

Briefing no. 2

A LOOK INTO THE LIVES OF WISCONSIN'S IMMIGRANT DAIRY WORKERS

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Introduction

This fact sheet is the second in a series in which we present the results of our recent research on labor relations on Wisconsin dairy farms. This project pays special attention to the important role that Latino immigrants now play in Wisconsin's dairy industry. In this second document, we provide a brief look into the lives of these Latino immigrant workers and the social vulnerabilities they experience as both workers and full members of the communities in which they live and to which they contribute.²

immigrant workers perform routinized tasks such as milking or moving cows, positions with limited decision making responsibility. Tasks, shifts, wages, and benefits are described in greater detail in the third report of this series.

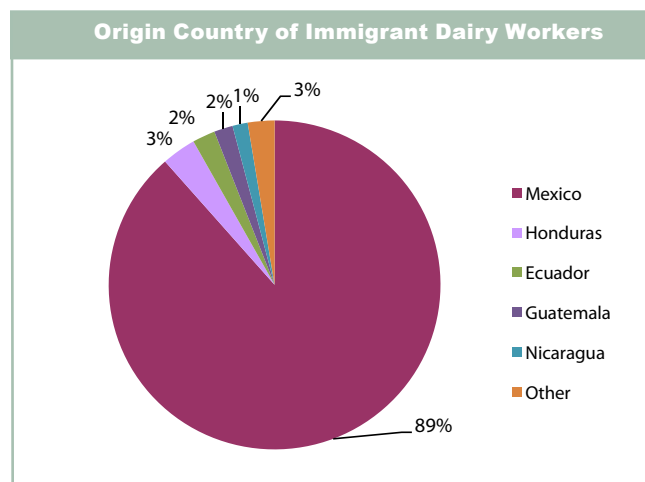
The stereotype of the solitary seasonal male farmworker does not fit Wisconsin's dairy workforce, as many immigrant dairy workers are here with their families. The average age for immigrant dairy workers in our survey is 29.5 years. The overwhelming majority of workers are male; of the immigrant workers we surveyed, 91.5 percent are male, and 8.5 percent are female. We believe that this is affected by the fact that we have oversampled larger farms in our survey; when we weight our survey data by the actual distribution of farms by farm size in Wisconsin, we estimate that 78.3 percent of immigrant dairy farm workers are male and 21.7 percent are female. Sixty-three percent of the immigrant workers we surveyed reported that they are married. Of these married workers, 85.5 percent are living with their spouse in Wisconsin: some fell in love and got married in the United States, while others married in their home country, immigrated alone, and then worked to save enough money to bring their spouse here later.

Who Works on Wisconsin Dairy Farms?

As elaborated in the first report in this series, Wisconsin's dairy farms rely increasingly on hired labor. Immigrant workers now comprise 40 percent of the state's dairy farm labor force; this is a recent trend that has emerged in just the past 10-15 years.

As the pie chart at right indicates, the vast majority (89%) of immigrant dairy workers in Wisconsin come from Mexico. Other workers come from Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Russia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, and Columbia.

According to our survey, Wisconsin's immigrant dairy farm workers do not change jobs or locations as frequently as workers in other agricultural jobs; the average immigrant dairy farm worker in Wisconsin in our survey has been working on his or her current farm for 2.8 years. Although some dairy farm jobs are seasonal, most are year-round because cows must be milked daily. In these year-round jobs, most



Sixty-eight percent of the immigrant dairy workers surveyed have children, with an average of three children each. 74 percent of these workers are living with their children in the United States, and 83 percent of those children attend school.³ Many of these children are bilingual. In fact, during the qualitative interviews, several immigrant parents noted that their children speak more English than Spanish, and that they have a difficult time getting their children to speak Spanish at home.

“There isn’t much to think about for ourselves, we must think about our children.”

-Milker and Mother from Mexico

Why They Migrate

These workers and their family members immigrate to the United States for the same reasons that people have always migrated from one region to another: poverty and lack of jobs at home, war and its devastating economic aftermath, desire to reunite with family members who have already migrated, and/or a family crisis – often medical – that creates debt and thus an urgent need to find well-paying jobs. Many people see no alternative to migration, since it is the only way to find a decent job that can support their families and keep their children in school.

