

Impacts of Foreign Farm Workers in Ontario Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of foreign workers stream to Canada for temporary employment in the horticulture industry under Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program (CSAWP). The numbers of workers employed under this Program are indeed significant: in 2002, over 20,000 foreign workers were employed in agriculture, with approximately 80 percent of that number destined for Ontario. While the program is considered seasonal, many foreign workers will spend up to eight months living and working in Canada.

Previous research on Mexican and Caribbean farm labour in Canada took a critical historical perspective and focused on labour relations (Satzewich, 1991; Wall, 1992). More current studies have concentrated on the limited rights of guest workers and their conditions of work (Basok, 1999, 2000; Preibisch, 2000; Smart, 1997), highlighted obstacles to the productive investment of remittances in their communities of origin (Basok, 2000), and demonstrated worker preference for the Canadian guest worker program to undocumented migration to the U.S. (Colby, 1997). In addition, government agencies have documented the importance of foreign workers to the survival of the horticultural industry (HRDC, 2002). This literature has neglected the economic and social impact of foreign farm workers on Ontario communities. This present report seeks to fill this gap.

The presence of tens of thousands of seasonal workers in the rural landscape for months on end has significant social and economic implications for Ontario's rural communities, as our research finds. For one, migrant workers are important consumers in the local economy. Not only do they purchase goods and services for their consumption while they reside in Canada, they take a considerable amount of goods purchased from local retailers with them when they return to their home countries. The importance of this clientele to local retailers, documented below, is visibly illustrated in the inventory of grocery stores and variety shops that now stock coconut milk, tortillas and *chipotle* peppers. Financial institutions such as banks and credit unions have adapted their services to meet the new needs created by the migrant work force, and wire transfers services have moved into the smallest of rural communities.

The social impacts are profound. As foreign workers participate in the economic and social life of the Ontario's rural communities, long time residents see the social fabric of their communities changing. Personal interaction between foreign workers and community members, however, tends to be limited to brief encounters in stores, banks, the mall or on the street. Despite the limited opportunity for personal interaction, community residents have formed concrete impressions of the workers, ranging from friendly and polite to pushy and rude. These sometimes distorted images are part of a process of social differentiation that has been observed elsewhere (Ley 1995, Mitchell 2000).

Unlike large immigrant reception centres, such as Toronto, small rural communities do not always possess the institutional infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of foreigners (Edgington et al. 2001). We selected two communities, Delhi and Simcoe, for a comparative study of economic and social impacts. Simcoe is the larger community with a denser institutional network than Delhi. Despite this difference, we found little variation in the economic and social impacts of foreign farm workers in the two communities.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Businesses

“[I]n Simcoe district it has become big business.” - Local grower, Simcoe

Our research found that foreign migrant workers represent an important local market. Retailers in Delhi and Simcoe perceived that migrant workers have a positive impact on local businesses, spending a significant amount of capital in communities with very little industry. The dollars stay in the community, particularly because the mobility of migrant farm workers is largely restricted in comparison to permanent residents who can travel to urban mega shops. One interviewee claimed:

“In our small communities like Delhi, and even in Tillsonburg and Simcoe, everybody seems to shop in bigger centers now like London or Hamilton... The migrant workers [are] more dictated where they will shop by where the farmer wants to bring them... So we are still getting the business that we probably wouldn't have gotten if there were local people working... [who] would go to London and stuff and shop in the malls.” (Manager, local business, Delhi)

Simcoe is a central hub where farmers bring their workers to do their shopping, as dozens of buses convene in the parking lots of malls and grocery stores. On Friday nights, Simcoe is considered “little Jamaica” for the merchants. The manager of a discount store in Simcoe stated:

“[E]conomically they [the foreign workers] are extremely important to the community. They provide a lot of work, and for us it's literally like Christmas. In September. That's the type of trade they bring to the community. And they bring it to many merchants; it's just not myself and the grocery store owners. They spend money all over town.”

Specific businesses that were experiencing benefits included grocery stores, restaurants, electronic retailers, hardware stores, and second-hand retailers.

Food retailers in the two study sites, such as the IGA (Delhi) and the A&P (Simcoe) have changed their inventory to include foods that are characteristic of Mexican and Caribbean cuisine. Even local retailers who do not specialize in food products have responded to the market demand. The Home Hardware in Delhi, for example, sells tortillas—the only food product carried by the store. New businesses have also been created, such as a Mexican grocery store, “Mi Paisano”¹ in Simcoe.

