

The Bracero Program: A Catalyst for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a background of the Bracero Program, a little known guestworker program that allowed millions of Mexicans into the United States. The Bracero Program had large-scale impacts, ranging from intertwining Mexican and American economies to impacting social justice movements regarding immigration reform and civil rights. Today, the program holds responsibility for strong links between Mexican and American communities.

Introduction

With millions of men enlisting in the armed forces during World War II, the United States encountered many issues on the home front, namely the challenge of an extreme labor shortage that threatened all economic sectors, especially those revolving around manual labor. One solution to this problem was the Bracero Program, which brought millions of Mexican migrant workers, or braceros, to work in place of the American men fighting overseas. Deriving from Spanish, the word *bracero* means “one who works with his arms,” an accurate description of the workers as most of them operated in manual labor sectors.¹ Although many politicians touted the program as a successful solution at its start, it ultimately resulted in the maltreatment of the recently immigrated Mexican workers, evidenced by decrepit living situations and long-term health effects. The Bracero Program was originally only planned to last until the end of World War II, but remained in place for almost twenty years after, resulting in millions of Mexican workers living in the United States. Originally created to aid the labor shortage during World War II, the Bracero Program led to worker exploitation and oppression that hurt Mexican development while contributing to the rise of social justice movements in the US, mostly centered around immigration reform and civil rights.

Historical Setting and Early Years

The utilization of Mexican labor support by the United States was not a novel practice during World War II's Bracero Program, as migrant workers had already been employed during World War I.² In 1917, the United States government allowed employers to recruit foreign workers to make up for the demands in World War I. The US cooperated with Mexico, which satisfied both parties as the Mexican Civil War displaced many Mexican workers, and American farmers desperately needed laborers. Nonetheless, the Mexican laborers were subjected to racism and inadequate treatment, just like they would be later in the Bracero Program.³

¹ "Bracero - Definition, Meaning & Synonyms," Vocabulary.com, accessed April 11, 2023.
<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/bracero>.

² "A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States: 1942: Bracero Program," Research Guides at Library of Congress, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program>.

³ "Mexican Braceros and US Farm Workers," Wilson Center, accessed April 3, 2023.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/mexican-braceros-and-us-farm-workers>.

Conversely, the Great Depression took away many jobs, creating a labor surplus which led the United States to repatriate many Mexicans to ensure Americans would have jobs. Since many Mexican workers were either forced to or decided to leave, the Mexican agriculture industry greatly benefited, as many Mexican workers returned with more expertise and skills from working in the technologically advanced American agriculture industry. The few Mexican farmworkers who stayed fought to survive in miserable conditions, as many landowners cut back on their workforce. Due to the seasonality and lack thereof of manual labor jobs, many Mexican workers would constantly travel around the country in search of work. Since it was so hard to find jobs, coupled with the Mexican Repatriation, very few Mexican workers remained in the United States when World War II hit, creating a new need for foreign labor.⁴

The Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, which established the Bracero Program, was a risk for both sides as the United States had experienced the negative effects of a labor surplus and Mexico was worried about giving up so many workers. Franklin Delano Roosevelt of the United States and Manuel Ávila Camacho of Mexico signed the agreement in 1942, which provided guidelines and restrictions for the program. Since wages were higher, many Mexicans wanted to come work in the US, giving American farmers a dependable labor source. In order to determine a potential bracero's ability to do good work, the hiring process spearheaded by the Mexican government comprised of completing background checks, medical examinations, and interviews with potential candidates. After Mexico approved the workers, the US government oversaw the workers' travel from Mexico to the United States. Many braceros lived in shared rooms close to the farms they worked on in temporary labor camps to mitigate commute time. The braceros' housing frequently lacked running water and sanitary facilities and was often overcrowded, as many farm owners opposed investing additional capital.⁵

In 1943, the demand for bracero labor grew as more American men enlisted in the military and the war effort continued. To provide more workers for the United States economy, Mexico and the US decided on a new agreement, which allowed over three times as many braceros as previously allowed to come into the United States to help short-handed industries. The program management changed because of the rise in demand for bracero labor, as the United States government put more effort into selecting and choosing Mexican workers and established training and orientation for many of the incoming workers. The United States government-built processing centers in Mexico to make the selection and checking of braceros easier, leading to increased productivity.⁶

Initial reactions were generally positive among American farmers and politicians who saw it as a temporary solution to their pressing needs, as the Bracero Program accounted for 10% of American hired workers from 1942 to 1947.⁷ The braceros were mainly supporting the agricultural and railroad industries, to allow capable and fit American men to leave their jobs and enlist in the army. While the braceros were prevalent on the home front, it was illegal for the migrant workers to serve and fight for the United States Army.⁸ Unfortunately, despite the no-discrimination clause in the agreement, many Americans were racist towards the workers, indicated by that the Bracero Program was banned from Texas for several years due to the horrible racism and lynchings. Despite racism being the most prevalent in southern states, braceros faced discriminatory treatment everywhere else, even in sectors such as education and

⁴ "Depression and the Struggle for Survival | Mexican | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress," The Library of Congress, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/mexican/depression-and-the-struggle-for-survival>.

