Food insecurity and the Canadian temporary farm labour migration regime: to what end?

Donald C Cole at PROOF on behalf of Anelyse Weiler, both University of Toronto, & Janet McLaughlin, Wilfrid Laurier University. 2016 Nov 17
MFW Workforce & Context

• Every year, hundreds of thousands of temporary foreign workers come to Canada – 567,977 (2014, Farraday 2016)
• About 38,000 are in agriculture
  – Seasonal Agricultural Program (SAWP) ~ 1966, through Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (FARMS).
  – “Low Skill Pilot Program” (LSPP) ~ 2002
  – Current name being used, Primary Agriculture Stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (Standing Committee report 2016)
Over a decade of research – qualitative, quantitative and clinical – in Ontario, Canada

- 450 hours of **participant observation** with migrant workers in Canada, including farm work (Hennebry, 2006), and spanning several years in Mexico, Jamaica and Canada (McLaughlin, 2009)

- **Quantitative survey on health issues** with nearly 600 migrant workers in Southern Ontario (2008-2009) (Hennebry, Preibisch, McLaughlin)

- **WSIB** Research Advisory Council-funded on MFW health issues and access, & involving health care professionals (Hennebry, McLaughlin, Pysklywec, Tew, Haines, Cole 2012 & 2014)

- Stakeholder, farmer and worker interviews in British Columbia (Weiler, 2014-15)

- **Hundreds of interviews with additional stakeholders:**
  - Canadian and sending-country country representatives
  - Employers
  - Civil society, labour and community groups, national and international
  - Health care providers, public health officials
A. Poverty as a Driver of Migration

• Approx. 9.8% of Mexico’s population live in extreme poverty (CONEVAL, 2013, p. 1), and 23.3% experience deprivation due to a lack of access to food (p. 15)

“We used to be able to live off of the land, but not anymore. .... All prices have increased, and the prices of food grown in the campo [field] haven’t changed, so ... we can buy less with our money. So for what we produce we can get very little money, but what we need to buy is very expensive. In every family at least one person must go; in many families many members must go.”

- Interview with village leader and former migrant, Mexico, 2006, JM
Migrant workers supporting Canadian food production – food sovereignty?

“We're to a point now really where it would cripple [sic] agriculture to remove the [SAWP] program. We ... can't be without it anymore” British Columbia Grower, 2013

Similar to concerns expressed in the UK around closing the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (Migration Advisory Cttee, 2013)
MFW supporting diversity of crops produced in Canada

“On my little road, within four miles, we've lost 2500 acres of horticultural crops, horticultural crops, in the last 20 years. It's all grain now. If all you want to eat is corn flakes, that's wonderful, but you know, it doesn't take much labour to grow grain.” -Ontario Grower, 2015
B. Principle Uses of MFW Remittances

• SAWP employment reduces the severity of migrants’ household’s immediate poverty, but their dependence on extremely precarious employment circumstances persists (Binford 2013).

• Providing for basic family needs, such as educating children, building and improving homes, maintaining the basics of life (food, clothing, etc.) and medical expenses (Binford 2013; Hennebry 2006; McLaughlin 2009; Wells et al. 2014). Similar to Barbadian households where remittances for food & utility bills (Wood & Watson, 2015)
Remittances, Food & Nutrition Security

• With migrant salaries, most families diversify their diets, include more nutritious food, and purchase food with more regularity, thus reducing or eliminating their previously experienced periods of hunger or malnutrition (McLaughlin 2009; Rosser 2011; Wells et al. 2014)

• Recent systematic review (Thow et al 2016) found remittances “reducing households’ vulnerability and leading to improved food security and reductions in underweight. However, remittances appear to have little effect on markers of chronic undernourishment[and]...that the extra income from remittances may compound trends toward purchasing less healthy (non-traditional) foods that are associated with the nutrition transition”
So MFW remittances may support sending household food security...

