

Section I.  
*Introduction and Overview*

*I-1. Purpose of the study:*

The Indigenous Farmworker Study (IFS)<sup>1</sup> was implemented in conjunction with the Indigenous Program of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA). The California Endowment funded the project with the goal of providing guidance for the design of policies and programs serving the indigenous farmworker community and of supporting indigenous organizations struggling to organize their own communities. The IFS builds on quite similar work done in the early 1990s by the California Institute for Rural Studies also in collaboration with CRLA.<sup>2</sup> This document shares the information and insights we collected from 2007 to 2009 about the history, languages, demography, and culture of indigenous farmworkers and outlines the economic and social challenges they face.

Immigration policies for managing flows, immigrant policies for integrating newcomers, and development policies in the places of origin have to adjust to the reality of a new, very different group of international migrants. Despite the deep understanding that indigenous leaders have of their own towns and networks, the indigenous community organizations themselves need to formulate an overview of the new migration patterns their communities are experiencing. And, the service delivery providers and foundations that seek to help the indigenous need complete information about the new occupants of the entry level farm jobs. And finally, public infrastructure needs to be customized to this unique group with distinct migration patterns, health care ideas, and methods of community organization.

*I-2 Who are indigenous farmworkers?*

In our study, we do not pretend to define a strict line between who is an indigenous Mexican and who is not. In considering this issue, one soon discovers that it is not for outsiders but for the indigenous community members themselves to identify who belongs to each of the indigenous groups. First, one must understand that the indigenous identity of the individual is usually shared with a group of people with the same language and often from the same locality. To be indigenous in Mexico encompasses identification with one of a huge variety of languages, groups and customs.<sup>3</sup> Still, in order to determine who to include in our study, we had to draw some rough distinctions. In making these distinctions, there is no implication of a racial genotype defining who is indigenous. We included only people from hometowns in Mexico where the Native American language is still spoken and where the obligations of community service, so

---

<sup>1</sup> Four seasoned farmworker researchers--Richard Mines, Sandra Nichols, Anna Garcia and David Runsten --staffed this project. The CRLA's indigenous-speaking Community Outreach Workers and private indigenous-speaking interviewers played the irreplaceable role of cultural intermediaries.

<sup>2</sup> For reports of the earlier studies see Zabin, Kearney, Garcia, et al. 1993 and Runsten and Kearney, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> For a subtle discussion of this issue see Navarette Linares, 2008, pp. 10-12,  
[http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?Itemid=24&option=com\\_docman](http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?Itemid=24&option=com_docman)

central to indigenous life, are still practiced.<sup>4</sup> We limited our study to people from indigenous towns whose people have a presence in California agriculture. There are many Mexican indigenous towns with settlements in California whose members do not work in agriculture. While recognizing that no strict line can be drawn, we nonetheless compare the unique social, demographic and economic characteristics of indigenous communities with other Mexicans. We label the non-indigenous Mexicans as mestizos.<sup>5</sup>

### *I-3 A new group enters at the bottom rung of the labor market:*

The indigenous farmworkers are the most recent of many groups that have occupied the bottom rung of the farm labor market in California. The U.S. food system has long been dependent on the influx of an ever-changing, newly-arrived group of workers that set the wages and working conditions at the entry level in the farm labor market. The indigenous workers are already dominant in many of the most arduous farm labor tasks (e.g. picking raisin grapes and strawberries). These entry-level conditions have been used to control (and limit) labor costs of the approximately 700,000-strong California farm labor force. The U.S. and Mexican societies continue to be confronted with the social costs of this system of labor utilization. The resolution of this problem has taken on a new complication as the newcomer immigrants are now increasingly indigenous-speaking Mexicans with a different history and patterns of migration, with different customs and of course, different languages. Approaches to facing this old problem now have to accommodate these “new immigrants.”

### *I-4 Indigenous farmworkers face extraordinary hardships:*

On average, the indigenous people living in Mexico are poorer, less educated, and have higher infant mortality rates than the mestizo population.<sup>6</sup> This is in part due to their isolation in remote areas. Though many thousands of indigenous have migrated to the large urban centers and border areas, the places where the majority of the people still speak indigenous languages and practice traditional indigenous customs tend to be small and remote towns. One contributor to their disadvantaged status is the systematic discrimination of the colonial and Mexican governments and the mestizo population in general toward the indigenous. As a group they have been intentionally deprived of employment and educational opportunities and public services commensurate with their share of the population. The lower levels of health, education and income for the indigenous as compared to the mestizos also exist in large Mexican cities, the Mexican border areas, and in California. In Section IV below, we detail the disadvantages faced by indigenous farmworkers as compared to other Mexican workers on California’s farms.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See Section V below for a full discussion of language and community obligations. See Section II for a discussion of the evolving place of the indigenous over the course of recent centuries.

