

**STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES IN THE US AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM:  
ON THE BACKS OF OTHERS**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>Background</b> .....	3
<b>History of Immigration Policies</b> .....	3
<i>The Bracero Program</i> .....	4
<i>Operation Wetback</i> .....	4
<i>Prevention Through Deterrence</i> .....	5
<b>Issues Facing Migrant Farm Workers</b> .....	7
<b>Housing</b> .....	8
<i>Types</i> .....	9
<b>Wage</b> .....	10
<i>Wage Theft and Piece-Rate System</i> .....	11
<b>Health and Safety</b> .....	12
<i>Manual Labor and Heat Exhaustion</i> .....	13
<i>Pesticide Exposure</i> .....	14
<i>Health Care</i> .....	16
<b>Children and Education</b> .....	17
<i>Child Labor</i> .....	17
<i>Barriers to Education</i> .....	18
<b>Discussion: Current Initiatives and Future Solutions</b> .....	20

## Introduction

A recent report by Trish and Gabbard (2018) indicate that the overwhelming majority of farm workers in the United States are of Mexican descent (69%): A number that has reached nearly 3 million within the last several years. Of these, half are under the age of 35 with an average of 2 children per household, not including other occupants (Trish and Gabbard 2018). These individuals comprise the majority of our agricultural workforce while feeding hundreds of millions of Americans annually, yet political rhetoric and the racialization of these migrant workers has created an attitude reflected in our countries immigration and labor policies. Take for example the rhetoric of Donald Trump in 2016, who stated:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. [Hughey 2017, 127]

Statements like these trivialize the experiences of these families, who often travel roughly 20 miles through desolate terrains seeking asylum from structural violence and poverty in their country of origin (De León 2015). If these individuals survive without being captured while crossing the border, they likely find themselves working in one of the easiest to obtain jobs for an undocumented American: field labor. Although these jobs are readily available, they are by no means easy work. In fact, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH 2020), a CDC affiliate, agriculture ranks among one of most hazardous industries in the US for workers and their families. Aside from physical health, these individuals and their families suffer from a myriad of other structural inequalities, including fair access to housing that meets government standards, unequal pay, hazards to health and safety, barriers to health care, and lack of educational opportunities. Thus, the goal of this paper is to examine these

inequalities in greater detail. Migrant farm laborers risk their lives and the lives of their families to support an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars, yet these individuals can't even provide enough food to feed them or their families. To further examine this paradox, this research will be organized as follows: 1) A brief history assessing various immigration policies targeting migrants from our southern border, and 2) a comprehensive analysis of the various inequalities that these individuals and their families face, which include access to housing, fair wage, workplace protections for health and safety, and equal access to healthcare and education for adults and children alike. This will be followed with a brief discussion examining novel solutions and campaigns aimed at combatting these structural issues.

## **Background**

### **History of Immigration Policies**

America was built on the back of others: namely those from indigenous communities spanning the coasts of Africa and the continental United States. Although this practice has over 240 years of documented history, the scope of this paper examines several immigration policies aimed towards those individuals seeking refuge from the US-Mexican border beginning during the Second World War. Policies like the Bracero Program were designed to solve the labor shortages associated with the nationwide draft of American citizens in the 1930's (Leonard 2017). As time progressed and veterans returned, a political shift in attitude swept across the nation leading to a dramatic transformation in US immigration policy, specifically targeting those workers who comprised the Bracero program. Near the turn of the century, two political mandates were implemented to militarize the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), cracking down on immigration while funneling millions of taxpayer dollars into military grade equipment and training (De León 2015). Although migrant farm laborers and their families face a myriad of structural barriers in the US, it is crucial to understand the first experience that many

find themselves in before setting foot on American soil: Crossing the desolate borderlands. Thus, this section will briefly examine four immigration policies targeting migrants at the US-Mexican border.