The A&P in Simcoe hosts a Mexican and Caribbean food section and stocks up on key products during the peak season. On Fridays the staff can be found stocking the section with cans of *jalepeños* and *chipotle* peppers, hot sauces, jerk sauces, bulk spices, dried beans, rice, coconut milk, condensed milk, carrot juice, and hard dough bread. A staff member of one of the local food retailers has also begun supplying the store with home-grown *tomatillos*.

The food retailers' attempts to target the foreign agricultural workforce is evident beyond the store stalls. Signs such as “welcome Mexican friends” are posted above the Mexican food section in the A&P and the flags of Barbados, Trinidad, Mexico and Jamaica hang in Simcoe's Giant Tiger, a retail discount store. One of the discount stores in Simcoe has installed a television in the shop's front hall to broadcast the World Cup soccer to cater specifically to the migrant workers. The manager of one of the food retailers, furthermore, also claims to have made efforts over the years to hire Spanish-speaking employees.

Examples such as these point to the economic significance of the temporary migrant work force for local food retailers. During the summer months, busloads of workers will arrive to do their weekly

¹ Meaning “my countryman” in English.

shopping at the A&P and Zellers in Simcoe. One food retailer estimated selling 30 or 40 cases of condensed milk weekly in peak season and up to 50 barbecue chickens on a Sunday. According to one interviewee, the “farm worker business” is the reason his business is still open and estimated that foreign agricultural workers: “represent a huge percentage of my business [...]. I can’t give you exact numbers are figures, but I will tell you that 36 percent of my business is on a Friday night” (June, 2002).

As a large sign on a steakhouse on the way out of Simcoe declaring Thursday night to be Mexican Night suggests, local restaurants also take a share of the migrant farm worker market. A bargain store in Simcoe that hosts a diner-style café can sell 50 chickens on a Friday night to the farm worker clientele. In Delhi, the Kentucky Fried Chicken is a popular dining spot for the farm workers. The manager of one fast food restaurant claims: “[In] our summer months, we really rely on offshore workers to boost our sales, so we do heavily depend on them here [...]. A major portion of our income is from the seasonal workers. When seasonal labour is gone and people are back to normal, everyday sales drop drastically.”

Retail stores in Delhi and Simcoe that have an important foreign worker clientele include electronic retailers, hardware stores, and second-hand shops.

Figure 1: Advertisement outside local retailer, Delhi



Hardware stores realize particular benefits. Migrant workers often outfit themselves for work at hardware stores, purchasing raincoats, gloves, and boots. In terms of sales, more important are the hardware and appliances that the migrant workers will export to their home countries.

“[Migrant farm workers] do a fair amount of business at places like Canadian Tire. One of the first things you often see when they get into the area, you see them walking by with a Canadian Tire catalogue [...] or a Home Hardware catalogue, so they have been over to the stores and they have got their catalogues, they are going to do

some shopping for their bunk house, decide what they want and then go back later to buy them” (Local merchant, Delhi).

One of the hardware stores in Delhi also stocks items atypical of their business such as tortillas and pre-paid phone cards. In addition, hardware stores realize benefits not only from their migrant worker clientele but also the expenditures farmers make on furnishing and maintaining the workers’ dwellings.

Retailers of electronics and appliance are other businesses that particularly benefit from the foreign agricultural work force. Workers will purchase televisions, video cassette recorders, DVD players, sound systems, microwaves and other appliances:

I don’t know if anyone’s tallied up just how much money they spend. But I would think that every worker that comes out would take at least a thousand dollars worth of products home with them. They load up these trailers with the goods that they buy and drive them to the airport of the end of the season. They buy a lot of appliances, and electronics stuff (Reporter, Simcoe).

Second-hand stores have also experienced positive benefits. In Simcoe, second hand shops, including the Salvation Army, have changed their business hours to stay open later on Fridays.

Financial Services

The banks in Delhi and Simcoe had modified their branch’s practices to deal with the demands corresponding to a substantial migrant workforce, in terms of both providing new services and extending their hours of operation. They have also experienced considerable growth in their money transfers to banks in Mexico and the Caribbean (see cover).

