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Abstract

This paper presents the results of research on the transition from primarily African American labor to primarily foreign, nonimmigrant (H-2B) labor in the blue crab processing labor force in North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland. In our analysis, we draw on three data bases: 1) a survey of H-2B workers conducted during the fall of 1993 and the spring of 1994; 2) interviews with past seafood processing workers, employers, and others in neighborhoods in eleven communities in North Carolina and Virginia near crab processing plants that have been utilizing H-2B workers; and 3) documentary evidence from court cases brought against seafood processing plant owners by H-2B workers. Analysis of 53 interviews with African American women in neighborhoods that traditionally supplied workers to blue crab processing plants suggests that those domestic workers who continue to rely on crab-picking jobs have seen an erosion of their household incomes. These are predominantly older workers with few alternative economic opportunities and few skills. Their incomes have suffered because there has been less work in the crab plants following the arrival of foreign workers, who constitute a resident labor force and are given priority at the plants when crab supplies are low. Because workers are paid piece rates, their earnings depend on the amount of crabs available to pick; virtually all workers interviewed agree that, since 1990, when the foreign workers first arrived, there have been fewer crabs per person in the plants. Nevertheless,

this has not resulted in plant owners refusing to hire domestic workers; quite the contrary, they actively recruit domestic workers and willingly hire domestic workers who have been laid off at other plants due to plant closures or seasonal shut-downs.

By contrast, some younger workers, following the influx of foreign workers, took the opportunity of the reduced work load to seek new jobs or enter training or educational programs and improve their economic positions relative to crab pickers. Some, however, finding conditions in the plants onerous with the foreign workers, quit work to collect various forms of government assistance or to rely on various family and underground support systems. Counties with high numbers of crab plants-Beaufort, Hyde, and Pamlico-have also experienced job growth in tourism and recreation (particularly ecotourism), in-home health care and nursing/nursing homes, and jobs associated with increased traffic through the counties (e.g. fast food restaurants). It is toward these industries and occupations that the younger displaced crab workers have migrated. Forestry, fishing, and agriculture remain important occupations for the household members of crab pickers, although many of the jobs in these industries have also been the target of seasonal migrant crews in the past few years.

Introduction

Throughout the rural South, poverty, racism, and seasonal fluctuations in work and income have created an environment where survival depends on developing several activities that either increase incomes or reduce consumption costs. Recently, declining subsistence security around the world (Nash 1994), combined with transfer of many costs formerly assumed by employers and the state to individuals and households (GAO 1997a, 1997b; Newman 1988), have led more and more families to rely on the multiple livelihoods that once characterized impoverished rural pockets in the South (Collins 1990: 5). Typically, these survival behaviors involve mixing waged work with work more commonly associated with household reproduction (shopping, child care, cooking, home maintenance and repairs, etc.) and other unwaged work (cottage industries, informal economic activities, etc. (Gimenez 1990: 33). In these cases, often the work household members devote to neighborhoods and social networks become as important to the household members' well being as those activities that generate income in the form of cash, food, shelter, and so forth. Such relationships, often the basis of migration and labor recruitment, may develop to the point where simple exchanges of information and contacts become more complex exchanges of gifts, personal services, cultural knowledge, and other goods, generally improving one's quality of life.

In the rural South, particularly in African American communities, women initiate and deepen these relationships more often than men, and more often their relationships are formed with other women. Several factors account for this. Most obviously, childcare responsibilities typically fall to women, which lay the foundation for their assuming additional responsibilities associated with the health and welfare of the children themselves and the spaces in which children move—primarily homes and households, but also day care centers, preschools and schools, parks and other play areas, and neighborhoods. Benson's work in two rural trailer courts in Garden City, Kansas, found that these spaces and these responsibilities often precipitate relations among women, although these are usually truncated by ethnic boundaries (1990: 377-378). Recognizing these behaviors, the state has developed several programs either oriented specifically toward women (WIC) or utilized primarily by women (AFDC and Food Stamps) (GAO 1997a, 1997b). These programs endow relationships between low-income women based on children with a measure of political legitimacy, yet other state behaviors towards low-income (especially minority low-income) individuals, particularly those emanating from the judicial branch, send negative signals regarding low-income households' relations with the state (Gibson-Carpenter and Carpenter 1997; Hahamovitch 1997: 10-11; Cecelski 1994). When poor families incorporate state programs into multiple livelihoods, it further reinforces the importance of women in household survival strategies.