Here are several real scenarios, told to us by dairy workers we interviewed:

- A 33-year-old Nicaraguan milker who is a father of five and who wants to be a teacher:

My family was very poor...I started first grade when I was 29 years old. I had to stop studying. I could not buy my notebooks and pencils. I went to Bluefields, Nicaragua, for six months to work on a palm plantation. The salary was \$4.00 a day. Sometimes I worked from 3:00am to 9:00pm collecting palm with a mule...It was very hard; I could not take it. I came directly to Madison because of family members here.

- Another Nicaraguan milker, father of one:

I was born in 1975, when the war started, in the farm land of Jinotega, half coffee, half cattle. In 1977, the army came and ate my father’s ten cows; in the war we lost everything. I remember the bombs when I was five years old...My family had to go. We left for Honduras. We lived in a refugee camp...In 1993, we came back [to Nicaragua] with

nothing, no house, no animals. The jungle had grown over everything and there were landmines. One of my uncles was killed by a landmine.

- This 23-year-old Mexican milker works on a multi-thousand-cow dairy farm. He left Mexico when he was 17. He is from a tiny village of some 200 corn farmers where everyone over 15 heads to the United States to find work because they cannot make a living on the land:

I did not want to come here. I wanted to study, but...there just isn’t the money. I didn’t have anything in Mexico. We were very poor with my parents and eight brothers and sisters. But I was happy... The reason I came here is very funny. I was with a girl on her 15th birthday and there it is the custom in Mexico to sell roses to couples but I did not have the money to buy her a rose. And that’s why I decided to come. There was no place to get that money. So I said to my brothers, you know what, I’m going.

Why Immigrant Dairy Workers Stay in Wisconsin

Like the Europeans who came to Wisconsin in previous eras of immigration, Latino immigrants stay in Wisconsin for a variety of reasons. Most immigrant dairy workers we surveyed were pulled here by economic opportunity, and the year-round and full-time nature of dairy work makes it a valuable form of employment. Additionally, many told us that they want to stay in Wisconsin because they simply like living here and/or because they have started to build satisfying lives here: “I like it here and I like the work.” “More and more time passed.” “I feel good here.” “I like living here. It’s very pretty.” “The people here are nicer than in California.” “In the little town of _____, Wisconsin, I feel good because it is peaceful.”

Schools in the U.S. are also a major draw for staying, and the immigrant parents we interviewed continually emphasized that their children’s education motivates the decisions they make about where to live and work. A 30-year-old milker and mother, who was a bilingual elementary school teacher in Mexico (Spanish and Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Mexico), explained:

There isn’t much to think about for ourselves, we must think about our children. I really like how the schools are here – very, very good. In Mexico, the quality of education is not good. My girl is in first grade [here] and she is learning to read and write. She already can add, subtract, things that in

Mexico, in first grade they do not teach. There are kids [in Mexico] that get up to high school without knowing how to read...She is really learning English. She's always following us around asking, 'How do you write this? How do you say this?'

Another immigrant dairy worker we interviewed pays for his children to go to a private Lutheran school, something he could never afford in Mexico. His children get more individual attention, he said, and his daughter is often up until midnight just to finish her homework. When we asked him to describe what dreams he has for himself and his family in ten years, he responded:

...In ten years I would like my children to have finished their studies and maybe they'll be married...the goal that I would really like, is for my children—that they get ahead. I want them to study...It's hard to live here with the climate and all, but it's also beautiful because your children have another kind of life.

Some immigrant workers decide to stay in Wisconsin because family in their home country cannot survive without the income they send home. This is the case of two female milkers, sisters, who came north to earn money to pay their mother's medical bills but desperately miss their village in Mexico; every day they are on the Internet, emailing their family in Mexico and exchanging photographs. One explained:

The thing I think about the most is my mother. She is alone and we are supporting her. We help her because she has to go to the doctor and the doctor is expensive. We would like to go back now for my mother. She is old and we are afraid she will get sick and something will happen. So we are always waiting.... When we came, it was really difficult to leave the family. It is so sad. Believe me, it is so sad.... It's hard to explain this thing with the family. And then the uncertainty when you leave them...

Others note that they want to stay in Wisconsin because they have developed meaningful relationships here. For example, several workers noted that they fell in love and married in the US. Additionally, as we discuss below, many Latino dairy workers have built relationships with their employers and neighbors and therefore now feel deeply invested in their jobs and communities.

