

# Migrants in Our Schools

**What are the facts concerning today's mobile population of workers, professional and service personnel? What do these statistics suggest for meeting the school needs of children of these migratory families?**

**H**AVE YOU moved recently? This year? Last year? Within the past five years? If the answer is yes, then you know something of the problem involved in changing homes, going from one school area to another, and in getting satisfactorily established in a new environment. If you had children in your household when you moved, there were additional complications for you and for them. And perchance for the school!

If you moved, you were one of the "one out of five" who move each year. According to the 1955 population survey, over 31,000,000 people in the United States moved during the year.<sup>1</sup> This was nearly one-fifth of the 158,600,000 persons in our country at that time. The study showed further that over 21,000,000 persons moved within their respective counties, and 10,400,000 moved into different counties. Of those who moved into different counties, about 5,500,000 moved within the same state, and nearly 5,000,000 moved to a different state. Furthermore, over a 15 month period at least 1,000,000 persons made two moves and another quarter of a million made three or more moves.

<sup>1</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1956*. (Seventy-seventh edition.) Washington, D. C., 1956, p. 40.

Thus it is clear that the population of the United States is mobile. Not only single individuals, but also thousands of families move from place to place each year. These families include millions of school age children. Among the 10,400,000 persons who move to different counties, there are approximately 1,329,000 children from 1-4 years of age. There are 1,600,000 from 5-13 years of age, and another 500,000 between 14-17 years of age. From these figures it can be seen at once that the schools of the nation are greatly involved in the give-and-take of population.

## Who Are the People Who Move?

The public schools have long expressed concern about the educational problems of the children of migratory farm laborers, but these individuals form only a part of the total picture. Among those who move most frequently today are farm managers, engineers, and military personnel. While there are slight differences, there is no one race, sex, or occupational group which predominates among those who move. Mobility studies dispel the assumption that movers are limited to economically poor groups. Actually the professional and skilled working groups combined are shown to

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be most mobile among the occupational groups.

This generalization is supported by an analysis<sup>2</sup> based on 1950 census findings. The figures show that the mobility rate among various occupational groups was much the same. For example, about 1 out of 5 managers, officials, and proprietors moved each year. The rate among non-farm laborers was 1 out of 4; among farm owners and professional people it was also about 1 out of 4. On April 1, 1954, there were nearly 1 million (927,000) persons abroad on various government and non-government assignments. Among this group are many military personnel. Thus we see that millions of people move each year and that all occupational groups are indeed involved in moving. A recognition of this phenomenon in American life must become a part of the thinking of those who plan for the general welfare of our people.

### Schools and the Mobile Population

As they move from place to place, the children in all these groups encounter problems related to going to school, and the schools, too, have problems. Does the pupil have a transfer record? In what grade should he be placed? Is there space for him in the already crowded school? Are there materials for him? Does he speak English? Has he attended school

<sup>2</sup> As reported by *Business Week*, September 13, 1952, p. 51, mobility rate among different occupational groups at that time was as follows: Among managers, proprietors, and officials 18 per cent; among non-farm laborers 25 per cent; among farm laborers 26 per cent; among professional people 23 per cent; and among farmers 24 per cent.

regularly in the past? What curriculum is suitable?

On the positive side, what can children who have moved contribute to the total school program? How can children who move serve, along with their parents, as ambassadors of good will, from community to community, from state to state?

Whatever the question, or the problem, the situation is magnified with respect to one group of children—namely, *the children of agricultural migrant workers*.