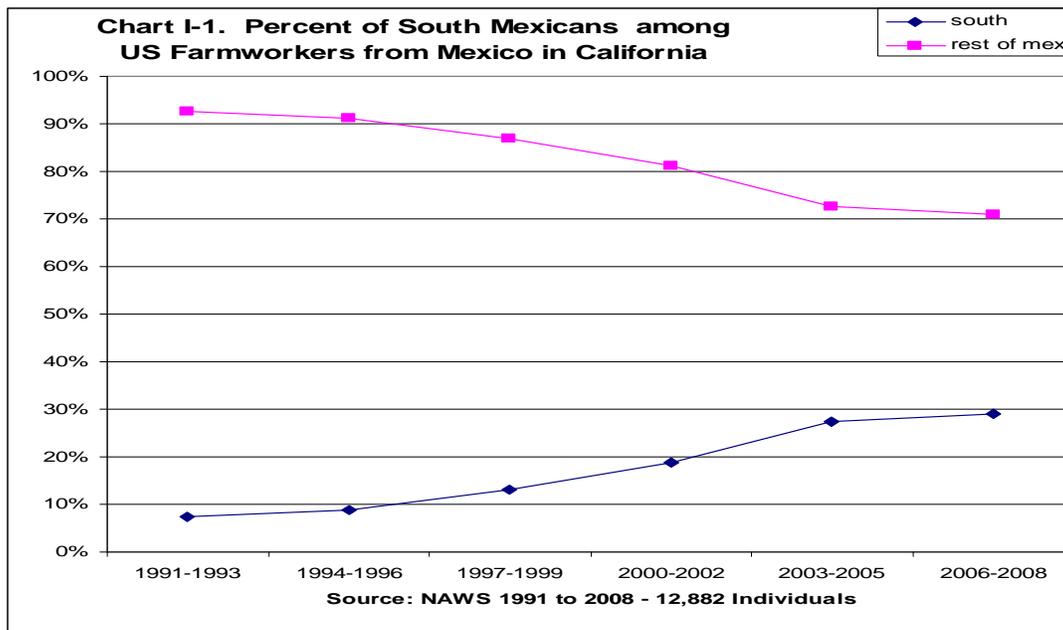
<sup>5</sup> Mestizos are first-language Spanish-speaking Mexicans who do not identify themselves as indigenous. Mestizo means “mixed” in Spanish and refers to people of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage.

<sup>6</sup> See Navarette Linares, 2008, pp. 105 to 112

<sup>7</sup> The authors analyzed the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) data from the Department of Labor for this report. (<http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/naws.cfm>) The survey, begun in 1988, takes a sample of about 2,500 farmworkers per year nationally, and about 700 in California. This survey makes it

*I-5 The indigenous expand their presence in California agriculture:*

Despite the relative isolation of the indigenous, the language barriers they face, the resource-based obstacles to travel, and the increasing difficulties of crossing the border for all Mexicans, the indigenous have figured out how to migrate in recent decades across the international border into the United States. In fact, the heavily indigenous swath of Mexico south of Mexico City that encompasses Guerrero, Puebla and Oaxaca has become as committed to cross-border migration as are the traditional ‘mestizo’ international migratory areas of the west-central region that began their treks northward many decades ago.<sup>8</sup> This expanded migration is clearly visible in the increase of southerners among all Mexican farmworkers in California.<sup>9</sup> We use southern Mexicans as a proxy for indigenous when analyzing the U.S. Department of Labor’s National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) data.<sup>10</sup> Chart I-1 demonstrates the enormous change in recent decades; the proportion of southerners grew by four times in less than two decades, from 7% in the 1991-1993 period, to 29% in the 2006-2008 period.<sup>11</sup>



clear that the indigenous group is the youngest, least settled, most poorly paid and housed, and most recently immigrated group of farmworkers. Comparisons between the indigenous and other Mexican farmworkers analyzed in the NAWS will be detailed in Section IV, below.

<sup>8</sup> See Paris Pombo, 2004, p. 1. The main sending states of the west-central region are Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Zacatecas.

<sup>9</sup> See Section II below for population estimates for indigenous Mexicans in rural California.

<sup>10</sup> The details of the choice of southern Mexicans as proxies for the indigenous are explained in Section II, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> The NAWS asks respondents to identify themselves by race (white, black, Asian, indigenous, etc.). The proportion of those who identify themselves by the racial category *indigenous* grew from a miniscule percentage in the 1991-1993 period to 23% by the 2006-2008 period for Mexicans working in California agriculture (N=12,843). For the effort being made to better identify the indigenous by NAWS staff see Gabbard, Kissam, Glassnapp, et al, 2008.