That said, it must be noted that immigrants are not always welcomed by the community in which they settle. Most of the immigrants we interviewed spoke

highly of living in Wisconsin, yet there are multiple reasons to expect that their experiences are not entirely positive. Although Wisconsin reported zero hate crimes to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in its latest hate crime report for 2007, anti-immigrant, nativist sentiment and violence have been widely documented throughout the US, and several people we interviewed shared disconcerting stories of being discriminated against by local residents.⁴ Also, our research budget and timeline limited the level of rapport we developed with our respondents, which in turn surely inhibited a full discussion of emotionally difficult topics such as these.

Immigrant Contributions to Dairy Farms

Since many immigrant dairy workers do not speak English, the general public often assumes that they

"I want to learn everything—computers, all of it."

-23 year-old Mexican milker

are also uneducated. However, this perception does not fit reality: 37 percent of immigrant workers we surveyed reported at least eight years of schooling, 15 percent graduated from high school, and nearly 11 percent attended a university. It is important to recognize that high schools are few and far between in rural areas of Latin America, and attending a remote school requires the students' family to spend substantial resources for the student to travel and live away from home. As a result, completing high school is a luxury that many people cannot afford.

Despite heavy work schedules in the U.S., most of the workers we spoke with want to continue learning; 91 percent of the workers we surveyed said they want to advance and learn new skills like animal health care or machinery operation. One 23-year-old Mexican milker who works 12-hour days, from 5:00am to 5:00pm, told us he plans to hire a private tutor to learn English. He is also attending night school at a local technical college, which he hurries to after he finishes his 12-hour milking shift. When asked what classes he plans to take, he said:

...It would be great to learn everything because... you can go somewhere else where they need other things and then you know how to do it. I want to learn everything—computers, all of it.

The immigrant workers we surveyed also bring valuable agricultural skills to Wisconsin – 39 percent said they worked in agriculture in their home countries.

Some were highly skilled professionals in their countries; of the twelve workers we interviewed in-depth, one was a lawyer, another a world-traveled musician, and another was a bank administrator. One had completed a year of veterinary school before family matters required him to leave university; he described with pride his technical knowledge:

In Mexico I worked on a pig farm and in an artificial insemination laboratory. I prepared the dosages. Now I feed the cows but I also know how to inseminate them, cure mastitis, detect illnesses and turn their stomachs. I know how to do all of this.

These workers also expressed an intimate knowledge of the cows that they milk and feed, as well as a deep sense of responsibility for the work they do. Many of the milkers we interviewed say they know each cow just by the feel or sight of its teats, even though they all milk hundreds of cows each day. Since milkers see the same cows every day, they are the first to notice any health problems. Some diagnose these problems and try to eliminate the root causes. One worker described what is causing the mastitis outbreaks on several farms he has worked on:

If you go to where the sick cows are and look at the ones with mastitis...you'll see that 80 to 90 percent of the cows are sick in the right front teat. It's because that's the teat that [milkers] don't pay attention to. Also, if you clean one first, then another, when you hit that one, you're going to rub it with your hands and that will get it dirty.... That's why you have start cleaning from the back first.... You figure this out while you are milking...by using your head.... You have to pay attention to things. I am a person who likes to do things well. Really, really well. I like everything to be perfect.

Workers expressed great pride in their work and noted that they are contributing to their new communities: “I think that my work benefits the community.” “I produce for this country and I’ve been here a long time.” “I’m helping the town and my boss.” “I contribute here.” “I own a house. I pay taxes.”⁵ However, these ambitions and attachments are complicated and stymied by a lack of training opportunities and long working hours. Moreover, as we discuss below, legal status issues render quite vulnerable the employment and community relationships that many dairy workers have developed.

“We tried to find the correct way to come. We asked how to get a permit but it is not possible. They ask you to have a bank account and how old the account is, but we don’t have any money and that is why we come. Another prerequisite they ask for is that you own property. How could I have any property? I have nothing.”

-Milker from Mexico

Legal Issues

There are no official statistics on undocumented workers in Wisconsin, but experts believe that roughly 50 percent of immigrant workers in US agriculture lack legal authorization.⁶ The US government estimates that there are approximately 11.8 million unauthorized immigrants nationwide, most of whom have either overstayed their legal visas or have crossed into the US without legal authorization.⁷ This legal scenario is complicated by the fact that unauthorized immigrant workers are often the parents of children born in the United States – U.S. citizens.

In agriculture, as in other industries, unauthorized immigrants typically work with false documentation that they have acquired on the black market. They use this documentation to open bank accounts, pay taxes, and otherwise live as normal a life as possible while in the US.