⁵ "Bracero Program," *TSHA*, accessed April 11, 2023. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bracero-program>.

⁶ Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (1992), 98.

⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 82.

⁸ "World War II Homefront Era: 1940s: Bracero Program Establishes New Migration Patterns | Picture This," Picture This: California Perspectives on American History, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://picturethis.museumca.org/timeline/world-war-ii-homefront-era-1940s/braceros/info>.

healthcare, and were often subjected to racial slurs and violence by their employers, but still remained dedicated to their work.⁹

Post-WWII through Termination

In 1947, the United States and Mexico agreed to continue the Bracero Program past the end of World War II, as the US's economy was improving with the increased amount of workers. However, in the years following, many more Mexicans decided to immigrate not through the Bracero Program, leading to American employers exploiting them in exchange for not turning the illegal workers in.¹⁰ In addition, growing accustomed to barely having to pay Mexican workers and giving them minimal benefits, farm owners and employers were hesitant to hire Americans, as they cost more.¹¹

The Bracero Program evolved in the 1950s to adapt to more labor needs by increasing the number of workers, but also shifting towards greater government oversight. President Truman signed Public Law 78 in 1951, which made the government the guarantor of the program rather than the individual employers. Even though Public Law 78 did make it more difficult for braceros to obtain permanent residency or citizenship, it improved their everyday life, providing them with protective work contracts to counteract unjust firings. Additionally, the law revised the Bracero Program's recruitment practices, creating a much more selective process for braceros to come to work in the United States. The Bracero Program became a very meaningful avenue for Mexicans to immigrate into the United States, as it almost guaranteed a job. To satisfy both sides, the program expanded, including more workers, becoming crucial to the US agricultural industry.¹²

Seasonal industries, specifically agriculture, saw the most benefit from the program as employers viewed the braceros as disposable and could hire them around harvest times and fire them in the offseasons.¹³ Constant supply of new braceros from Mexico allowed for a perfect number of workers for every farm and industry without too much overcrowding.¹⁴ While some groups, including churches, considered it to be exploitation, the American landowners were able to keep their costs much lower by paying the braceros less than other domestic workers, allowing for an agricultural boom.¹⁵ The US agricultural industry and economy received longstanding benefits from the use of cheap labor during the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1954, the Bracero Program grew increasingly popular, encouraging many workers to skip the requirements and enter the United State without permission. In turn, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) decided to start a mass deportation of Mexicans, named Operation Wetback.¹⁶ Support for the deportation grew as many more Americans grew frustrated with the uncontrolled amount of undocumented new workers coming in. Despite the INS cracking down on illegal immigration and public support decreasing, the need for cheap labor among farm owners

⁹ Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-speaking People of the United States* (Santa Monica: Praeger, 2016), 50.

¹⁰ "Farm Labor Shortages During World War II," Wessels Living History Farm, accessed April 2, 2023, https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe40s/money_03.html.

¹¹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 86.

¹² "The McCarran-Walter Immigration Act," *Social Service Review* 27, no. 1 (1953), 102-102. doi:10.1086/639115.

¹³ Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (London: Penguin, 2011), 53.

¹⁴ David Griffith, "Peasants in Reserve: Temporary West Indian Labor in the U.S. Farm Labor Market," *The International Migration Review* 20, no. 4 (1986): 875-98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2545741>.

¹⁵ Philip Martin and J. E. Taylor, "Ripe with Change: Evolving Farm Labor Markets in the United States, Mexico, and Central America," Migration Policy Institute | Migrationpolicy.org, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/RMSG-Agriculture.pdf>.