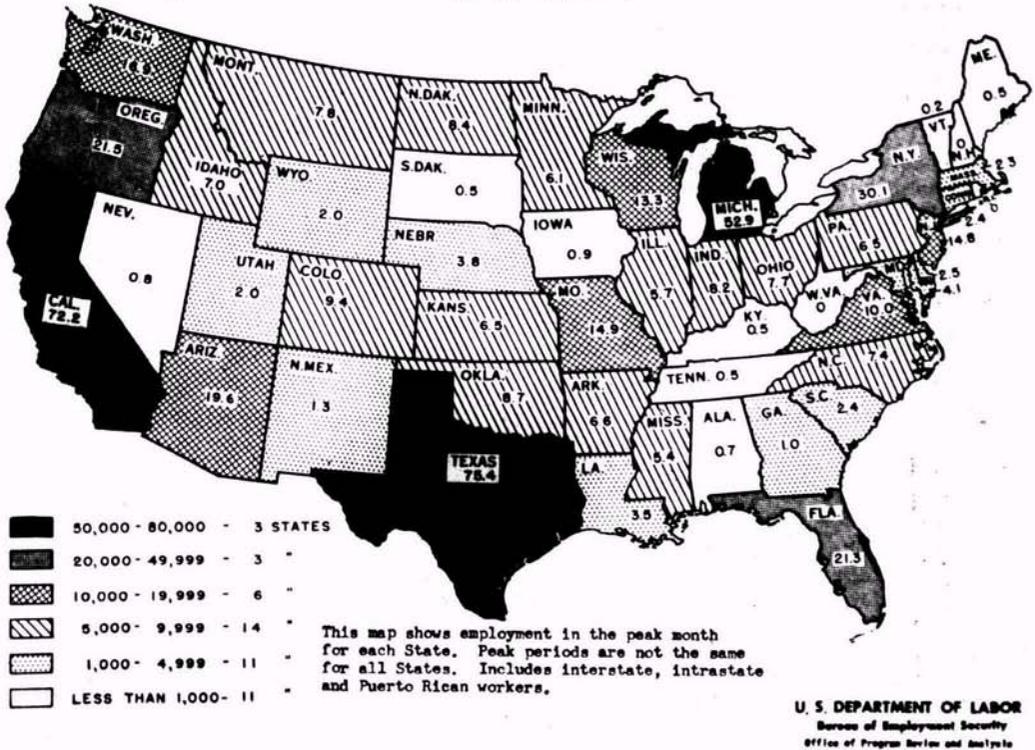
The parents in industrial, professional, and military occupations, for example, expect their children to go to school. It does not occur to them to keep their children out of school. Not so with many migrant agricultural families. The tradition of going to school is not strong among them, nor is the expectation strong in many communities that these children should go to school. Thus school attendance is a major problem associated with agricultural migrant children, but there are other problems also.

First, who are the agricultural migrants? They are the men, women and children who move from place to place to help harvest crops. They move northward in the spring and summer and southward in the summer and fall. They are individuals. They are families. Some move within states, some move between states. There are approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  million persons on the move. Of these, 500,000 are workers, men, women and children, for the most part over 14. One-fourth million are younger children and adults who do not work.<sup>3</sup>

There are four major routes or streams of movement—The Atlantic Coast stream, the Mississippi Valley stream, the Rocky Mountain stream, and the Pacific Coast

<sup>3</sup> These figures are from the President's Committee on Migratory Labor based on estimates made by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Labor.

PEAK EMPLOYMENT OF MIGRANT FARM WORKERS, 1955 (DOMESTIC)  
(IN THOUSANDS)



stream. The Atlantic Coast stream originates in Florida and includes the eastern states as far north as New York. The Mississippi Valley stream originates in Texas and branches northward into Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio on the East, and Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin on the west. The Rocky Mountain stream originates in Texas and "flows" northward to Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. The West Coast stream likewise originates in Texas, from which workers move through New Mexico, Arizona and into California, then northward to Oregon and Washington.

Innumerable variations occur in these routes, including east-west migration between the streams. Almost every state to some extent makes use of migratory agricultural labor.

Several studies have shown that the average years of schooling of migrants is low. A study<sup>4</sup> of a group of hundreds of Negroes in the Atlantic Coast stream showed the median years of school completed were 4.8 years. "The range in education attainment was very great. Fourteen per cent had not gone past the second grade; approximately a third had left school after the third or fourth grade, and another third after the fifth, sixth or seventh grades. Almost 20 per cent had completed grade school and 11 per cent had gone on to high school. Those who went to high school usually dropped out during the first year."

<sup>4</sup> "Migratory Farm Workers in the Atlantic Coast Stream," Circular No. 966, U. S. Department of Agriculture, p. 14. Washington, D. C., January 1955.

Not only is the total schooling of agricultural migrants low, but children in school are greatly retarded. A study by Greene<sup>5</sup> of 1,709 migrant children, ages 6-18, gives evidence on this point. A child is considered retarded if the number of years enrolled in school is greater than the grade last attended. By this definition, the 25 per cent in school for the first time in the first grade could not be considered retarded. "In the second year of school, over one-third of the children are held back in the first grade. Thereafter, the percentage of retarded children mounts steadily in each bracket up to 75 per cent retardation among those 9-years in school. . . . After the fourth year of school more than one half of the children are retarded two to five or more years."

In spite of all the difficulties in moving from school to school, a small percentage of these children were advanced.