In many small coastal communities of Eastern North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia, one aspect of many low-income households' multiple livelihoods has been their involvement in various sectors of the fishing industry, an industry that shares many characteristics with agriculture: it is highly seasonal, with highly valued products sometime available only during brief periods during the year; it is heterogeneous in terms of sizes of operations, organizational forms (e.g. family, corporate, incorporated families), labor intensity, enterprises mixes, and proximity to urban markets; and in many places the industry has been adversely affected by coastal gentrification, a process similar to suburban encroachment on farm land. Rural peoples of the mid-Atlantic depend on the region's fishing industry and marine resources as sources of employment, cash income, subsistence, and recreation, as well as a source of identity and heritage (Ballance 1989; Forest 1988; Griffith 1996, 1994; Lawson 1988; Taylor 1992; Warner 1975). Particularly important fisheries today include the blue crab industry, with fresh hard crab, processed crab meat, and specialty soft-shelled crab sectors; the industrialized menhaden industry, which extracts fish oils for cosmetics and rustproofing and relies heavily on African American families in the plants and on the fishing vessels (Garrity-Blake 1995); the highly seasonal but historically important springtime herring fisheries, which yield large numbers of river herring and shad that are easily preserved for year-round use through smoking or salting; and several seasonally abundant species of finfish (Atlantic croaker, spot, and flounder).

Several recent developments, many of state origin or with heavy state backing, have threatened the extent to which low-income families in these areas can continue to rely on fishing for principal or supplemental sources of

income. More stringent licensing requirements, gear restrictions, and area or season closures have been enacted up and down the eastern seaboard, creating more competition in those areas and those fisheries that remain open to all and constricting the practice of moving among several fisheries or areas through the year.

In some areas, these changes have occurred at the same time immigrants have begun entering the fishing and seafood processing industries. While immigrants in seafood processing and ethnic enclaves of fishers are common in several ports around the United States (New Bedford and Gloucester, Massachusetts, for example), immigrants entering the Mid- and South Atlantic fisheries is a new phenomenon in several areas. In particular, the recent influxes of Vietnamese fishermen into Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia have caused crowding problems and, in some cases, speeded vertical integration and capital concentration; the use of Mexican workers on blue crab boats in North Carolina has caused several conflicts between independent crab fishermen and processing houses. The subject of this paper has been somewhat less controversial, although potentially equally disruptive: this is the growing use, since the late 1980s, of H-2B workers from Mexico to perform the work of processing blue crab.

Character of the Blue Crab Industry in North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland

The Work of Blue Crab Processing

The processing of blue crab meat in North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland takes place in isolated rural locations in counties with few alternative employment opportunities; many of the jobs available, like crab processing, are seasonal jobs in agriculture, fishing, forestry, and tourism. Several characteristics of crab processing have undermined the industry's ability to attract and retain reliable workers: in addition to being seasonal, the task is tedious and repetitive, payment is by piece, the amount of work and hours are unpredictable, fluctuating from day to day, the potential for injury is high, and the working settings are often malodorous and uncomfortable. The task itself consists of extracting meat from cooked, cooled blue crabs, demanding patience and a level of technical skill appreciated by anyone who has ever performed the task. It isn't easy work. One reason the white lump meat, free of shell, commands a retail price of as much as thirteen dollars per pound is that most people would rather have women in remote concrete buildings pick the meat from the crabs than tear up their own fingers.

Pickers receive the crabs at work stations in shovelfuls. Pickers take up one after another and work a knife under and then around the rim of each carapace, lifting off the top and separating viscera and fat from meat with further deft swipes of the knife. Usually women, the workers who perform this task, in most picking houses, earn piece rates instead of hourly wages. The big "lump" crabmeat pays \$1.70 to \$2.00 per pound while the flakes and shavings from the legs and more inaccessible reaches of the crab's insides may bring only \$1.35 or \$1.50, and the fat and refuse, used for pet foods, as little as fifty cents. On a good day a good picker can earn up to sixty or seventy dollars, but most earn around forty. Frustrating their earning capability is the supply of crab, rising and falling daily and weekly through the season. On some days the pickers have gone through all the cooked crab by ten in the morning, picking only a few pounds apiece. On others, arriving at first light, they stay well into the afternoon.

Geographical Distribution of Crab Plants

Of the three states that use H-2B workers in the crab industry, North Carolina has the largest number of blue crab plants and the most employees, with between 28 and 30 total plants and between 1500 and 1600 employees. Virginia and Maryland have substantially fewer plants, between 10 and 15 each, and employ under 500 workers. The number of plants fluctuates from year to year as plants open and close or phase back and expand their range of operations; the number of workers changes through the season, depending on the availability of crab, itself a function of weather, water quality, plants' trade relations with seafood dealers and crabbers, and the use of fishing vessels. North Carolina's plants are more geographically dispersed than those in Maryland and Virginia, larger, and somewhat newer; the crab industry in the Chesapeake is much older than the industry in North Carolina, dating back to the late 19th century, when Crisfield, Maryland satisfied the demand for crabmeat throughout Baltimore, New York, and other eastern metropolitan areas. Exporting crabmeat was constrained through the 19th century by poorly developed infrastructure and the high perishability of crabmeat (Taylor 1992: 29). In communities where today some of the most productive crabbers live, the first roads were not built until 1929 (Forrest 1988: 46). Until the development of refrigeration and the bridges and roads linking the diverse peninsulas and barrier islands of the Albemarle Pamlico Estuarine System, around World War I, North Carolina's industry remained overshadowed by crab production in the Chesapeake.