¹⁶ "Operation Wetback," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Operation-Wetback>.

continued, and so the immigration of Mexican workers continued.¹⁷ This led to the extension of the program, and the signing of Public Law 78, which aimed to make life better for the braceros.¹⁸

President John F. Kennedy signed the extension of Truman's Public Law 78 in 1961 to improve workers' rights and extend the program. This extension allowed for the program to continue and established improved protections for the workers, including safe and clean housing, sufficient food, three meals a day, and medical care. The US government now expected the employers to provide braceros with their own sleeping facilities and unsullied bedding. Also, employers were now required to provide for and pay for transportation from bracero housing facilities to the worksite. Another significant impact of the revised Public Law 78 was the establishment of a minimum wage requirement for braceros, trying to ensure fair pay. This part of the law also tried to prevent employers from hiring undocumented workers in exchange for reduced wages, a very commonplace occurrence in the manual labor industry. Throughout the course of the program, Public Law 78 was one of the few changes the US government made to improve the conditions for braceros.¹⁹

Stricter immigration policy and negative response from labor groups contributed to a large decrease in braceros that entered the country in the early 1960s. Due to a lack of support for continuation and concern over worker treatment, both American citizens and Mexican laborers alike urged the United States and Mexican governments to start negotiating the end of the program, ending it for good in 1964. Even though there was criticism all along, the US government thought its benefits outweighed its flaws, but eventually realized the program was too flawed to be fixed by reforms.

With the conclusion of the Bracero Program, many Mexican workers who depended on the program to help them and their families survive in the United States sought out new ways to legally immigrate and find work. However, the noteworthy concern from Mexico's perspective was the impact of the program on Mexican workers and the economy of Mexico, because although the Mexican government initially supported the program to promote political and economic ties with the US while also providing jobs for Mexican citizens, it ruined many communities and industries by displacing such a significant number of men. But, returning to Mexico was typically difficult, as braceros became accustomed to the living and had developed communities in the US.²⁰

Mistreatment and Protests

During the Bracero Program, braceros were forced to endure low wages, a lack of legal protection, dangerous chemicals, threats of violence and deportation, and increased racism towards migrants and immigrants. Despite these challenges, braceros worked their hardest to make the most out of their dismal situations. When conditions were exceptionally harsh, the braceros formed labor unions and went on strikes, hoping for better pay, improved working conditions, and legal protection.

The wages and income of Mexican laborers during the program were consistently low, as seen in instances such as the minimum wage set at thirty cents an hour. Nonetheless, employers often paid even lower salaries under the table, resulting in even less take-home pay. The thirty cents an hour minimum wage was significantly lower than the payments earned by American workers doing similar jobs. For example, in 1956, the American minimum wage

¹⁷ "Our History," USCIS, last modified August 24, 2020, <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history>.

¹⁸ "Braceros: History, Compensation," Rural Migration News, last modified December 9, 2015, <https://migration.ucdavis.edu>.

¹⁹ James Creagan, "Public Law 78: A Tangle of Domestic and International Relations," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7, no. 4 (1965): 541–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/165274>.

²⁰ Library of Congress, "A Latinx Research Guide

was set at one dollar an hour, whereas braceros were still only getting paid thirty cents.²¹ The program administrators set this low wage to keep labor costs down for the farmers in dire need of workers during World War II. The low salaries paid to braceros allowed American farmers to maintain profits while still meeting the demand for labor, however, at the expense of the workers subjected to exploitative conditions.²² The thirty cents minimum wage law was often broken by either paying less than thirty cents and coercing the braceros into agreeing or delaying pay for months. Companies occasionally paid employees under the table and off the record to avoid taxes and further labor costs at even lower rates, and braceros were forced to deal with his.²³

Coupled with very little pay, the braceros had to pay for other expenses, often including their own equipment and tools. The head tax, which Mexican workers had to pay in exchange for the right to work in the US, was one of the most substantial fees, taking a cut of the bracero's salary. Additionally, the charge system was a tactic used by employers to pass on the duty and burden of running their company to the employees. According to the charge system, braceros had to cover their expenses for food, transportation, and occasionally even tools and equipment, often taking a sizable chunk out of their salaries. Furthermore, the braceros had a duty to send money back to their families in Mexico, and thus were left with barely anything to live on in the US.²⁴

Even though braceros were supposed to be protected legally from horrendous working conditions, farm owners and railroad employers still forced them to work long hours and exposing them to dangerous chemicals. Workers were often subjected to twelve-hour workdays, using painful equipment such as the short-handled hoe, which made the bracero to bend over for their entire workday. Another painful tool was the long-handled hoe, which affected opposite body parts from the short one by forcing the bracero to stand straight up and swing it repetitively for long periods of time. Extended hours using this dangerous equipment was perpetuated by not only agriculture's many requirements, including planting and cultivating, but also by employers trying to create the largest profit margin possible.²⁵