### *The Bracero Program*

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the American Navy was bombed by Imperial Japan, prompting the US to enter the Second World War. As men were actively recruited by various branches of the military and women turned to industrial labor, the US lost the vast majority of its agricultural workforce. To remedy this issue, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his administration reached a series of agreements with the Mexican government that provided Mexican agricultural workers (braceros) legal access to the United States in the form of renewable permits (Leonard 2017). Leonard (2017) estimates that over 4 million braceros had enrolled in this program and worked in the US from 1942 to 1964. Although this program guaranteed its workers fair compensation and safe working conditions, these individuals were subjected to harsher conditions and poverty than they experienced in their country of origin. Once braceros were stationed at a farm, they signed a contract written in English that “guaranteed” the rights promised by the federal government. These documents were often manipulated to benefit the farm owners, allowing them to benefit from the influx of cheap labor (Leonard 2017). As the war ended and life returned to normal, the Bracero program was abolished, making way for harsher policies which ushered in an era that sought to reduce immigration and crack down on those seeking a better life.

### *Operation Wetback*

As the Second World War came to a close, the American workforce sought to reestablish its former self. To make create a job market for returning veterans, Dwight D. Eisenhower implemented a program named “Operation Wetback”: An aggressive campaign that criminalized and deported roughly 2 million people of Hispanic and Latinx descent to random areas across the

Mexican border in which they had no affiliation (Ngai 2004). This policy set a precedent for two practices that would continue for the next several decades: The recruitment and abuse of undocumented field laborers by farm owners that saw them as cheap labor, and the militarization of the CBP, which had nearly doubled in size since the war had ended. Thus, operation wetback standardized these above practices while paving the way for similar measures to be passed in the following decades.

### *Prevention Through Deterrence*

As time progressed into the mid-1990's and early 2000's, two important pieces of legislature were enacted by the Clinton and Bush Jr. administrations, respectively. In 1994, "Operation Gatekeeper" expanded the number of internal border patrol agents while bolstering ties between the CBP and other law enforcement agencies to combat the increased prevalence of border crossings (Nevins 2002). This policy was shortly followed in 2006 with the "Secure the Fence Act", which effectively brought the CBP into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bush Jr. (2006) authorized the construction of hundreds of miles of fencing, vehicle barriers, and checkpoints while increasing the use of advanced military technologies including cameras, satellites, and drones to reinforce border infrastructure. From 2001-2006, Bush Jr. (2006) had exponentially increased the CBP's spending budget from \$4.6 to \$10.4 billion and doubled the CBP agents from 9,000 to 18,000 while deporting more than 6 million people. This program also adopted a policy of "Prevention Through Deterrence", a method that systematically examined the southern border and identified areas of increased migrant activity to increase the number of apprehensions made (De León 2015). Using the desolate surrounding landscapes to their advantage, the CBP created choke points which would deter any future attempts at crossing (De León 2015).

Instead of decreasing the prevalence of border crossers, these policies have significantly increased the frequency of deaths to the point at which many contemporary researchers are

considering this issue to be a humanitarian crisis, leading to the mass killing of ethnic groups hailing from Mexico and Southern America. The effects of these policies are reflected in an excerpt from a 2010 Congress meeting stating:

‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ . . . has pushed unauthorized migration away from population centers and funneled it into more remote and hazardous border regions. This policy has had the *unintended consequence* of increasing the number of fatalities along the border, as unauthorized migrants attempt to cross over the inhospitable Arizona desert without adequate supplies of water. [De León 2015:34, emphasis added]

The physical and emotional effects of these policies are reflected in the novel research by Holmes (2013), who participates in a border crossing with his informants from Oaxaca (Figure 1). Holmes (2013) documents the harrowing stories of these individuals and their families: In one instance, a mother and her son were kidnapped for ransom, and in another, a man explained that he was raped by a Border Patrol agent in exchange for his freedom. Holmes (2013) explains that none of his informants had ever had a positive experience at the border, but the promises that awaited them on the other side was better than anything they could have ever hoped for in their country of origin, where a pair of pants or shoes often took two weeks salary to purchase.