Over the past twenty years, by contrast, various problems with water quality, urban development, and regulations in and around the Chesapeake have led to fluctuating and unpredictable crab populations, deteriorating labor supplies in crab plants and for crew on crab vessels, and discouraged crabbers who recommend that their sons take up other occupations (Lawson 1988; Griffith 1994). With each setback suffered by the Chesapeake, North Carolina crabbers and crab plants have worked to improve their relations with seafood wholesalers based in Baltimore and New York.

Until the mid-1980s, part of the continued success of North Carolina crab processors was due to their abilities to access, through network ties, three generations of primarily African American labor who had few alternative economic opportunities. Historically, crab processing plant owners in the Mid-Atlantic region recruited workers through networks of African American women and men in neighborhoods near the plants (Griffith 1993). These jobs served as sources of social capital for African American networks, where access to jobs through ties of friendship and kinship served to strengthen these ties and the support and resources that flowed through the networks.

The crab season lasts from April or May to October or November, and typically women would return to work after winters of collecting unemployment insurance benefits, relying on transfer payments and the social supports of households and networks, engaging in informal economic activities (breeding dogs, child care, raising livestock, producing crafts, fishing, etc.), or working other part-time jobs. In interviews conducted between 1985 and 1993, processing plant owners claimed that three factors led to the erosion of this traditional source of labor: 1) increased reliance on transfer payments among young African-American women; 2) increased educational opportunities provided by community colleges; and 3) an increase in job opportunities in the growing tourist/recreation industries.

With the exception of seafood plants on the western shores of Core Sound in Carteret County, most of the North Carolina plants were located in or near African-American neighborhoods. Those Core Sound plants, moreover, tended to be smaller and more likely to languish into underproduction from year to year than plants further inland. The counties with the densest concentrations of plants-Pamlico, Beaufort, and Hyde-are rural counties where residents combine seasonal work in fisheries and fisheries related industries with hunting, trapping, serving as guides, farm work, and forestry work. They are laced with creeks, inlets, bays, and other coastal formations that underscore the residents' reliance on the water for income.

None of these three counties contains a city larger than 10,000. Only two population centers, both in Beaufort County, provide light manufacturing jobs and jobs in the retail trade and service sectors: Washington, with 9,075 people, and Belhaven, with 2,269. A large phosphate mine near Aurora, in Beaufort County, provides employment to several of the family members of women who have worked or still work in the crab plants, and Weyerhaeuser's forestry and paper milling operations, located on the Neuse and Roanoke rivers, are among the larger industrial presences in the eastern part of the state. Some of the more recent developments in these counties' industrial bases include attracting retirees from northern regions, ecotourism, marina and other coastal real estate development, nursing homes, convenience stores displacing the old general country stores, and the expansion of the region's network of community colleges.

Use of Foreign Nonimmigrant Workers

Primarily due to the difficulty plant owners have staffing jobs such as these, between 1988 and the present, the blue crab processing labor force in North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland changed from predominantly African-American women to predominantly Mexican nonimmigrant women with H-2B visas. From only three employers importing around 200 nonimmigrant workers in 1988, the program has grown to its present level of between 28 and 30 employers importing between 1,200 and 1,500 workers (US Department of Labor 1993). Over the same time period, several other low-wage, low-skill industries in a number of regions of the United States either increased their use of, or continued relying heavily on, nonimmigrant (H-2B) workers. These included shrimping in Texas, stone quarrying in Idaho, salmon processing in Alaska, horse racing stables in California and Arizona, tree-planting in Virginia and Arkansas, and hotels/resorts in Michigan, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Impact of Foreign Workers on Domestic Workers in Mid-Atlantic Coastal Communities

The following discussion is based on 53 semi-structured interviews with African American women who live in neighborhoods that supply workers to crab processing plants in eleven communities in North Carolina and Virginia (see Appendix A: maps):

North Carolina Communities: Virginia Communities:

Aurora Nuttsville

Belhaven Reedsville

Columbia

Grantsboro

Maribel

Mesic

New Bern

Oriental

Vandemere

During the first phases of interviewing, we worked in communities between Oriental, in Pamlico County and Aurora, in Beaufort County, on the south side of the Pamlico River, since this region constitutes the heart of North Carolina's crab industry. During later phases we moved into communities along the north shore of Pamlico River (still in Beaufort County), into Hyde and Tyrell Counties, and into the two Virginia communities on the western shore of the Chesapeake. Based on previous work, we knew that workers in these areas and occupations tend to access jobs through network ties, particularly ties established through one's mother: simply, mothers traditionally recruited daughters, grandmothers recruited granddaughters, aunts recruited nieces, and cousins related through mother's sisters recruited one another. Our initial sampling strategy took advantage of these network ties to locate women who have worked and still work in the industry; during later phases of interviewing we located several other women who worked for crab plants for brief periods or who were included in current or past crab workers' networks of relatives and friends. In this section of the report, we focus on:

1. Workers' relationships to the seafood processing and crabbing industry.
2. Household and network information.
3. Past and current employment and other economic strategies, and the probable impacts of foreign workers on those strategies.
4. Attitudes toward education and work. This focus derives from the claim by crab plant owners and other observers that young women are rejecting these jobs because they are entering training programs at community colleges, taking jobs they perceive to be better, or collecting welfare benefits.
5. Responses to foreign workers entering what was, traditionally, a core industry in their household livelihoods.