*I-6 The unique needs of California's indigenous farmworkers:*

In California, farmworkers in general and particularly the poorest ones, the indigenous, are undercounted by all the official census takers.<sup>12</sup> As will be shown in Section VIII, the inability to gather information about the indigenous population has led to widespread unawareness of this community's needs; and, in some cases, service providers may even be unaware of the community's existence. As we will explain in Sections V and VIII, the language barriers and the unique cultural traits of the population make it critical that customized programs be designed and implemented to accommodate the significant differences with other Mexican immigrants and the substantially greater barriers to access that the indigenous population faces. Under current conditions, the service providers, who more often than not would like to render the highest level of service possible, are being asked to accommodate a population that they do not know or understand.

*I-7 Indigenous Farmworker Study approach to special challenges:*

To study indigenous farmworkers entails several unusual challenges. First, they come from towns that are isolated with a long history of discrimination and exploitation by non-indigenous strangers. As a result, indigenous peoples tend to be difficult to approach. Their experience has taught them not to trust outsiders. The largest barrier is language, because although some speak Spanish well and most speak it to some extent, most prefer to speak in their own languages. Most have a limited Spanish vocabulary that constrains their ability to express what they are feeling. This presents great obstacles to data collection that consequently can only be accomplished through an intermediary group of cultural and linguistic interpreters.

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Count of Hometown Networks</i>	<i>CHTN</i>	Interviewed members of 350 Mexican Indigenous Sending Communities and gathered estimates of population and location of settlements
<i>Survey of Key Informants</i>	<i>SKI</i>	Gathered community-level data from leaders in 67 sending networks about jobs, U.S. and Mexican migration destinations (including the periods of outflows), and use of services by the network and the importance of community institutions
<i>Indigenous Community Survey</i>	<i>ICS</i>	For nine sending networks, the survey gathered information with 400 respondents about demography of the family, migration history of the respondent, housing arrangements, employment conditions and health care utilization.
<i>Provider Key Informant Interviews</i>	<i>PKI</i>	Gathered information on the experiences and point of view of providers of social services to indigenous farmworkers.

In light of these challenges, the IFS undertook a gradual process of building trust with the communities and devised a stepwise method of data collection (see summary in Table I-1). First, our indigenous-speaking interviewers spread out all over California and carried out a census-like *Count of Hometown Networks* gathering data on about 350 Mexican localities. For each of these networks, the interviewers asked questions of one or more

<sup>12</sup> See Jacobs and Kissam, 2002 and Gabbard, Kissam and Martin, 1993.

members of each network, allowing us to make population estimates for each network and to determine the distribution of its members across California.<sup>13</sup> Our next activity was to do interviews with community representatives from a few dozen sending towns, in order to get more in-depth information from which we could narrow our search for representative case study communities and deepen our understanding of indigenous farmworker migration. In the winter and spring of 2007-2008, the IFS chose 67 representative towns that encompassed the major language groups, places of origin and destinations in California. The *Survey of Key Informants* was done with a representative (or two) of each community. The survey gathered community-level data from the community leaders about jobs, U.S. and Mexican migration destinations (including the periods of outflows), the use of services by the network, and the importance of community institutions. The next step, in the spring and summer of 2008 was to visit the selected hometowns in central Mexico and their daughter border settlements in order to familiarize ourselves with the conditions in the places of origin and to ask permission of town authorities to conduct a detailed survey among their community members. In the fall and winter of 2008, we conducted the main data gathering of the IFS, the *Indigenous Community Survey*, in nine hometown networks in California. These nine communities cover four languages, two Mexican states, and include both deeply rooted and newcomer networks. The survey gathered information about demography of the family, migration history of the respondent, housing arrangements, employment conditions and health care utilization. The survey used universe lists (as best as could be obtained) of all people from the town living in California agricultural areas. Then, a selection technique was instituted for each town to include representative proportions of men and women, of old and young, of the unmarried, and of people with spouses and families in Mexico and those with their families in the United States. An average of over 40 respondents from each community were given an hour-long sit-down interview, often in their homes. This procedure has guaranteed a representative distribution of interviewees. Finally, during the winter of 2008-2009 and spring of 2009, we carried out *Provider Key Informant Interviews*. The point of view of providers completed the picture of the information gathered from the community families.

*I-8 What's in the different sections of the report:*

In Section II, we outline the history of the immigrant networks in their places of origin, elsewhere in Mexico, and in their settlement communities in California. Section III provides a brief introduction to our basic approach of using the hometown networks as the foundation upon which we build our study. A full explanation of this approach is found in Appendix II. Section IV describes the demographic traits of the population in a bi-national context and details the economic and social barriers faced by indigenous farmworkers. In Section V, we identify the language groups and the community organizational structures unique to the indigenous Mexican groups working in California's fields. Section VI describes the income and assets of the community and the working conditions and wages it faces in the labor market. In Section VII, the housing

---

<sup>13</sup> In addition, during the count we verified the presence in California of 150 other hometown Mexican indigenous networks for which we don't have population estimates.

arrangements and the level of crowdedness are detailed for the different parts of California. Section VIII explains in detail the barriers to health care, the social service needs of the indigenous community and the provider perspectives on the population.