Immigrants who choose to live and work in the US without legal authorization – and thus with a host of vulnerabilities, risks, and costs – do so largely because they do not have legal opportunities to immigrate. It can take years, even decades, for a Latin American to gain legal permission to enter and stay in the United States. This opportunity is only open to individuals with advanced degrees and a job offer, or to the immediate family members of a lawful legal resident or a US citizen.⁸ One milker from Mexico lamented this reality:

We tried to find the correct way to come. We asked how to get a permit but it is not possible. They ask you to have a bank account and how old the account is, but we don't have any money and that is why we come. Another prerequisite they ask for is that you own property. How could I have any property? I have nothing.

The other primary immigration doorway is the US’s H2A guestworker program. However, because it is for seasonal agricultural work, it does not meet dairy farmers’ year-round labor needs. As a result, dairy

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-Dairy Farm Worker from Mexico

farmers who cannot find sufficient US-born workers to fill the job openings on their farms tend to rely on informal social networks to acquire their immigrant employees, many of whom are falsely documented.

The primary problem that many immigrant dairy workers face is that there is currently no way for them to legalize their status in the United States. Consider the bureaucratic odyssey of this Mexican feeder in Wisconsin who has been trying to legalize for nine years: This worker paid three different lawyers – in three states – and spent at least \$4,000, yet he still has no legal authorization. His last effort shows how desperate he was to get legal status. While working in Wisconsin, immigrant workers told him about a Florida Indian tribe that claimed that if Latin American immigrants bought tribal memberships, they would be recognized as Native Americans and given permission to stay. After traveling to Florida with a group of 50 other immigrants to try and become legalized, the organizers stole his money.⁹ This story challenges the stereotype of immigrants as “illegals” taking advantage of the system. It is worth noting that this worker first entered the U.S. on a legal visa, speaks fluent English, helps his boss by recruiting other Spanish-speaking workers, often volunteers as a local translator in his Wisconsin community, and is also a highly skilled iron worker. In spite of these skills and investments, he lives in a state of fear and uncertainty: “The situation is very bad...I’m an example...I can’t go out...and walk around in peace.”

For workers and/or their family members who lack legal authorization to enter the US, immigration is a costly and dangerous affair. Many workers and their family members spend considerable money (ranging from \$3,000 to over \$10,000) for a ‘coyote’ – a smuggler – to facilitate the journey into the US, and the journey is fraught with the risk of environmental danger and physical violence.¹⁰

If the dairy worker has legal authorization to work in the U.S. and manages to secure a visa for his/her spouse, the cost is minimal compared to paying a

smuggler and running the risks involved. However, as the story below demonstrates, the visa process can be long, expensive and inconclusive. This Ecuadorean immigrant worker is a U.S. resident who has been trying to get a visa for his Ecuadorean wife and son for three years. He currently supervises 30 milkers on a very large dairy farm in Wisconsin:

I’ve never been able to bring them [wife and son]. It is very difficult. I applied in immigration but so many people are waiting. Each year they give like 50,000 visas for residents and the demand is over 80,000.... I think they are very behind.... It’s the biggest problem I’ve had and that every immigrant suffers...when you are married.... This is the most difficult part that the system has not understood about people from the other side of the border. You don’t know how hard it is until you live it. It is so hard.... The problem now is that there have been many terrorists. Because of them, we find the doors closed, people like us who have never done anything.... The laws got tougher. Before if you came here and if you conducted yourself well and all, you could stay and fix your immigration status. But now, no.... Time passes and time does not wait. For a married person, life is to be lived every day – you can’t wait five years until her residency is approved for her to come.

Recent changes in immigration policy enforcement practices have deepened this vulnerability. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a division of the Department of Homeland Security, has increased the number of workplace raids and deportations. ICE is also training local police forces to enforce federal immigration policy, meaning that any traffic stop for an unauthorized immigrant is a potential indefinite jail sentence, followed by deportation.

As a result, all workers who lack legal authorization – or who have family or friends in that position – live in constant fear of being arrested and deported, being separated from their family, losing their job and belongings, becoming unable to pay their debts, and potentially being prosecuted for violating immigration law. One worker from Mexico described how vulnerable his life is here in the US:

Look at how everything is happening. We know that we could lose everything, just like that. We could lose everything.... We are aware that we could lose everything. It would be hard to go back to the country that you are from, but it’s the children who are going to suffer the most.... They’ve spent their whole life here.