Workers' Relationships to the Seafood Processing and Crabbing Industry

As noted above, all of these women worked in crab picking plants prior to the arrival of Mexicans and many continued to work after their arrival. Twenty one (40%) of those interviewed still work in crab plants, although most of these workers have phased back to picking only a couple of times per week. Workers range in age from 17 to 76; many began working in crab plants as young girls, even as young as 11, and worked most of their lives. We interviewed women who had nearly 60 years of experience in the industry and women with only a single season.

Commonly, and in line with other economic strategies discussed below, workers worked for more than one crab plant, rotating among two or three over the course of a season of from year to year. Workers reported working in plants as far apart from one another as 30 miles; plant owners typically provide transportation over such distances.

In the overview of the crab industry presented above, we noted that work in the seafood industry has long been a central component of many of these communities' residents' economic activities. Workers we interviews for this report have not, by and large, severed their ties to crab processing. Everyone we interviewed knew of relatives or friends who worked in some branch of the blue crab industry: we asked all the women to list five others whom they knew who worked in the crab plants. Only one third of those interviewed listed fewer than three individuals, but half of those added statements like, "God, when I started everybody worked; mostly everybody was related. God, I had so many relatives and people I knew working. Some picked all their life." Or: "Most everybody in this area were picking crabs."

Households and Networks

"Black folks, not white folks, work there, so we know about everyone."

-Crab picker, age 39, Oriental, NC

Reconfirming the observation that workers are recruited into the crab processing industry through maternal ties, among the more common relatives whom our respondents worked beside were mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nieces, and aunts. In all, workers we interviewed listed 101 relatives and 53 friends that they knew in

the plants when they took their first seafood processing job, with most workers listing three or more individuals (mean = 2.9). All but two individuals learned of this work through network ties, usually brought to the plant by a mother or aunt.

By 1995, 67 (43%) of the 154 workers listed in the plants still worked in blue crab processing; the remaining 87 had left the plants for one reason or another, listing as reasons for leaving: 1) health, age, or disability; 2) moving away; 3) finding another (usually better) job; or 4) developments in one's family (e.g. having to care for a sick relative or helping a husband with his occupation). When the workers our respondents knew changed jobs, they went into economic sectors that reflected the changing economies of North Carolina's and Virginia's coastal communities. Commercial fishing, including crabbing, has been suffering from several water quality, regulatory, and social problems for the past ten years; in the wake of fishing industry declines have been economic developments of a different character. Coastal regions are, for example, increasingly targeted by elderly individuals as pleasant retirement locations and, as such, have fostered not only gentrification and construction related to marine recreational activities, but the growth of nursing homes and in-home health care; in Pamlico county, several of the workers have left crab plants to work in a nursing home called Brickhaven, taking jobs similar to orderlies in hospitals (Foner 1995). Tourism has been increasing in these areas as well, creating jobs in restaurants, bed-and-breakfast establishments, hotels, motels, and marinas. Other occupations that the workers our respondents knew went into were day-care, domestic work, catfish farming and other agricultural pursuits, and working for the county or state government.

Female members of workers' households work in similar occupations as those listed above, including, of course, crab processing, but male members tended to work in somewhat different jobs. The crab industry does provide some jobs for men, as truck drivers, maintenance workers, helpers, and the people who off-load and steam the crab, and most crabbers are men, but the majority of picking jobs are filled by women. In ten years of observing the industry, on and off, I could count on the fingers of one hand all the male pickers I have seen. In addition to work in the crab industry, men in crab pickers' households work in construction, forestry (logging), agriculture and aquaculture (catfish farming), and on a nearby military base (Cherry Point). Commonly, too, they fish, garden or farm, and hunt and trap to contribute to households incomes.

Although all of our respondents were African American, three-fourths of the workers' households are not typical of the (often misleading) stereotype of the female-headed Black household. Only 13 (24.5%) of the 53 women interviewed lived in what could be considered female-headed households; these were households composed primarily of sisters living together, cousins, and aunts living with their nieces. Most workers, however, live with their husbands and children, often with one or two lateral kin or a grandparent or granddaughter.

Households are generally not large, ranging in size and character from individuals living alone to complex households of eight individuals with three generations and lateral kin such as cousins and aunts. Average household size is 3.13, and they tend to be far along with the household life cycle, with 2.7 individuals, on average, 18 or older.