The fact of educational retardation among migrant children and adults is related to a pattern of living and working which makes school attendance difficult. Thus one could begin to analyze the problem by asking, "How can better school attendance be encouraged?" Or one could approach the analysis through any one of a dozen other significant questions: What is the economic necessity that causes families to migrate with the crops? Why do many migrant families look upon their children as economic assets responsible for working in the fields? Why do many communities that depend on migrants for their economic security look upon these citizens as "not a part of the community?" Why is it difficult for migrants to achieve and maintain optimum health?

<sup>5</sup> Greene, Shirley E. *The Education of Migrant Children*, National Council of Agricultural Life and Labor. Published by: The Department of Rural Education, N.E.A. Washington, D. C., p. 76.

The various strands in this economic-sociological-educational situation are so interwoven that an examination of one strand leads inevitably to a look at other strands. The significance of these various strands can be appreciated if we look even briefly at the story of the Bendez family — Father Louis, Mother Maria, Jose 9, Gloria 8, Emilia 5, and Marcus 2.

It is late April and word has just reached them that Mr. Brown is getting a crew together to pick strawberries in another state. Work is slack so they decide to go along, as all but a few dollars of their money is gone. Last year, the whole family had earned only \$1,376. Perhaps this year would be better. The perennial hope! Jose and Gloria had been in school just a couple of months and a move now would take them out nearly two months before the end of the term. Early morning saw them loaded into a covered truck with three other families. No chance to tell the teacher they were leaving. No chance to pick up a record of their school work. No chance to say goodbye to the few friends they had made. Of course, some of their classmates were going north, but probably not to the same labor camps. After two days and nights of almost continuous driving, they arrived at a labor camp. They were assigned a cabin—one room for six. They were lucky to arrive early in the season. Some of the other cabins were very bad—much smaller, older, and without windows.

By now a week and a half had passed since Jose and Gloria left school, and in their new community only three weeks of school remained. They wanted to go to school, but Mrs. Bendez thought their clothes were too badly worn. With three or four days of work, they might buy some new clothes. But unfortunately, the rains had kept everyone out of the fields

and the meagre savings they had brought with them were nearly gone. Hardly enough for food.

Someone from the school visited the camp one day and invited Gloria and Jose to come the next day and told them where the school bus stopped. In the meantime, Mrs. Bendez and Gloria had washed and ironed some clothes left at the camp by a local church. So Gloria and Jose were to go to school—if only for three weeks.

The day was bright and both Mr. and Mrs. Bendez set out for the fields, leaving Emilia and Marcus at home. When it was time to go to school, Gloria and Jose were supposed to leave the little ones with an older girl in the next cabin, but this girl was sick, so Gloria stayed home.

Jose went to school. The children were friendly and the teacher smiled at him, yet he did not feel comfortable because he understood very little English. He decided to let Gloria go the next day—she knew more English words. But Mrs. Bendez thought the small children would be better off with Gloria—and Jose better off in school. So he went again—and for several days. He began to like it.

Then one morning his father announced the crew was moving into the next county. That was that. No more school—for in the next county only one more week of school remained. Well, Mrs. Bendez thought, next year will be better!

And next year is better for many agricultural migrant children in many places throughout the United States.

Fresno County, California, is such a place. A few years ago under the leadership of the health division of the Fresno County Coordinating Council, a small committee, later called the Rural Health and Education Committee, was formed to carry out a health and welfare project for many migrant families. Among the

first objectives of this committee were clinics to provide public health services and medical care for both children and adults and day-care centers for children of working mothers. The Rosenberg Foundation gave financial support to these efforts.

A project known as the Educational Program for Migrant Children was organized. In this project, the schools have worked hard to develop ways of improving school attendance, getting children started in school, teaching the learning skills, teaching a second language (most of the children speak Spanish and must learn English), and in many ways giving children the background necessary to make continued schooling a pleasure for them. *Teaching Children Who Move with the Crops*<sup>6</sup> was prepared in Fresno County to help teachers do a good job in working with migrant children.

In the fall of 1954, a pilot project was launched in Northampton County, Virginia, and in Palm Beach County, Florida. The project is now in its third year under the sponsorship of the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor.

No account of the education and welfare of agricultural migrants would be complete without special mention of the work of the Division of Home Missions, National Council of the Churches of Christ. Its Ministry to Migrants over the years has done perhaps more than any other private agency to "awaken the community to the opportunity and obligation of sharing with migrants the warmth and protective benefits of community life." Through the efforts of the Ministry to Migrants, many day-care centers and summer schools for migrant children have been organized. In addition, the Ministry

<sup>6</sup> *Teaching Children Who Move with the Crops*. Report and Recommendation of the Fresno County Project, Fresno, California, September 1955. County Superintendent of Schools.

to Migrants has provided educational, recreational and religious opportunities for migrant families.