*Figure 1: Holmes (2013:25) sleeping in trash bags with his companions while crossing the border.*

## **Issues Facing Migrant Farm Workers**

If one is successfully able to navigate the border without dying or getting caught, then they likely find themselves in a situation where they live in a crowded shack, earn well below minimum wage, are subjected to harmful pesticides and back breaking labor without access to health care, and have no attempt at securing an education for their children. It is important to remember that these individuals are the building blocks of our agricultural system: not only do they feed the families of American citizens, but they harvest enough crops to export to foreign countries, turning a profit for an industry where they are marginalized. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to thoroughly examine these issues in greater detail, contextualizing the lived experience that these individuals and their families encounter daily. Prior to this analysis, an important distinction must be made between H-2A visa holders and undocumented workers: H-2A visa holders are supplied a temporary work permit which falls under federal protections, whereas undocumented workers aren't afforded any rights or protections from employer



violations and abuse. Accordingly, Robinson et al. (2011) report that undocumented workers, an estimated 39% of the entire workforce, are more likely to encounter lower wages, wage theft, housing violations, and pesticide exposures. Since these individuals and their families lack proper documentation, their voices are suppressed: A factor likely owing to fears of apprehension and deportation, which some farmworkers leverage to increase profit for their business. This distinction is important because federal reports often reflect the statistics of H-2A visa holders, leaving the struggles faced by undocumented workers to the wayside (Robinson et al. 2011).

## **Housing**

Locating and securing affordable housing is one of the first issues faced by migrants and their families. Summers et al. (2015:2570) argue that these conditions are only one example of the structural vulnerabilities that migrant farmworkers often face, as this susceptibility is created through class-based economic exploitation, cultural and racial discrimination, and complementary processes of depreciated subjectivity formation. Overcrowding, lack of plumbing, pest infestations, and structural damage are common characteristics that comprise farmworker camps (Summers et al. 2015; Figures 2 and 3). Holmes (2013) documents two instances of the housing conditions he faced during his participant observation: In the first, one of the labor camps he visited was mistaken for a collection of chicken coops by a housing developer who recently toured the valley, and in the other, 19 people crammed into a three-bedroom, one-bath apartment in the slums. After working in the fields for roughly eight hours a day, these individuals return to an overcrowded living space where sanitation, especially after frequent pesticide exposure, isn't an option (Early et al. 2006). If the condition of these camps weren't bad enough, these locations are often hidden from public view. Summers et al. (2015) reveals that more than one third of 180 labor camps surveyed in east central North Carolina were

hidden from public view, situated roughly a quarter of a mile away from the nearest all-weather road.



*Figure 2: External conditions of grower-provided housing (Summers et al. 2016:12-13).*



*Figure 3: Examples from two migrant farm worker camps indicating variation in housing conditions: bedrooms (a and b); shower (b and c), and kitchens (e and f) in good vs. poor condition (Gustafson et al. 2014:1093).*

### *Types*

When assessing the housing market for potential dwellings, migrant farmworkers are often presented with two types of housing. The first, government housing, is only provided to documented workers: A recent report suggests that 60% of migrant farmworkers are undocumented (Hernandez and Gabbard 2018). This equates to an overwhelming majority of

migrant farmworkers and their families unable to qualify for subsidized housing, leaving them no other option than to pay for grower-owned facilities or create their own camps from abandoned structures or tents. Although the provision of housing by the grower is required by law, many smaller operations neglect this mandate. For those growers who do provide housing to their workers, most charge rent per individual while setting their own costs due to a lack of housing competition in these rural areas (Early et al. 2006; Summers et al. 2015). In other words, farmworkers toil in the fields daily for pennies on the dollar while exposing themselves to a myriad of health conditions, returning to an overcrowded shack where they pay an excessive amount of rent to their employers. The ability to secure and maintain housing after employment is intensified by the poverty-level wages offered by employers, who have continued to exploit labor laws established by the federal government since the Bracero Program in 1942.