Past and Current Economic Behaviors.

As noted time and again in this report, in counties with long histories of seafood processing and fishing, work in the crab-picking plants long constituted an important core of income and employment in many households, occupying a central role particularly in the employment strategies of African American women with few human capital skills. Yet rarely has crab-picking been household's sole source of income, especially when one considers the household instead of the individual as the principal income-generating and income-pooling unit.

The strategy of combining several sources of income has not changed in the wake of crab plants using foreign workers. In the years prior to the arrival of the foreign workers, households typically relied on unemployment and other forms of government assistance, particularly during the times of year work in the plants was slow. When asked what other kinds of jobs and activities they performed for income during the years they worked in crab plants, their responses indicated that it was more common to move between crab plants and other jobs seasonally than during the picking season; even so, at least one-third to one-half reported moving into other industries during the picking season. Only 15 (28%) of the 53 interviewed claimed they did not receive any government assistance or income supplements during the years they were crab pickers. When asked about their current receipt of government assistance, fewer than half (39.6% or 21 respondents) said that they receive any help from the government. Most common kinds of assistance received were food stamps, unemployment compensation, and energy assistance.

Foreign workers have influenced the economic and employment strategies of domestic workers in two ways: first, among those who continue to rely on crab-picking, this work has become less important in their overall corpus of income generating activities; second, the arrival of Mexican women does seem to have led some younger workers to reconsider crab-picking as an occupation, still less as a career-as their mothers might have considered it-and move into other economic sectors.

In the executive summary we mentioned that work in the crab plants for domestic workers became more sporadic after foreign workers arrived at the plants. In the communities studied, some crab plants have not imported Mexican workers; these plants continue to provide employment for domestic workers under similar conditions as in the past. However, the use of foreign workers in general has caused increased competition among crab house owners for crabs, constricting the supply of crabs at all plants and reducing the amount of work available to each individual employee. In an entirely unrelated development, crab supplies to plants (and concomitant amounts of work available) have been further impacted by the recent developments of a "basket" crab market and a market for soft-shelled or "peeler" crabs. Under both of these marketing arrangements, crabs that previously were sold to picking houses are now shipped to Baltimore whole. Crab picking plant owners have compensated for this loss by importing more crabs from other regions, primarily Louisiana, South Carolina, and the Chesapeake Bay. While this has enabled them to maintain and even expand production of processed crab meat, it has also meant that work in the plants is more sporadic and less predictable, subject to the fishing conditions and transportation problems of several regions instead of one.

Under these conditions, the role of crab-picking employment in most household economic strategies has been reduced or eliminated altogether. Elderly women who have depended on crab-picking for years took this especially hard. Quotes from several workers illustrate this:

_ "Malcolm [crab plant owner] didn't need them [the Mexican workers]. They were full of workers, excellent workers who picked fifty pounds a day, even with bad crabs. They made their living, built their houses off this money... It's like they said, 'You black people, we are through with you.'

_ "That's [the arrival of the Mexicans] what messed it up. It took all the work from the people. Those Mexicans work all the time."

_ "When the Mexicans came, we worked less days. Not enough work for us. Some days I would get home at 9:00 or 10:00. I'd come home and say [to her husband], 'Honey, we're picked out.'" [Her husband, present at the interview, added]: "They might as well stay at home."

_ "Only Mexicans worked the evening shift. That cut us out of working at night."

_ "Sometimes when there was low crabs, they sometimes just let them [Mexican workers] pick, but not all the time."

_ "Now we come in at 4:00 [AM] and get off at 1:00, where we used to come in at 3:00 and get off at 2:00. We got less hours because of Mexicans."

Comments like these are more telling when seated in the context of household survival strategies in counties with limited economic alternatives. A brief accounting of another woman's experience illustrates how the program has affected some of those women who continued to depend on crab-picking after the arrival of foreign workers:

Toni Thule (pseudonym), born in Pamlico County in 1930, began working in the tobacco fields as a youth but in 1975 moved into the seafood processing industry, shucking oysters and picking crabs. She worked in the crab house with her daughter and several other friends from the community; her daughter predated her as a crab-picker, in fact, staying with it for 26 years. From 1975 to 1990, Toni worked for four different crab plants, one of which went out of business. During this time, in her household of six, her husband was a logger, one of her daughters picked crabs, and her other children had summer jobs in agriculture.

Mexicans began arriving at the plant where Toni worked in 1990; and between 1990 and 1993, several developments reshaped the composition of her household and her employment strategies. First, her husband died and all her children but one left home. Second, the daughter who worked in the crab plant left and took a job in a restaurant. Work in the crab plants became more sporadic and she reported working "on and off" between 1990 and 1993. After her husband's death, she moved in with a man who collects disability payments and picks up odd jobs, in particular repairing cars for neighbors and friends. One of her sons recently moved in with them after being released from jail because the jail was overcrowded. In attempting to help him find work, she recommended he apply at the local drugstore instead of the crab plant where she worked. Now she subsists primarily off her husband's Social Security, food stamps, and the generosity of her children and roommate.

