing laws and regulations relating to worker transportation, wage and hour provisions, field sanitation and working conditions (e.g. availability of water and toilets), and housing conditions address some of the factors affecting occupational health—but lack of enforcement undercuts their impact.
- Interventions need not be exclusively targeted to indigenous youth but overall MSFW policy and service delivery needs to give attention to the indigenous MSFW youth sub-population

Examples of “Best Practices” are Emerging

- In Florida, the CIW has worked for a decade now with the US Justice Dept. to uncover cases of slavery and prosecute them.
- CRLA has recruited young indigenous community workers in major farmworker communities in California
- The Oregon Law Center and PCUN, relying on indigenous health workers, are seeking to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace
- FIOB--recognizing the nexus between work/life has played a key role in several initiatives—development of Casas San Miguel affordable housing as an alternative to a contaminated trailer park where Mixtec migrant families had lived for years
- FIOB also supported development of Se’ e’ Savi, a dance group providing recreational opportunities for youth as well strengthening cultural traditions as sponsors a basketball tournament
- In an urban setting, Kurt Organista has led development of a participatory training model to build streetcorner day laborers’ awareness of HIV. It would be replicable in farmworker areas.

But Service Systems' Response Remains Inadequate

- Migrant clinics' staffing has not kept pace with language change and their specialization in maternal-child health has stood in the way of young, indigenous, solo migrants' using them.
- Migrant Education programs have not provided alternative learning programs for working MSFW youth—although they could develop customized curricula to focus on workplace hazards and worker rights, along with improved English (and Spanish).
- Local parks are a key resource for teenagers with no other place to go for recreation—but there has been little progress in developing recreation programs targeted to indigenous migrant farmworkers.
- OSHA and other formal provisions designed to assure workplace safety are too process-oriented/cumbersome to make much difference except in terms of prevention. Enforcement is spotty.
- Rural systems are unprepared for confronting the many facets of stress-related mental health problems of MSFW indigenous youth

Ultimately, Immigration Reform Is Needed

- The types of occupational health problems encountered by transnational migrant farmworker youth are rooted in continuing recruitment of teenagers (mostly indigenous) to replenish retiring farmworkers
- Currently, indigenous (and other) farmworkers' maltreatment and lack of access to standard public health and other services stem primarily from lack of legal status. Immigration reform is crucial.
- Adoption of an immigration reform law with guestworker provisions will decrease border-crossing deaths but abuses, pervasive coercion, sub-standard living conditions, and dangerous transportation are likely to persist even with this change.
- A better solution would be the “North American Visa” approach (a portable permiso) where work visas would be issued directly to prospective migrants—for a fee comparable to that paid to immigrant smugglers for current illegal border-crossing and transport to the agricultural workplace