

TEACHER'S GUIDE
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MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

Social Effects of Migratory Labor

The following excerpt is from economist and social activist Paul S. Taylor's 1937 report on migratory farm labor. Already an expert on rural and agricultural economics by the time of the Great Depression, Taylor was hired by the Farm Security Administration to travel throughout the country studying and documenting the impact of the Depression and Dust Bowl on farm laborers. In this concluding section of the report, Taylor explains the difficult living and working conditions experienced by migratory farm laborers and their families.

Migratory agricultural labor is attended [accompanied] by characteristic social problems. First, earnings are low, with all that fact entails [involves]...

Second, housing of migrants (with of course the usual exceptions) is universally a serious problem... In California, the ragged camps of migrants squatting in filth by the roadside, in open fields, along ditch banks, or on garbage dumps fairly beggar description. Large growers frequently provide good housing, but smaller growers with short peak season are often unable to do this...

Third, migrants, like other farm workers, are left relatively unprotected by social security legislation. All the evils of migrant-labor life are aggravated when children must submit to its hardships. I shall mention only that migration cripples the education of the young...Indeed I know of school districts where Mexicans predominate, where in fact the non-attendance at school was preferred, so that the State aid given because of their presence in the district might be spent on the local white American children . . .

To sum it up, migratory farm labor is a focus of poverty, bad health, and evil housing conditions. Its availability in large numbers at low wages aids large-scale agriculture in its competition with the family farm. Migratory laborers are victims of all the prejudices of settled folk against outlanders and nomads, without the advantages of an organized group of their own. They are discriminated against by arbitrary and illegal blockades. They cannot participate in democracy. The education of their children is seriously impaired if not completely neglected. Race prejudices are heightened and labor conflict intensified. Migrants and public welfare suffer alike.

Source: Paul S. Taylor, *Migratory Farm Labor in the United States*, (Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, March, 1937), 10-12.

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