

# Importing Poverty

Book Review by Wayne Lutton

**Poverty amid Prosperity: Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural California**

by J. Edward Taylor, Philip L. Martin, and Michael Fix  
Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press  
110 pages, \$21.50 paperback

The links between agribusiness, immigration, welfare use, and the demographic and economic transformation of rural California are revealed in this concise study. Based on U.S. Census data and community-level academic research reports, the authors of *Poverty amid Prosperity* find that highly profitable agri-operations, often owned by East Coast and Japanese concerns, annually import thousands of foreign workers to pick strawberries, broccoli, lettuce, cauliflower, and other high-value fruits and vegetables. Instead of employing Americans at decent wages, corporate owners use farm labor contractors (FLCs) who hire gangs of (largely illegal) aliens to do the work. Since the 1980s, farm worker earnings have plummeted 40 to 60 percent.

Many of the poor Mexicans recruited by the FLCs are electing to remain in the United States. Drawn here by agri-corporations, they are transforming rural sections of California from what were, as recently as the 1970s largely white and relatively prosperous areas, into poverty stricken tracts whose growing populations are making increasing demands on taxpayer supported public services. Thirteen federal programs serve only or primarily migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families.

Apologists for cheap farm labor try to scare consumers by charging that grocery store costs would skyrocket if they didn't have a steady annual supply of alien migrant workers, and that further mechanization of harvesting is not an option. The authors discount both of these assertions.

First, labor counts as a very small percentage of the retail price of food as it moves from the farm to the

grocery store. The end cost to consumers of a stable, better paid agricultural workforce would be measured in pennies, not hundreds of dollars, per year. This does not include the additional savings to taxpayers of potentially lower demands on public services from a more prosperous farming community.

Secondly, university-based agriculture school research into additional labor-saving harvest procedures and equipment, which made remarkable gains into the 1970s, has come to a virtual halt.

The authors summarize the situation:

*in the long run, the relationship between farm employment, immigration, and poverty is circular. The presence of low-skilled immigrant workers creates an incentive for farmers to expand their production of labor-intensive specialty crops. Increased employment in these crops, in turn, stimulates immigration.... The result is a patchwork of poverty and prosperity in rural areas, the juxtaposition of the world's most prosperous agricultural sector with growing concentrations of poverty in the towns that house the farm work force.... Taxpayers indirectly subsidize the expansion of labor-intensive agriculture by shouldering the public-assistance costs of supporting an impoverished farm worker population... Farmers do not factor these public-assistance needs of low-wage workers into their decisions to plant labor-intensive crops.*

Readers of this study will conclude that agribusiness cares nothing for the country they are based in and the people they exploit. It is also clear that the endless demand for cheap labor threatens to transform more than just one western state. What we are witnessing in California is a grim foreshadowing of what is likely to occur wherever corporate agriculture reigns. -//-

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