Many other organized groups have a genuine concern for improving the welfare of the migrants. Among these are the Boy Scouts of America, the Girl Scouts of America, the National 4-H Clubs, the American Association of University Women, the National Child Labor Committee. The national offices of each of these organizations can supply further information about their respective programs.

#### *State and Federal Committees*

Interest in the welfare of agricultural migrants has waxed and waned over the years. In many respects, as judged by the growing number of state committees, the interest is at an all time high. For there are now active, official state committees in at least 13 states: Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and South Carolina. There are innumerable voluntary, unofficial and official local and county committees throughout the nation. Almost all of these have educators serving as committee members. Is there a problem and is there a committee in your community?

At the Federal level, there is the President's Committee on Migratory Labor. It was organized in 1954 to coordinate the activities of the various departments in their work related to migratory labor. This committee has made studies and issued publications dealing with transportation, housing, safety and taxation problems of farm employees. Through periodic meetings of the President's Committee on Migratory Labor, it has been possible for all concerned government agencies and departments to be familiar

with the programs of other departments and to work cooperatively on several of the problems of mutual concern.

The U. S. Office of Education, in cooperation with a committee of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the President's Committee is carrying on a number of activities designed to stimulate increased attention throughout the nation to the educational problems of migrant children. At least 40 of the state departments of education have designated a person to take leadership on this problem in the state and to work with educational leaders in other states on common and continuing school problems encountered by children on the move.

Thus at local, state and national levels, there is genuine interest in helping our agricultural migrant citizens achieve a fuller and richer life.

#### *Two Special Problems*

The phenomenon of mobility of our population, including school-age children, highlights two major questions regarding public education in the United States. The first concerns the curriculum. What curriculum adaptations are needed to assure continuous school progress for all pupils? Can children who move be sure they are not in some instances going to "miss" some important part of their schooling, or to "repeat" in other instances? Some educators, and many laymen have proposed the development of a "standardized" curriculum grade by grade. Others urge that the curriculum needs of mobile children may be met by teachers, giving sensible attention to the individual differences or needs of all children in the class, including the newcomers. They say that the range of difference in need and ability introduced into a class by mobile children is usually no greater than that already existing in a typical

classroom. The curriculum problem is one to which curriculum specialists must give further attention.

The other question concerns financial support of the public schools. Obviously, the right to move about in order to find a better job or to do one's present job in another place, or to find a pleasant environment is a generally accepted part of American citizenship. And it is clear

that people *do* move. Children who are educated in one state become residents of other states. Thus the question is how best to finance the schools to provide maximum educational opportunity for all children. Some argue the need for Federal assistance on the basis of the evidence of mobility. In answering the question of financing the schools the factor of mobility must certainly be considered.

MILDRED M. HOYT

## Newcomers as Resources

**A teacher's first concern is with the feelings of the newcomers. He then is eager to turn their knowledge of other places and their fresh point of view to good account academically.**

**N**INE-YEAR-OLD Helga skipped a little and then ran a little to keep pace with the rapid stride of Miss Purly, the school principal, as they covered the long hall to Helga's "new room." Helga was breathing hard and had a very strange feeling in her tummy as they came to the right door. The principal beckoned to the teacher as she steered Helga into a room full of boys and girls—thirty-two pairs of eyes all on Helga! After a hasty, whispered conference with Miss Kent, the teacher, Miss Purly departed. Miss Kent pointed out a distant desk and said, "Helga, you may sit back there for now. I'll take care of you when we have finished our spelling lesson." Helga made her way clumsily up an endless aisle and shriveled down into the seat indicated for her. Tears hovered threateningly back of her lids. She felt very small and very much alone.

Helga *was* alone, of course, because she was so entirely outside the group situation. The efficient teacher went on pronouncing words. The inquisitive children cast furtive glances at Helga while they wrote. No one was really *unkind*, but neither had a single person in this whole big school said a real word of welcome or given so much as a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Finally, to be sure, Helga would be drawn into the group because she was a charge and a responsibility. Finally, the teacher and the children would discover that this unprepossessing girl spoke both French and German passably, drew very good maps, and played the flute with mounting skill. But it is doubtful if this child herself would ever forget how clumsy, how unworthy, how unattractive, how unneeded she felt on that memorable first day in Miss Kent's fifth grade.

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