But what of MFW situation where they are working?
C. Agrarian Exceptionalism & Structural Conditions of Inequity

- ‘State of exception’ now the norm (Agamben, 2005; Hennebry & McLaughlin, 2012)
- Unfree labour regimes justified on basis of food security for high income country, preserving rural life, ‘international competitiveness’
- In Canada, Visas ‘tied’ to employers with dependence on employers for housing, transport, navigating health care - barriers to reporting or leaving abusive jobs
- Like MFW in the UK with labour intensification and low wages (Rogaly 2008) though not as extreme as ‘Gang’ labour in the horticultural and agricultural sectors (Strauss 2015)
Poor and dependent...MFW Food Insecurity

• Studies in multiple USA regions indicate significantly greater food insecurity i.e. a lack of secure access to sufficient food through dignified means among migrant /seasonal farm workers, compared to general population

• 82% of 100 sampled farm workers in Texas and New Mexico exhibited food insecurity, including 49% food insecure with hunger (Weigel et al. 2007).

• Low income, long working hours, limited access to transportation, and inadequate food preparation and storage space (Quandt et al. 2014) can lead farm workers to adopt diets focused on lower-cost, energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods that are less prone to spoilage than fresh produce and more readily available in a new cultural context (Cason et al., 2006)
Food Access & Preparation

• Limited access to usual foods:
  – “There are no *nopales* [cactus] to make you a smoothie…. we brought ourselves our tortillas and all that we can, we make *tamales* and *pozole*” (Interview, female migrant worker, Mexico, 2006, JM)

• Time for cooking:
  – The guys ... get off late from work and only have one stove, so they can’t all use it, so some of them have to cook the night before to make sure they can eat (Interview, Canadian migrant volunteer, Ontario, Canada, 2007, JM)

• Skills for cooking:
  – “you don’t know how to cook or wash or anything. It’s very difficult....I have to cook, wash, iron, everything. There is no help. (Interview, Mexican migrant worker, Ontario, Canada, 2007, JM)
Health Consequences

• Food insecurity can generate and exacerbate other health issues e.g. weight loss/overweight, negative mental health outcomes (Kilanowski 2012; Kiehne and Mendoza 2015; Weigel et al. 2007; Ip et al. 2015)

—“All of us lose weight..., because we work a lot and we don’t eat what we should eat” (Interviews with Mexican workers, 2007, Ontario, JM)

—“When I get nervous I want to eat. I get this because of tough work, missing Mexico, and problems in house,” remarked Patricia, a clinically overweight Mexican worker who gained over ten kilos in Canada
Health Outcome Data

• Limited fruit and vegetable intake, large fluid requirements in hot weather, result in gastrointestinal system health problems – acid reflux, constipation, and associated hemorrhoids.

• Norfolk Hospital Emergency room visits (2006-2010) by diagnosis/system
  – Gastrointestinal disorders 13.8% of visits

• Medical Repatriation data on MFWs (2000-2011) (Orkin et al 2014)
  – Digestive or gastroenterological disorders reason for repatriation in 11% (86/787)
D. Agenda for Future Research

1. Quantifying household food insecurity for migrant farm workers in Canada and sending-countries (longitudinal)
2. Better understanding of workers’ food security skills, knowledges and assets
3. Assessing extent to which migrant labour supports domestic food security vs. export-oriented profit
Policy Opportunities

1. Supporting more dignified livelihood alternatives and immigration pathways for sending country households. E.g. Duany 2010 suggests that better social protection in Puerto Rico means less remittances sent home.

2. Promoting food security for farm workers’ in Canada

3. Considering other ways to achieve Canadian food sovereignty (Desmarais et al 2011, NFU 2012)
In the meantime....food-relevant responses

• Farm employers provide small garden plots for growing vegetables or share farm produce with employees.

• Employers & community health centres provide nutrition lessons and cooking classes to small groups of workers.

• Employers at larger operations pay one worker to cook for the others, providing workers with healthy, culturally appropriate meals from a more experienced cook.

• Local immigrant entrepreneurs generate informal businesses selling culturally familiar ‘home-cooked’ meals to workers.

• Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples Food Bank provision
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Photo by Janet McLaughlin, courtesy of migranworkerhealth.ca
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