In such circumstances, driving a car – or being in public at all – can be incredibly risky. Several workers we interviewed said their fear of being apprehended is so great that they only leave home to go to work and, twice per month, to buy groceries. Heading into town for language classes – difficult enough for people who work over 60 hours per week, as many dairy employees do – becomes unthinkable in such a context. In short, the fear of deportation can make immigrant workers afraid to report workplace injuries, crimes by unscrupulous employers, or other work-related grievances.

Conclusion

Latino dairy workers in Wisconsin today are similar in many ways to the European farmworker immigrants

who came here in the past, particularly in regards to their reasons for coming to the United States. However, their current daily situation is very different. Changing immigration enforcement practices, especially policies that turn local police into federal immigration agents, make the border and surveillance a pervasive part of daily life for unauthorized immigrants, their friends and families, and the employers who have developed valuable relationships with them. The social vulnerabilities and inequalities facing this new population underscore the need for meaningful federal immigration reform that honors immigrants as both workers and full members of the communities in which they live and to which they contribute.

Endnotes

¹ Harrison is Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology at UW-Madison and is this project's principal investigator. Lloyd and O'Kane are graduate students at UW-Madison. This research was generously supported by the Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) at UW-Madison, USDA Hatch grant #WIS01272, and the Frederick H Buttell Professorship funds. We would like to recognize Julia McReynolds and Brent Valentine for their invaluable research assistance in 2006-2008, and Alan Turnquist, Sam Kanson-Benanav, Brad Barham, Jack Kloppenburg, Enrique Figueroa, John Bauknecht, and Dick Okray for their helpful insights on earlier drafts.

² The information we present in this series of documents showcases several new sources of original data. First, in early 2007, we conducted seven focus groups with a total of over 50 dairy and other farmers throughout Wisconsin. Second, in early 2008, we conducted a survey of 83 dairy farmers throughout Wisconsin and many of their non-family employees (103 US-born workers and 270 immigrant workers). We oversampled large farms in order to interview as many immigrant workers as possible. Although this was not a representative sample of the Wisconsin dairy farm labor force, we drew on other survey findings and statistically adjusted our data at several points in these documents (as indicated) in order to make our data representative of the entire state's dairy farm sector. Our surveys in 2008 were brief questionnaires conducted in person in the workplace by a bilingual researcher. Our survey probably does not fully capture the experiences of many temporary or informal dairy employees. Third, in early 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 immigrant workers and some of their family members in Spanish at their homes.

³ We assume that the remaining 17 percent are too young for school or too old for school, although it is certainly possible that some live with relatives in their native country or simply do not attend school here in the US.

⁴ We elaborate on these issues in the fourth report in this series.

⁵ When talking about their employers, interviewees all used the Spanish term "patrón" which means "boss." In Latin America, historically, the "patrón" has been a very powerful figure in worker's lives, much more so than an

"employer" in a U.S. context. On isolated coffee, banana, rubber and cotton plantations in Latin America, the patrón often exercised a life or death control over workers.

⁶ According to the US Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey, 53 percent of respondents in 2001-02 (the most recent available data) self-reported not having any legal authorization to be in the US (see NAWS Chapter 1 at: <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/chapter1.cfm#eligibility>). See also "New Immigrants in Rural Communities: The Challenges of Integration" in *Social Text* (2006; Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 81-98) and also "Uniting Two Cultures: Latino Immigrants in the Wisconsin Dairy Industry" by Brent Valentine (Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, September 2005).

⁷ "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2007" by Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, in "Population Estimates" September 2008. Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security: www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2007.pdf

⁸ "Visa Types for Immigrants," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_1326.html.

⁹ The purported tribe calls itself the "Pembina Nation." In August, 2008, the scam ended when federal officials arrested and charged four Florida residents with conspiracy to commit immigration fraud and the sale of fraudulent immigrations documents. See U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Bulletin on August 29, 2008: "Four individuals arrested on charges in connection with the sale of fraudulent Native American Indian documents to illegal aliens..." <http://www.ice.gov/pi/nr/0808/080829ftlauderdale.htm>

¹⁰ The fees charged by smugglers for individuals looking to cross without authorization into the US have widely been documented. See "Uniting Two Cultures: Latino Immigrants in the Wisconsin Dairy Industry" by Brent Valentine (Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, September 2005). For discussions of the dangerous nature of unauthorized border crossing systems, see work done by Charles Bowden, including "Exodus: Coyotes, Pollos, and the Promised Van" from *Mother Jones* (October 2006, pp. 36-51, 106).

The Program on Agricultural Technology Studies is a unit of the University of Wisconsin - Madison and of the University of Wisconsin - Cooperative Extension

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