Toni's case illustrates the subtle erosion of crab-picking from its core position within her family's livelihood. Not only does work in the crab plants become more sporadic following the arrival of Mexicans, but the social support of having her daughter with her in the plant disappears as well. Her case, though extreme and complicated by the changes within her household, is nevertheless similar to those of women who remain dependent on crab-picking.

At the other extreme, however, are those younger women who moved onto other jobs following the arrival of foreign workers, in some cases improving their economic situations as a result. The case of Anna Ipock is exemplary here.

Anna, at 29, has secured two jobs in the past two years that have improved her economic position, yet she reports continuing to seek employment. She works from 8-12 at the Department of Social Services and 3-11 as a nursing assistant at a local nursing home.

Until 1994, she worked for ten years in crab processing, working in the same plant where her mother worked. She also held a job with Head Start for ten years while she worked in crab picking. In 1991, the plant owner began importing workers, causing a reduction in everyone's work load. Anna took the opportunity of the reduced work load to improve her human capital skills. 'We worked the same,' she said, "but we had more employees, double what was there before, so work was cut to four and a half days.'

From 1992 to 1993 she attended classes at the community college, earning certification as a nursing assistant. In 1994, after ten years in crab-picking, she got a job in the nursing home where her sister worked.

Anna's case is somewhat uncommon. Her work history and continued job seeking behavior suggest that she has been and continues to be upwardly mobile, viewing the Mexican workers as an opportunity to improve her job skills. In general, not surprisingly, those workers with more extensive employment experiences fared the transition to Mexican labor in the crab plants better than those with narrower experiences. Contrast Marcia's history with Anna's, for example:

The same age and from the same county as Anna, Marcia worked in crab picking from the age of 11, in 1967, to 1993, three years after Mexicans began arriving in the plant where she worked. Although she began working by just picking crab, eventually she began working in a restaurant at night during the same months she picked crab during the day. She also cleaned houses, lived with a man who worked as a logger, and received food stamps. Over the years she worked in six different crab houses. She has a tenth grade education and took one year of training to learn how to become a bricklayer, but never found work in that field.

She left the crab work in 1993 and concentrated exclusively on working in the restaurant, citing child care responsibilities as the principal reason for leaving the crab plant. She left the restaurant in 1995, and is currently awaiting receipt of unemployment and living off food stamps and AFDC payments. Both she and her boyfriend, the former logger, are now out of work. She had adopted a far more casual approach to the job market than previously, taking odd jobs whenever she believes she needs to work. She believes she could work again in the crab plants if she wanted to—that they would "find her a seat," she says—but currently she spends most of her time taking care of her young children.

Again, these few cases simply indicate the various ranges of experiences one encounters in the crab-picking counties. Similar to those cases discussed earlier—friends and relatives of our respondents who left crab picking for other jobs—respondents who left the crab plants left primarily to work in tourist related jobs, nursing and health care, and restaurants. Specific new jobs they landed included, for example: working at a Hardees fast food chain; cleaning rooms at a bed-and-breakfast, in the local hospital, and in a nursing home; working as a school custodian; working at a local yarn spinning company; and working at a factory that makes bathroom and kitchen fixtures. In some cases, taking these jobs not only improved the stability of their income, paying them regular pay checks, some of these jobs also provided benefits, which were lacking at the crab plants. (Interestingly, some of the workers interviewed believed that the Mexicans received free medical care, yet American workers did not). About one in five workers we interviewed have quit the plants without finding other jobs; most of these claimed to have been injured at work (crab pickers, like poultry workers, are susceptible to carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as a condition they call crab rash; recent water quality problems have exacerbated these conditions by introducing new bacteria into the crab plants). Injuries on the job, in fact, constitute one of the underlying reasons that workers move among various crab plants and between crab plants and other economic activities. Some of this movement is due to the relief and recovery time it provides injured workers, which is not uncommon among low-wage workers who work in hazardous industries (Griffith, Valdez Pizzini, and Johnson 1992).

Movement to other jobs was facilitated by networks, primarily, although workers interviewed did list several other job search methods, including newspaper ads, job service, and simply showing up and applying for work at a place of business. "Word-of-mouth," however, remained the most common method of accessing new employment, again facilitated by ties through women (sisters, daughters, nieces, etc.).

Attitudes Toward Education and Work.

The principal reason cited by the crab plant owners that domestic workers reject crab processing jobs is that they are receiving welfare benefits and can refuse work on that basis. This seems questionable, in light of the finding that fewer respondents reported collecting welfare benefits now than previously, when they relied on crab picking more heavily. It is likely that, in fact, welfare benefits served as subsidies to crab plant owners, allowing workers to accept these jobs despite that they were insufficient to lift them above the poverty line.

