

Challenges Experienced by Migrant Labor Contractors in Southeastern U.S. Agricultural Operations

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Introduction and Framework

Southeastern agricultural operations within the United States (U.S.) have faced the challenge of fulfilling labor demands. Due to limited domestic labor resources, the U.S. has relied on the use of migrant labor sources to fill the gap in labor availability. Research demonstrates migrant labor

programs, such as the H2-A Temporary Agricultural Visa Program, can serve as a major relief to offset farm labor deficiencies (Schewe & White, 2017; Stephens et al., 2024) and help maintain business viability and financial success among farming operations (Williams & Escalante, 2018). H2A help connect producers with a labor force that is managed through program contractors. While the need for these labor sources is strong among southeastern operations, challenges faced by migrant labor groups in this area may threaten the effectiveness or longevity of such programs. Challenges identified in prior research include the conflict between wage demand and financial resource availability (Castillo et al., 2022; Martin & Rutledge, 2021), dangerous working conditions and lack of health resources for migrant workers (Keller et al., 2016), and immigration enforcement (Kostandini et al., 2014).

Purpose and Central Research Question

This research was conducted as part of a larger study with the purpose of understanding the use of migrant labor in the southeastern United States. Through programs like H-2A, farm labor contractors often serve as coordinators between farmers and seasonal migrant workers. To better understand the complexities of migrant labor programs, it is beneficial to better understand the experiences of all involved in such. As such, the following central research question guided this study: *What challenges shape the experiences of migrant labor contractors?*

Methods

We used a phenomenological approach for this study. Phenomenology is rooted in the personal knowledge and subjectivity of participants and emphasizes participants' perspectives and meanings of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). We collected data from contractors of migrant labor programs in the Southeastern United States using semi-structured phone interviews. We analyzed data through Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological strategy, which includes the key elements of (a) epoche, or bracketing, (b) reduction, (c) variation, and (d) synthesizing composite textural and structural descriptions.

Results

Participants in this study included four labor contractors who had been in the role of contracting labor for 22 to 35 years. All participants worked primarily with fruit and vegetable growers and coordinated labor to harvest crops that have a relatively higher labor demand for harvest, such as watermelons, squash, carrots, and corn. The average crew size of our participants ranged from 300 to 2,000 migrant laborers at a time during a single harvest season.

The reduction of significant statements across respondents revealed several key, shared challenges, including housing availability and cost, bureaucratic difficulties, wage increases, and stigmas associated with migrant labor. All contractors expressed difficulty in allocating housing for their crew members, either due to the cost of housing or ability to find housing options willing to enter into the short-term lease required in the migrant labor situation. One contractor noted, "with the large amount of people we carry, it is very difficult to get housing for this many people for such a short period of time." Bureaucratic difficulties and concerns shared by all contractors were primarily related to paperwork regulations they felt did not compliment the nature of migrant worker programs. For example, petitions are required for each worker each time they cross states lines, which often became a cumbersome practice that continue to the contractors' felt stress of the job. Further results showed that wage increases in association to the use of migrant laborers were not only causing financial controversy among producers, but

contractors as well due to the shared understanding that wage increase could lead to less producers being able to afford these labor sources, no matter the need. Lastly, contractors shared experiences of stigma with migrant labor, though each experienced this differently. One contractor experienced push-back for all non-local labor and lack of accommodation within communities, while another contractor experienced stigma with government offices not accommodating documentation needs such as social security. One contractor noted, “we’re trying to do everything by the law, but we have these offices that either want to keep rescheduling you or don’t want to see you period.”

Discussion and Recommendations

We discovered migrant labor contractors face many challenges that increase on-the-job stress for current contractors, as well as may pose significant barriers to entry for future contractors. However, when discussing the challenges they face, all contractors still emphasized our need for and reliance on migrant labor to help fill the domestic labor gap (Schewe & White, 2017; Stephens et al., 2024). Due to the financial strain faced by producers during their harvests, fulfilling labor requirements has become an even greater necessity than ever before (Williams & Escalante, 2019). With migrant labor usage in the U.S. increasing from 48,000 certified positions to 371,000 over the last 17 years (USDA, 2023), it suggests that the need for and reliance on migrant labor among U.S. producers will only continue to grow. In addition to the challenges facing farmers who contract migrant labor and the challenges facing the workers themselves, our findings reveal challenges at the middle level as well that need to be considered and addressed. Stories of all involved in labor programs should be shared to best shape policy that is meaningful and reflective of the felt needs of this work community. For example, recommendations from contractors should be included in discussions when determining regulatory policies for documenting migrant labor. To better understand the full story, future research should also be conducted with farmers in specific commodity sectors, as well as laborers who work those sectors.

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