Both CIBC and the Bank of Montreal, for example, have a system whereby growers can fax in their payrolls for direct deposit into workers’ accounts. The initiative was an attempt to solve the congestion of migrant workers on payday, but also allows workers to use the ATM outside of working hours. Workers have opened accounts at these institutions to ease their transactions and also to avoid fees charged to non-members for cashing cheques. For example, one of the local banks put in new regulations whereby individuals without bank accounts suffered a \$5 service charge, even if the cheque was from a bank client (i.e. a grower).

In 2002, for example, CIBC’s branches in branches in Tillsonburg and Simcoe began opening later on Thursday nights, Friday nights and Saturdays; the Bank of Montreal closes later during the tobacco harvest, and a credit union stays open until 9 p.m. on Friday nights.

Wire transfer services, such as VIGO or Western Union, have cropped up in both the study sites. These services are accessed by a great number of workers. Even before the harvest, for example, one wire transfer operating out of a café in Delhi was sending money weekly for 30 to 40 workers.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

Community Perceptions

The foreign workers from Mexico and the Caribbean are very visible to the resident members of the two communities, as shoppers in local stores on Friday nights and as bicycle riders on rural and community roads. Moreover, the workers have become an integral part of the two communities. One respondent remarked: *“they are visible in the area and people know about them. But they’ve been around for such a long time that they have become part of the fabric of the area.”* The perception of foreign workers in

the two communities is generally positive. Most interviewees made comments such as “*they are very nice people, very polite*” and “*they are very good-natured people.*” Workers were also described as law-abiding, humble, respectful and “*a lot of fun.*”

Although most foreign migrant workers have only limited contact with community members, some workers play an active role in the community. Occasionally, a migrant worker assumes a pioneering role and serves as an ambassador for migrant workers as a whole. One respondent, commenting on the community role played by one migrant worker reports: “[*he*] is in the St. James United Church choir. So he really as part of the community. He's joined right into the community ... there's a good feeling between us.”

Taking a closer look at these community perceptions, however, we also uncovered racial stereotypes. These stereotypes were directed, in particular, against workers from the Caribbean countries. Some respondents, for example, believe that local residents stopped shopping on Friday nights to avoid not only the long lines, but also to avoid black shoppers. One resident claims: “*I went into Miracle Mart a few weeks ago, on a Friday night. And when I walked in all I could see were all these black faces. The manager came over to me, and said; 'Not a good night to come in, on Friday nights...'*” The physical appearance of non-European origin workers apparently threatens some community members. One respondent, who frequently visiting the farms where migrants work, explains this effect: “*I'll be blunt. I sat down in a room like that, in their home, and felt: whoa, geez! Like, you look around and you see 10 big black men walking around you.*” The fact that the vast majority of workers is male and come to Ontario without their wives and children further alienates the workers from community participation and probably perpetuates this racial threat.

Race relates to additional perceived differences between Mexican and Caribbean workers. A church official describes the perceptions of the two groups within his parish: “*And if you're talking about perceptions, the Mexicans are seen as being hard-working, family-oriented men. Who wish to return to their families. Whereas the Caribbean workers have gotten, I think, some bad publicity.*” These perceived differences were mentioned by other interviewees: “*I find the Jamaicans are worse, they are rude, pushier than the Mexicans; they seem more polite.*”

The perceived differences between Mexican and Caribbean workers shape their roles in the community and the local economy. One respondent, for example, suggests that Caribbean workers are more likely to contribute to the restaurant and entertainment industry than Mexican workers: “*The Jamaican fellows seem to go to the bars, but not the Mexicans.*” Some respondents observed that different consumption patterns and preferences among the two groups affect local businesses. A store owner notes different preferences for price and quality of products: “*The Mexicans will buy anything cheap, and the Jamaicans buy the nice stuff. I think that this is just a cultural difference; the Mexicans buy the inexpensive stuff and the Jamaicans look for quality.*” An employee of a different store remarks that the two groups consume different kinds of products: “*The Mexicans probably are buying more clothes and stuff like that, while the Jamaicans are into electronics, which is what we sell.*” A bank manager contributes his view on the spending habits among the two groups:

The Jamaicans and the ones from Trinidad and those other [Caribbean] countries, they spend a lot of money here. They almost spend as much as they make. But they are spending it in this area which is good for us, for the community, that they are spending their dollars here. But the Mexicans tend to save theirs up and most of theirs is sent back to Mexico to their families, yeah. We notice there is quite a difference in their cultures of course with those two, like with the Mexicans vs. the Jamaicans you can really noticed it in here [the bank] too.