## **Wage**

Another structural issue that migrant farmworkers face include low wages and wage theft. Robinson et al. (2011) report that these individuals earn roughly 35% less than do other occupations, and that the average income was almost \$7,000 in 2005. Although these numbers have risen to an average of \$17,900 annually, Bowers and Chand (2018) confirm that workers lacking H-2A visas earn roughly \$3,000 less than their visa-holding counterparts. Bowers and Chand (2018) also report that age and gender are significant factors in annual income, as female workers earned close to \$4,700 less a year than males while workers younger than 21 earned nearly \$5,700 a year less than those older than 21. The above numbers translate to over 25% of the workforce falling under the federally established poverty line, and these statistics are primarily from H-2A visa holders (Bowers and Chand 2018). The experiences and abuses suffered by undocumented workers are relatively difficult to find in academic literature, as these individuals are often omitted from federal statistics due to fears of deportation. These low wages

are intensified by wage theft and the implementation of the piece-rate system used on some farms, which is examined in further detail in the following section.

### *Wage Theft and Piece-Rate System*

Heine, Quandt, and Arcury (2017) report that farmworkers in the US are almost entirely excluded from key labor protection laws on the federal level, including the minimum wage and hours guarantee clause on the Fair Labor Standards Act, basic safety standards issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and collective bargaining protections found on the National Labor Relations Act (NRLA). Some growers are aware of these loopholes, taking advantage of them to save costs on labor. These abuses are further documented by Holmes (2013), who reports that growers in the Central Valley of California consistently paid workers well below minimum wage while firing them if they didn't meet the set quota for the day. Additionally, Holmes (2013) states that field supervisors were often requested by the owner to clock all workers in and out at same time daily, cutting them short on hours. Holmes (2013) documents a particularly disturbing account where field supervisors would charge migrant farmworkers for transportation from their camp to the field, which was situated roughly 3 miles away from the site. This rhetoric is reflected in an interview from a farm owner in Skagit Valley, Washington, who states:

The challenge for us at a management level is to maintain our fair share of the market...

The difference is that in South Carolina, they have federal minimum wages, \$5.75 an hour. In Washington, I'm paying a picker \$7.16, the state minimum wage, competing in the same market. That's a huge difference, huge difference. I would say the largest challenge . . . is probably offshore competition. For example, China: they could take a strawberry and bring it to San Francisco and deliver it to a restaurant cheaper than we can. And a lot cheaper to Japan. We pay \$7.16 an hour. In most countries that we're

talking about here, China or Chile or wherever, they don't pay that a day! [Holmes 2013:55]

Cases of wage theft increase dramatically on farms using the piece-rate system, which comprise roughly 8% of farming operations across the US (Bowers and Chand 2018). These operations diverge from minimum wage as they pay workers by the bucket or pound, disincentivizing them to take water and shade breaks as this would cut into their pay. Additionally, the rate per bucket is subject to change at the behest of the owner. Holmes (2013:72) reports that the “official contract pay for strawberry pickers is 14 cents per pound of strawberries, which requires pickers to bring in fifty-one pounds of deleafed strawberries every hour because the farm is required to pay Washington State minimum wage—\$7.16 at the time.” To meet this requirement, pickers take little to no breaks from 5:00 a.m. until the afternoon when that field is completed (Holmes 2013:72). In a several instances on a different farm, Holmes (2013:73) reports that the pay per bucket was subject to change by crop managers without warning or opportunity for negotiation. Ultimately, these regulations are only as strong as their enforcement. In the case of small farms, which fall outside the scope of federal regulation, wage protections are poorly enforced, especially for those individuals without an H-2A visa.