A secondary reason given, however, is that community colleges have marshaled extensive outreach programs among women, minorities, and nontraditional students (e.g. the elderly) in order to boost enrollments and develop the human capital of the counties in which they are located. We investigated this with interviews with

recruiters of students at community colleges in Eastern North Carolina. Based on interviews with five such individuals, in most cases enrollments of African American students have remained relatively constant in the past five to ten years, accounting for between 8 and 17% of total enrollments. Only in Pamlico County, the county with the most crab plants in the Mid-Atlantic, did community college recruiters report that African American enrollment had increased. There, they also reported that African American women had been, historically, the second largest group (after white women) to attend Pamlico County Community College.

These mixed findings lend some support to the claim that potential crab workers are attempting to utilize community colleges to find jobs better than those in the crab plants. Workers themselves expressed interest in education as well. In our interviews, even among those with little education, we encountered a high value placed on education; many view it as a necessity for finding and keeping a job. More than half of the women we interviewed (56%) had not finished high school, although most came close: average number of years of schooling was 10.6, with the range from 3 years to 14.5 years. Sixteen (30%) had had some community college training, including training in nursing, child care, business administration, upholstery, auto mechanics, computer techniques, and cosmetology. The majority of the women who had taken or were taking these courses were between twenty and forty years of age, although one was over sixty and two were over seventy. Clearly, younger women view education as a necessity more often than older women, but even many of the older women we interviewed made comments such as this comment by a woman born in 1931 and having only a tenth grade education: "I plan on going to Pamlico Tech in January. I might take up nursing. You have to go to school for everything now."

These comments, combined with the tendency for many of the younger workers to pursue certification at the local community colleges, lend some weight to the claim that younger workers are more upwardly mobile today than formerly and so reject crab-picking jobs as beneath them, working in them only until they are able to move into something better. At the same time, younger women reject crab-picking jobs on other grounds. Specifically, first, the character of the crab industry working conditions, and the chances of advancement, do not compare favorably even to work at local fast food restaurants. Although tourist jobs tend to be seasonal, many of the others are year-round occupations with more pleasant working conditions. Second, many of the younger women seem to object to the way they are treated in the plants, or the quality of supervision, which tends to be direct and authoritarian. According to one, for example: "The boss makes it hard on the blacks. He tells you what you are going to do or else he will give your job to a Mexican. I have a few Mexican friends. It's the bosses, not the Mexicans, that treat you bad." Such comments suggest that younger women are no longer so willing to tolerate disrespect from employers on the job, especially when that disrespect is tainted with racism and strained race relations.

Finally, one of the problems developing in the wake of the erosion of work in the industry-whether due to the Mexicans or to other causes-is that there may be an accompanying erosion of the authority of elder women over their younger female kin and friends. Historically, when these jobs served as one of the principal sources of income and employment for poor young women in rural areas, work in the plants became a setting for groups of elder women to teach and discipline those younger women that they brought into the production process gradually, beginning, as some of the cases above show, at a very early age. At the same time, these women served as role models for younger women; their limited control over recruitment, through network recruiting, provided them with some material means to control younger women.

Clearly, this development can be viewed as liberating, in that it is a reflection of the growing employment opportunities of younger women, yet there are disadvantages to removing this setting of self-control and discipline from the lives of African American women in these counties. One worker blamed the younger workers' lack of enthusiasm for crab-picking jobs as the principal driving force behind bringing in Mexicans in the first place, saying, "Now there was a time when the young blacks wouldn't work, so they brought in the Mexicans. So it was the young blacks that hurt the faithful workers." Another blamed it for a somewhat more far reaching range of problems, saying, "I think they [the Mexican workers] should go back where they came from. We need the work around here. These young girls around here need to go to work and quit getting welfare. They know how to pick. They're able. They can work but they just mess around."

Responses to the Use of Mexican Workers in the Plants.

"I never been around them in crabs, but in cabbage packing he brought them in and after a while, about one year, he wouldn't hire us anymore."

-former crab picker, referring to foreign workers in agriculture, Belhaven, NC

I have already mentioned that virtually all women agree that the use of foreign workers has resulted in a reduction in the amount of work available for those domestic workers who want to work. Several other observations by workers also suggest that crab plant owners have been treating workers differently since the arrival of foreign workers in other ways as well, in particular using the presence of the Mexicans as a threat to the domestic workers' continued employment under old terms. Now, it seems, plant owners have become more demanding, insisting on higher standards of performance and increased worker reliability. This comes as a blow

to workers who were used to meshing plant schedules with home production schedules and coming to work when they pleased. Of course, from the employer's perspective, their operations have become more efficient and planning has become easier. Our interviews are peppered with statements like:

_ "They separated us. The Blacks worked on one side and the Mexicans on the other. He [plant owner] didn't care if you came to work [before the Mexicans arrived] and then he would say, 'If you don't come to work, you will not have a job.' Also he started grading our work harder, checking our backfin buckets for quality."

_ "We been having short days because of the Mexicans."