Ironically, while workers from Jamaica and other Caribbean countries are seen as “troublemakers” and more “bossy” and less “gentle” than Mexican workers, they are appreciated as consumers who spend more of their incomes in local businesses.

Personal Interactions

The most obvious barrier to personal interaction between the foreign workers and the community is language. The lack of English among Mexican workers makes it “hard to get anything across beyond hello and goodbye.” Jamaican workers, on the other hand, have a particular advantage. One interviewee observes:

with the Jamaicans we can speak their language, their lingo is a little different but we can communicate. The Mexicans on the other hand, speak Spanish, they generally do not know English, we do not know Spanish so we have a hard time, we talk in hand signals and the write-down amounts on paper, so it is a little tougher for us to communicate with them.”

As a result of limited knowledge of English, Mexican workers often cluster in groups. “They usually come in a group and usually out of that group there is one that can speak English or understand enough to get us through it.”

Many interviewees noted that they have little or no interaction with the foreign workers beyond the formal transactions in their stores and businesses. Although some interviewees said that they occasionally receive a bottle of rum from migrant workers as a present when they return from Jamaica, most respondents noted that they “don’t know the workers personally” and that their interaction “tends to be a strictly business relationship.” One respondent summarizes the common view that migrant workers and community members do not interact much: “They do tend to stay amongst themselves. Although there are the adventurous few who will wander out, and mingle with the general population [...] Most people aren’t exposed to them.”

This lack of community interaction should not be interpreted as a lack of interest on the side of the migrant workers or the community. Rather, the offshore program does not promote community interaction. One respondent makes precisely this point: “I’ve never really seen the fellows interact with the community, except on Friday nights. They’re working. They’re not here to be entertained; they’re here to earn an income.”

Despite the lack of direct interaction between the local community and the workers, many interviewees harbour distorted images of migrant workers’ degree of involvement with local women. Anecdotal stories, such as the local woman “who was married and she ended up marrying one of her offshore workers, [...] abandoning her family and everything,” helped create gross stereotypes. For example: “They’ll spend six months with a woman, and their children here; often in subsidized housing. And then they’ve got their woman and children in Jamaica—or women.” The stereotype of sexually hyperactive migrant workers was quite common among our respondents, although only few had first-hand evidence. One respondent was particularly honest about his lack of first-hand knowledge: “[S]ome of them tend to mingle with the local people and we see some inter-marriage, so some of that happens. From a firsthand basis I don’t know of any particular examples.”

Institutional Outreach

The denser institutional network in Simcoe is associated with greater efforts of outreach towards the foreign workers, compared to Delhi. Consequently, opportunities to participate in the community exist in Simcoe which are not available in Delhi. For example,

“...the Rotary Club has strong ties with Jamaica, and this is historical, it goes back to when we used to have a medical officer of health who was from Jamaica. And from that very tenuous little link there’s been quite a lot of back and forth between Simcoe and various communities on the island.”

In addition, the farmers and the community host a barbeque for the foreign workers:

“...September, the very first thing we do, is have a barbeque out of one of the farms, and [a migrant worker] cooks Jamaican jerk chicken. So we get chicken from the local place here, we supply all the chicken, and he barbecues it on the BBQ and makes all the stuff, and the hot sauce and has rice and peas and all the other Jamaican stuff. And they’ll be a whole bunch of Jamaican people there, and a whole bunch of fringe people there from the community, and there will be 100 to 150 people.”

The Army Navy club in Simcoe offered migrant workers a place where they could congregate and socialize. Unfortunately, the club burned down in 2001. *“It was quite a place; it was a hopping place on the weekends. But it burned down. Now they don’t have a major meeting Hall.”* According to some interviewees, there is a need to provide a new mingling opportunity to the workers and the local community.