## **Health and Safety**

Perhaps the most damaging structural inequality that migrant farmworkers face are inadequate protections to their health and safety. Frank et al. (2004) reports that migrant workers are sicker than any other group in the US, suffering from a fatality rate seven time higher that of all workers while experiencing higher rates in nonfatal injuries, heart disease, and many forms of cancer, accompanied by increased risk of stillbirth and congenital birth defects in children born near farms. Furthermore, research by Gustafson et al. (2014) reveals that approximately one-third to one-half of agricultural workers report chronic symptoms associated with pesticide

exposure such as skin and eye irritation, headache, and flu-like conditions accompanied by other chronic conditions such as malnutrition, diabetes, anemia, memory problems, and dental problems, among others. Although some injuries related to this occupation are common in others, there are many that put migrant farmworkers at greater risk. Farm work is physically demanding, requiring laborers to perform habitual bending and picking motions while lifting hundreds of pounds of produce daily under extreme environmental conditions, leading to heat exhaustion and musculoskeletal conditions. Migrant farmworkers are frequently exposed to pesticides without proper safety and protection protocols, while overcrowded living quarters spreads these chemicals to other members of the household. To exacerbate these issues, an overwhelming majority of farmworkers face multiple barriers to healthcare, which include eligibility, transportation, and education. The following subsections will briefly examine each of these issues in more detail, as they pose a significant risk to the health and safety of migrant farmworkers and their families.

### *Manual Labor and Heat Exhaustion*

Migrant farmworkers are already at-risk before even setting foot in the agricultural fields, as the conditions in their country of origin expose them to numerous chronic and acute conditions (Holmes 2013). When subjected to habitual bending and stooping, heavy crates full of produce, and 100-degree summer days, these issues are exacerbated. McCurdy et al. (2003) report that nearly 10% of surveyed farmworkers (n=1,200) had experienced injury requiring medical intervention, such as a severe sprain or laceration, over the course of their work life. Similarly, Gustafson et al. (2014) report that over 75% of surveyed farmworkers (n=372) had experienced some form of skin condition due to the work environment. In addition to the manual labor required by this occupation, workers also face extreme climatic conditions in the form of heat. According to Frank et al. (2004), migrant farmworkers die from heat-related illness at a rate

20 times greater than the rest of the US civilian workers, a number that is likely underreported. In addition to these statistics, it is important to recall that those who work by piece-rate are disincentivized to take breaks, increasing the prevalence of injury and heat-related illnesses. If extreme heat exposure in the fields during a grueling day of work wasn't enough, migrant farmworkers often find themselves in the same conditions when they return home for the evening. According to Quandt et al. (2013), over 80% of surveyed households (n=170) fell within their low or moderate caution heat index, which ranged from 80-103 degrees Fahrenheit in the early and mid-summer. This statistic is reflected by Holmes (2013:49), who recounts that "During summer days, the rusty tin roofs of the units conduct the sun's heat like an oven, regularly bringing the inside to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. At night, the air is damp and cold, reaching below 32 degrees Fahrenheit during the blueberry season in the fall." Although manual labor and heat exhaustion pose an existential threat to migrant farmworkers and their families, exposure to harmful pesticides is even more hazardous.

### *Pesticide Exposure*

The recent application of pesticides in agricultural settings has significantly increased crop production while providing a larger return for farming operations, incentivizing owners to use these methods in their own ventures. Although the wholesale adoption of these chemicals may be beneficial to farm owners, the effects of these harmful chemicals have reverberated through the migrant community of workers. Research by Gustafson et al. (2014) reveals that approximately one-third to one-half of agricultural workers report chronic symptoms associated with pesticide exposure such as skin and eye irritation, headache, and flu-like conditions. The largest factor contributing to this statistic is employer negligence, who fail to educate their workers about the harmful effects of pesticides or provide them safety equipment and cleansing facilities. This is echoed by Holmes (2013), who reports that many of the pesticide warning

labels are printed in English (Figure 4) while the only education that workers received pertaining to pesticide use was through a cassette tape played in broken Spanish. Aside from direct exposure to pesticides in the fields, many workers carry these chemicals home on their clothing, subjecting other members of their households to these dangerous toxins. In their survey of 176 households, Arcury et al. (2014) found that over 90% contained the harmful pesticides used in the fields by the workers, exposing all occupants to their harmful effects. The occupational hazards associated with agricultural work, especially in the forms of physical labor, heat exhaustion, and pesticide exposure, pose a significant threat to the health and safety of migrant farmworkers and their families. When the time has come to diagnose and treat these issues, many of these individuals are unable to access the appropriate resources as they are confronted with several barriers to healthcare involving eligibility, cost, and transportation.