_ "I guess they need to work, but I tell you, they take a lot from people here. Everywhere I go, I see Mexicans. But they work."

_ "To me personally everything changed [after the Mexicans came]. It went down for Americans. That's why I left. Days got shorter. Crabs were scarce and there were so many extra workers that it was squeezing out the original workers. Money was short.... It hurt the loyal dedicated workers-cut their hours because they brought in so many workers. They can't get new American workers because they know they won't make enough to survive."

_ "We picked more days when they first came, but then crabs slowed down and they we worked less. As long as the Mexicans are here we work. When they go back we don't work. They try to keep work for the Mexicans."

_ "I think they made the work shorter. There's not as much full time work."

_ "Crabs were getting scarce anyway and we picked slow, but when they came in it cut us down to a few days. The didn't need all those extra Mexicans. They took our hours."

These statements were the most common we encountered in response to our inquiries about changes in the plants brought about by the foreign workers. Most workers who made these comments, however, did not fault the Mexicans as much as the crab plant owners, and many qualified these comments with statements about having Mexican friends. A few workers, however, said that their employers attempted to buy more crabs after the Mexicans arrived, to compensate for the imbalances created by labor surpluses. Statistics on production of crab meat from the Division of Marine Fisheries show, in fact, that, in North Carolina at least, crab meat production did increase in the first few years following the arrival of the Mexican workers, from around 8.9 million pounds to 10.8 million pounds, or an increase of around 21%.

Conclusions

The information presented here gives a mixed account of temporary foreign worker programs, raising concerns regarding differential treatment of workers while providing some limited support for employers' claims that African American workers have been abandoning crab processing as an occupation of choice. The changes occurring in the relations between employers and domestic employees in the crab plants portend an increasing movement toward an all-foreign labor force as older workers age out of the work force and younger workers grow increasingly embittered by what they perceive as employers' favoritism toward foreign workers, perceive better employment opportunities in other sectors of the coastal economy, and actively pursue educational opportunities.

The transition to foreign labor imported with H-2B visas may have far reaching consequences as legislative pressures to phase back on government assistance continue. For those native workers who continue to work at the crab plants, as earned income from crab processing falls with the reduced amounts of work available, we can expect payments from government assistance sources to assume larger proportions of total household incomes, thus making these workers more vulnerable to assaults on welfare. Even greater problems await those workers, like the cases of Toni and Marcia presented above, who have increased their reliance on food stamps and other forms of government assistance to the exclusion of most earned income. A less direct consequence of reductions in welfare involves occupational injury. Those workers who engage in strategies that combine crab picking with work in other sectors of the economy may be less likely to leave the crab plants as they develop conditions like carpal tunnel syndrome, recognizing their increased vulnerability to shifting government policy and the problems of returning to plants that foreign workers dominate.

Moreover, we cannot consider the increased reliance on, or importance of, government assistance apart from the full range of social and economic support systems that these women participate in. Life in these sparsely populated, rural counties, particularly among minorities, depends heavily on what social scientists refer to as social capital: those goods and services that derive from one's membership in meaningful social groups. Social capital thus includes the food and clothing one receives as gifts from friends and kin, information about and recommendations for jobs and other economic activities, and support such as child or elder care and transportation. These practices do not, however, depend solely on one's group memberships or the sentiments of friendship and kinship, but must be enforced or shored up by various means (Coleman 1990). We noted above that work in the crab plants, based heavily on network recruiting, served as a source of social capital as well as

enabled the enforcement that social capital requires. As work in the crab plants becomes less important and less desirable to younger workers, this source of social capital deteriorates and those goods and services that derive from one's social capital decline as well. It is against a background, then, of weakened support networks that welfare reforms will take effect in these counties.

As long as leaving the plants ushers in a period of retraining and renewed job-seeking, this development may result, in the long run, in the improvement of rural African American households and perhaps establish a foundation of interest in education and technical training as means of upward mobility. When leaving the plants initiates the sporadic working and despair of dependence on government assistance, underground economic activity, and heavy reliance on friend and kin networks in an atmosphere of reduced social capital, the transition to foreign labor currently taking place is less heartening. Whichever the case, we are witnessing, it seems, the process by which foreign worker programs become institutionalized.

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APPENDIX A:

MAPS SHOWING STUDY COMMUNITIES

In addition, the use of H-2B workers has had unanticipated impacts on blue crab fishing, encouraging some processors to expand their fishing fleets to reduce periods of inactivity of imported labor. The use of immigrant labor as crew on crabbing vessels has accompanied this process, a practice that began shortly after crab processing plant owners gained experience with the work habits of Mexican workers. Most recently, this development led to a dispute between a one of the crab processors who imports H-2B workers in Pamlico County and a group of crabbers, culminating in the destruction of the processor's crab traps and a subsequent lawsuit

against the crabbers accused of destroying the traps. On the positive side, however, some domestic workers reported that the presence of H-2B workers allowed them more flexibility to combine household schedules and plant schedules more efficiently.

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