Most community interaction occurs in the churches. A respondent remarks: *“if I do have any interactions it is usually here in the church either in Delhi or LaSalette.”* Local churches have made efforts to welcome migrant workers into their community and to meet some of their social needs in both communities. For the Mexican workers, the Catholic church in La Salette (a small community north of Delhi) hosts a Catholic mass in Spanish every Sunday from the later part of July up until the end of September. The mass is often followed by a soccer game in the school across the street from the church. Apart from the mass, there are two other big events for migrant workers in La Salette to open and close the season. At the beginning of the summer, a parade is held in honour of Mexico’s patron saint, and the season closes symbolically on September the 15th with an Independence Day celebration, an event that can attract over 300 migrant workers.

Catholics in Simcoe have also responded to the migrant farm workers in their community. A Mission Action Committee operates out of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, which has been involved in distributing reflective tape and bicycle safety information to offshore workers

The Caribbean workers in the area have been targeted by the United Church through the Caribbean Workers Outreach Program (CWOP). This group provides a church service in Simcoe that is led by two ministers from Jamaica who will stay for four weeks at a time, in total for an eight week period. The pastors, brought to Canada by the CWOP, minister to the Jamaicans in the church and also visit the bunkhouses nightly during their stay in Canada. The CWOP is funded by the United Church through the United Church Mission and Outreach Committee. There is also a church twinning project that was an initiative of the CWOP. The St. James United Church twins with the Webster United Church in Kingston, Jamaica. Some Ontarions have gone to Jamaica to see how the workers live in their home countries, and Jamaican community leaders have also come to Canada stay with Ontario families.

CONCLUSION

The economic and social impacts of foreign farm workers are profound in the two communities we surveyed. Grocery stores, banks, hardware stores, building material suppliers and even restaurants benefit from the seasonal presence of the foreign workers. The added consumer power is particularly valuable for rural communities where the local service and business sectors have been contracting in recent years.

As a policy recommendation, we recommend that the Ontario Ministry of Food and Agriculture (OMAFRA) fund further research to quantitatively measure the impact of seasonal agricultural workers on rural economies. Furthermore, OMAFRA should consider encouraging the initiatives of rural businesses to adapt and respond to the market created by seasonal agricultural workers. This would help small businesses and better serve the needs of the migrant worker population.

The social impacts of migrant workers are varied. Generally, the communities are well aware of the presence of the migrant workers, as frequent encounters occur in local stores, shops and banks. Despite the workers' visibility in the community, however, few residents entertain personal relationships with the workers. The lack of personal interaction sometimes leads to distorted images of behaviour and attitudes. While some stereotypes may be based on racial judgments, many observations made by the respondents are legitimate, especially if they relate to first hand experiences about shopping behaviour. Business owners and sales personnel, for example, noted differences in consumption patterns between Mexican and Caribbean workers.

In addition, workers from Jamaica speak English, while most workers from Mexico lack English skills. For Jamaican workers, however, this relative advantage does not translate into better integration into the rural community. Rather, the opposite is the case. Many respondents perceive Jamaican workers as rude and bossy, while Mexicans are depicted as polite and humble.

As a policy recommendation, we suggest that community-based institutions in both Simcoe and Delhi focus on addressing existing stereotypes within the community, among their range of activities aimed at meeting the social needs of migrant workers. Part of such efforts could include cultivating images of migrant workers as economic and social assets rather than a cultural threat, hosting more community events to welcome the workers and to celebrate the communities' unique type of diversity, and encouraging the regular intermingling between locals and migrant workers in places such as the former Army Navy club.

Finally, we stress the need for more research. Our research was exploratory, focusing on depth rather than representativeness. Accordingly, our sample was small and targeted business owners, stake holders and community leaders. A future project could examine community representations of foreign farm workers by the general population in a more systematic and representative manner.

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APPENDIX

Method

We selected the two communities, Delhi and Simcoe, because the agricultural areas surrounding these communities employ large numbers of seasonal foreign workers. Yet, the two communities differ in size and the density of a network of institutions that provides services to the workers. One of the questions of interest was if and how size and density of institutional networks influence the perception of migrant workers by the community.

In the summer 2002 we conducted semi-structured interviews with non-purposive samples of local merchants, members of local NGOs, public servants and community members. The total sample size was 38 (Delhi 18, Simcoe 20). The interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative analysis software package. Field notes provided additional information.