

History of the Bracero* Program, 1942-1964

The bracero program consisted of a series of bi-lateral agreements between Mexico and the United States between 1942 and 1964, enabling millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on short-term labor contracts. Credited by some as saving American agriculture and by others as being exploitative, the bracero program without question affected the business of farming, immigration patterns, organized labor, and even United States' and Mexican culture. During the twenty-two year life of the bracero program, more than 4.5 million Mexican nationals were legally contracted for work in the United States (some individuals returned several times on different contracts), making it the largest and most significant contract labor program in the 20th century in the United States.

Braceros primarily worked in agricultural areas of the United States. Small farmers, large growers, and farm associations alike employed braceros in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Arkansas--as well as 23 other states--to provide manpower during peak harvest and cultivation times. In the 1950s, sociologist and labor historian Ernesto Galarza estimated that in seasonal migration labor, one out of two jobs was filled by a bracero; effectively increasing competition and lowering wages for Mexican American laborers already living and working in the United States.

Politically, the bracero program was justified by labor shortages that many feared would occur with United States citizens going off to war. In 1917, WW I labor shortages were used to modify immigration law to allow a proto-bracero program. However it was not until 1942, and concerns about W.W.II labor shortages, that the bracero program was truly begun. On August 4, 1942 the United States concluded an intergovernmental agreement for the use of Mexican agricultural labor on United States farms (officially referred to as the Mexican Farm Labor Program), and the influx of legal temporary Mexican workers began. Concerns over production and the U.S. entry into the Korean conflict led to the temporary measure to be formalized with the passage of Public Law #78, the Mexican National Program, in August 1951. The law expired on December 31, 1964, when pressure from unions and moral activists made Congress unwilling to renew the legislation. Increasing mechanization in agriculture and enforcement of bracero program rules by the Department of Labor also had much to do with the growers' willingness to see the bracero program end.

In theory, the bracero program was not supposed to exploit Mexicans or Americans. In practice it affected some individuals in both groups adversely while providing limited opportunities to some, and plentiful, cheap, labor to growers. The bracero program guaranteed (on a bi-national level) payment of at least the prevailing area wage received by natives for performing a given task, employment for three fourths of the contract period (during the duration of the program contracts ranged from 4 weeks to 6 months), adequate, sanitary, and free housing, decent meals at reasonable prices, occupational insurance at employer's expense, and free transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract. Braceros were only supposed to be used in areas of certified domestic labor

shortage, and were not supposed to break strikes. In fact, most of these rules were not followed.

The impact of the bracero program continues to today. Many historians have linked the program to settlement patterns of Latinos in the United States, and many Latino families can trace an ancestor's involvement in the bracero program. Although bracero workers were supposed to return to Mexico at the end of their contract, some remained in the United States. Some who did return to Mexico eventually emigrated to the United States, aided by the experience and knowledge gained as bracero workers.

* The term “bracero” is derived from the Spanish word brazo meaning “arm,” and idiomatically refers to farm hand or labor for hire. More broadly “bracero” came to mean a legally-contracted Mexican farm worker as opposed to an undocumented worker.