From the 1940s to 1960s, harmful pesticides and herbicides were commonly utilized in agriculture, and braceros frequently used them without any safety precautions or training. These hazardous chemicals hurt many workers, eventually leading to the banning of some of these substances in the 1970s. The pesticide DDT, regularly used in agriculture and lice fumigation during the Bracero Program, is one especially harmful example of a hazardous chemical the workers were exposed to, as it interferes with the nervous system and forces it to act irregularly. Braceros were frequently forced to apply DDT without the proper tools or training, posing serious long-term health risks.²⁶

In addition, braceros faced a severe lack of legal protections despite being able to work lawfully in the country, including fewer labor rights than American workers. The Bracero Program's transient nature was one of the primary causes of this absence of legal protection. Braceros lacked many of the benefits Americans did, including the rights to unionize and overtime pay, and were only permitted to work in the country for brief periods of time, usually

²¹ "History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938 - 2009 | U.S. Department of Labor," U.S. Department of Labor, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history/chart>.

²² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 96.

²³ Wayne D. Rasmussen, "A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47" [Letter, Howard A. Preston to Chief of Operations, Chicago, Illinois, Sept. 24, 1945], *Internet Archive* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics), 232.

²⁴ "Bittersweet Harvest: Introduction/Introducción," National Museum of American History, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/introduction>.

²⁵ "Colorado Oral History and Migratory Labor Project," University of Northern Colorado, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.unco.edu/colorado-oral-history-migratory-labor-project/>.

²⁶ Linda Nash, "The Fruits of Ill-Health: Pesticides and Workers' Bodies in Post-World War II California," *Osiris* 19 (2004): 203-19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3655240>.

six-month contracts that could occasionally be renewed.²⁷ Since they were part of a guest worker program, the Fair Labor Standards Act and many other worker protection acts did not have any jurisdiction for the braceros. Moreover, American employers could easily exploit the braceros due to the language barrier. While some braceros spoke English, the majority did not, meaning braceros could neither figure out their rights nor argue for more rights and better treatment. Also, since many of the American employers viewed the braceros as inferior due to their race, the braceros were treated very differently than the Americans in terms of pay and difficulty of the work.²⁸ Although the United States certainly needed cheap labor during World War 2, the braceros were taken advantage of legally and physically.

Moreover, bracero often feared deportation, which generally happened if they violated program rules or did not listen to employers while working. Braceros were afraid of violating even the most minor rule, as they were disproportionately punished. Albeit authorized to work in the US, braceros in seasonal industries such as agriculture faced unpredictable calendars and work schedules. Considering their status to stay in the country depended on their employment, braceros lived in perpetual fear of being deported. If a bracero lost their job and could not find another one immediately, they could be deported, as the United States did not want unemployed immigrants idle. For example, often braceros were not allowed to leave the worksite without permission, which could result in deportation. While working, the braceros were often too afraid of the employers' power to do anything about their meager pay and unsanitary living conditions, so most of them just stayed silent and did their work.²⁹

Despite their precarious legal position, braceros had leverage in that they were necessary labor during the shortage, so they were occasionally able to negotiate better conditions and wages. By threatening to strike, they negotiated better wages and working conditions, and sometimes, a tiny percentage of braceros actually had a large enough resistance and enough courage to strike. One significant strike was one in Medford, Oregon, resulting in those workers receiving a set pay of seventy-five cents a day. Another successful strike happened in Twin Falls, Idaho, in which over 285 Braceros struck against the Amalgamated Sugar Company, ending in a wage increase of fifty cents.³⁰ These displays of activism encouraged future protests for better rights for immigrants and laborers alike.

Organizations including the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), a precursor to the United Farm Workers (UFW), proved vital in helping to amplify the workers' hardships and try and receive improved conditions for the braceros.³¹ In addition, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) was established late in the Bracero Program—1959—but was one of the most effective committees for workers' rights in the late 1900s.³² Cesar Chavez, a leading founder of the NFWA, saw firsthand the horrible treatment Mexican workers and braceros were subjected to, leading him to create a push for more rights. Chavez became famous as a labor movement figurehead

²⁷ Wilson Center, "Mexican Braceros."

²⁸ University of Northern Colorado, "Colorado Oral History."

²⁹ Elizabeth Fussell, "THE DEPORTATION THREAT DYNAMIC AND VICTIMIZATION OF LATINO MIGRANTS: Wage Theft and Robbery," *The Sociological Quarterly* 52 (2011): 593–615, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23027567>.

³⁰ Mario Jimenez Sifuentez, *Of Forests and Fields: Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 26.

³¹ "National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)," SNCC Digital Gateway, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/alliances-relationships/national-farm-workers-association/>.