*Figure 4: Example of pesticide sign written in English (Holmes 2013:161).*



## *Health Care*

Perhaps the most critical issue threatening the health and safety of migrant farmworkers and their families is their access (or lack thereof) to healthcare. Most of these individuals lack preventative care in an industry where they are most at risk to injury, leading to the overwhelming number of grievances reported by Frank et al. (2004) and Gustafson et al. (2014). Unlike most other developed countries, the American system of healthcare is rather difficult to navigate and even harder to qualify for. This deters many migrant farmworkers and their families from seeking medical care, as they are confronted with a multitude of issues. Language and cultural barriers along with fears concerning immigration status and deportation are commonly cited reasons for failing to seek medical care, even in the dire situations described by Holmes (2013) where one individual declined to seek treatment after rupturing a tendon in his knee. Holmes (2012, 2013) argues that this burden falls upon the shoulders of healthcare workers, who only treat the physical symptoms presented by the patient rather than the social, cultural, and economic symptoms that these individuals embody throughout their lives. Aside from eligibility requirements needed to access healthcare, Holmes (2012, 2013) states that transportation is another issue faced by migrant farmworkers and their families, as they live in rural areas without access to a working vehicle or city bus routes. The inability for migrant farmworkers and their families to access healthcare and other medical resources is the culmination of this structural inequality, which threatens the health and safety of this group. Put simply, extended periods of physical labor in extreme heat coupled with chronic exposure to pesticides forces these groups to seek medical attention, where they face numerous language, cultural, and economic barriers before they can be properly diagnosed and treated.

## **Children and Education**

Perhaps the most vulnerable population subjected to these structural inequalities are the children of migrant farmworkers, who often find themselves working in the same fields as their parents. Not only does this expose them to the same health risks as their adult peers, but also reduces their ability to access formal education while staying engaged. As mentioned previously, the wage provided by working in the fields is often below the federal poverty level, indicating that many families struggle to make ends meet. In this all-too-common occurrence, children are called upon to support the family by working in the fields, taking away from their time in the classroom while perpetuating this generational system of inequalities. Thus, the purpose of this section is to briefly identify how child labor and access to education are concomitant factors, which work together to create and perpetuate this generational issue.

### *Child Labor*

According to Hess (2007), hundreds of thousands of children work as laborers in America's fields and orchards, as they are the least protected of all child workers (Figure 5). Children working in agriculture experience the smallest number of federal protections: The minimum age at which these individuals can begin work is 14, where every other industry has a minimum age of 16, while several exceptions have been proven to allow children as young as ten to work in the fields (Hess 2007). In other words, this law allows children to work in the fields while subjecting them to the same risks associated with their adult counterparts, namely health issues occurring from manual labor, heat exhaustion, and pesticide exposures, among others. Tucker (2000) reports that nearly all children interviewed by his organization worked on farms where sanitation requirements were not met, and when drinking water ran out, the only option was to buy overpriced sodas or beer from management. Hess (2007) reports that agricultural workers face a near epidemic of musculoskeletal disorders, and that children are most at risk

since they are still developing. Apart from issues stemming from physical labor, child laborers are exposed to almost double the rate of pesticides than adults (Hess 2007). Put simply, the health and safety of children who work in the fields are at greater risk for injury and pesticide related disease than their adult counterparts. These risks to health and safety are especially damaging because these individuals are still growing, as constant bouts of nutritional deficiency, illness, and injury can lead to a lifetime plagued with chronic issues. When required to work in the fields with their parents, children often trade their pencils and notebooks for gloves and a bucket, perpetuating this generational system of inequalities.



*Figure 5: (Left) 12-year-old girl carrying a heavy bucket of onions; (Right) 10-year-old boy harvesting onions, who has three years of experience under his belt (Hess 2007).*

### *Barriers to Education*

According to Hess (2007), the children of migrant farmworkers are most at-risk to drop out of school, as nearly 60% fail to complete high school. Factors that contribute to this statistic include barriers to language and culture, limitations to transportation, and frequent seasonal

mobility. In their annual report to the CDC, Hernandez and Gabbard (2018) record that nearly 80% of migrants surveyed spoke only Spanish (n=5,132), while Robinson et al. (2011) report a slightly higher statistic of 89%. In terms of the household, these numbers translate to children with little to no experience with English, making the schoolwork encountered in the classroom twice as difficult. When these children suffer from low grades and ridicule by their peers, cultural preference is given to the fields where youth are prompted to assist their family. In simpler terms, these children are often faced with two choices: 1) Work in the fields to sustain their families, or 2) attend an educational system which fails to understand the structural issues associated with their lives. Another barrier facing these children includes sufficient access to transportation, as members within the household are unlikely to own a working vehicle while bus routes rarely service rural areas where these camps are often situated (Hess 2007). In cases where migrant farmworkers are seasonal, meaning they travel to areas that are currently harvesting, these children are forced to change schools' multiple times. According to Hess (2007), child farmworkers may attend three to five different schools a year depending on their parent's seasonal work habits. For the child, this translates to varying curriculums, peers, and social hierarchies, which can be detrimental to both their education and social integration (Holmes 2013). The economic, social, and cultural strain placed upon these children creates a situation where sustaining their family becomes more important than furthering their education, leading to a generational pattern where children choose the fields over their education. As migrant farmworkers and their families comprise most of the agricultural workforce, farm owners benefit from this situation. This sentiment is reflected by a farm owner interviewed by Holmes (2013:56), who states "It's a multidimensional issue. What happens is that the first generation comes over and they're willing to work in the fields. But the next generation, they're schooled here, and they don't quite see the same passion for the fields." In summary, the conditions

associated with field labor pose a significant risk to the health and safety of migrant children, especially as it can lead to chronic health issues further down the road. In terms of education, which can be used to disrupt generational systems of inequality, these children face several obstacles in the forms of language and culture, limitations to transportation, and frequent seasonal mobility, among others.

## **Discussion: Current Initiatives and Future Solutions**

Migrant farm laborers place themselves and their families at the forefront of a food industry that trivializes their experiences. As if carrying the US system of agriculture on their backs wasn't enough, these individuals are confronted with a multitude of structural inequalities that have persisted for generations. If these individuals are fortunate enough to cross a border designed to kill them, they are subjected to hours of backbreaking labor for an employer that neglects their health and safety, steals from their paycheck, provides housing that has been mistaken for chicken coops, and ignores their desire to achieve a better life for their children, effectively perpetuating this system of inequalities for generations to come. Although migrant farmworkers continue to suffer from these inequalities, many organizations have been created to protect their rights while providing these historically powerless individuals' equal representation in the US court system. One of these is the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI): A conglomeration of grassroots initiatives aimed at combatting the structural inequalities experienced by migrant farmworkers across the nation (Scully-Ross and Boyle 2018). To address these issues, EFI developed a comprehensive set of labor, food safety, and environmental standards while cultivating relationships between these highly fragmented groups (worker and management), whose coordinated efforts have built new structures and processes that enable farmworkers to nurture and extend their knowledge of farming, allowing their voice to be heard when implementing new safety and working conditions on the farm (Scully-Ross and Boyle 2018:42-

43). Aside from campaigns like EFI, Hess (2007) and Holmes (2012, 2013) argue that consumers can combat this system of inequalities in two ways: 1) Support legislation that seeks to improve wage, safety, and working conditions for farmworkers and their families, and 2) use buying power to support growers that implement ethical and sustainable labor practices in their operations. In conclusion, combatting this system of inequalities goes beyond treating a single symptom, as these injustices are intertwined in a complex web of relatedness. These issues must be placed in their broader social, cultural, and economic contexts, starting with the humanitarian crisis occurring at the US-Mexico border and ending with the multitude of injustices these individuals and their families face daily in the fields. Although the US agricultural system falls on the back of others, organizations are mobilizing to empower these individuals while providing their children with a sustainable future away from the fields.

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