³² "Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (A.W.O.C.) and the National Farm Workers Association (N.F.W.A.)," National Museum of American History, accessed April 4, 2023, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1940715.

and defender of marginalized workers' rights.³³ Motivated to fight for justice and equality by his experiences in the Bracero Program, he worked extremely hard to improve lives for all workers, especially those discriminated against.³⁴

Cesar Chavez's most famous and concrete victory came in 1966, very soon after the Bracero Program ended, when he and the UFW helped to negotiate the first of the table-grape contracts, which raised the wages and also provided better legal protections including unemployment insurance. The first grape table contract was a turning point in the farm worker movement because it showed how effective collective bargaining could be in enhancing farm workers' quality of life.³⁵ Despite the horrible and inhumane treatment braceros were exposed to, they remained resilient and pushed for more representation.

The efforts to address the exploitation and mistreatment of braceros have continued beyond workers unions in recent years, resulting in relative success. In 2008, the Mexican Government paid over \$14.6 million to the braceros who had worked in the United States during World War II, recognizing the braceros' invaluable contribution enduring bad conditions. While this doesn't truly fix the maltreatment during the program, this demonstrates a push for a more equitable future for all.³⁶

The Effect on Mexico

In addition to Mexican workers, the Bracero Program left a legacy of Mexico's economic reliance on the United States, which severely harmed Mexico, leading to vulnerabilities, limited growth opportunities, less men, and a brain drain that has hindered the country's economic development. Because of the downturn in access to better education and social mobility for Mexicans due to reliance on the United States, Mexico struggled with many social justice issues following the program.

The program impacted the Mexican economy positively and negatively, but it certainly created a system of Mexico's reliance on the United States. Since so many able Mexican men were now working in and contributing to the US economy, the Mexican agriculture industry took a large hit. To remedy this, many Mexican farmers focused primarily on growing crops for export to the US, leading to Mexico's reliance on the US as a trading partner. This reliance on the United States negatively impacted the Mexican economy as every time the United States had economic downturns, Mexico faced one too, like in the 1970s, where both countries faced recessions.³⁷

Furthermore, the Bracero Program created the institutionalization of remittances from the US to Mexico. Mostly sent to rural areas, remittance are a necessary source of income that reach over ten million Mexican families.³⁸ Remittances did lead to empowerment for all groups, because since the men are away, the people left such as women and children were responsible for leading and developing their communities.³⁹

Although remittances can benefit struggling economies in some cases, this negatively affects Mexico because it leads to underinvestment in Mexican businesses. Additionally, since families rely significantly on these payments,

³³ Mario T. García, *The Chicano Generation: Testimonios of the Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 3.

³⁴ Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³⁵ García, *The Chicano Generation*, 8.

³⁶ Jorge Macías, "Time is Running Out for the Braceros," CalMatters, Last modified February 27, 2020, <https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2019/11/time-is-running-out-for-the-braceros/>.

³⁷ Alberto M. Garcia, "The Politics of Bracero Migration," EScholarship, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://escholarship.org/content/qt48d5q4qz/qt48d5q4qz.pdf>.

³⁸ Jazmin Rangel, "Infographic | Remittances in Mexico Reach a Historic High," Wilson Center, Accessed July 28, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/infographic-remittances-mexico-reach-historic-high>.

³⁹ Kayla Dantona, "The Bracero Program and the Exploitability of Mexican Workers," CUNY Academic Works, Accessed April 30, 2023. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6291&context=gc_etds.

they were less inclined to participate locally in their own enterprises or communities, and so remittances acted as a disincentive to local investment. Remittances serve as a simple source of income that doesn't need effort or investment for the receivers. Because money for Mexicans is being made in the United States, it hinders economic development in Mexico. Remittances can also divide classes, as only families with migrant members can benefit from increased wages and more access to privileges.⁴⁰

Despite providing economic support to struggling Mexican families, the Bracero Program completely decimated families and communities. Even though the laborers' wages were higher compared to what they made in Mexico, and supported their families better, they were less than the standard for Americans, leaving them with barely anything to live on in the United States. Nevertheless, the braceros with families in Mexico decided living in poverty in the United States was worth it, as it greatly benefited their families and communities. However, many Mexican businesses suffered greatly from a severe lack of men, resulting in much less economic output. The Mexican government had to try and fix the shortage of man labor, by encouraging more female workers and motivating immigration into Mexico.⁴¹

With many men separated from their communities, women left in Mexico often took on new social roles and helped in any way they could, comparable to the feminist movement in the United States during World War II.⁴² Women were frequently left to run the farms and care for their children. Many had to take over the farm work, including crop harvesting and animal care, along with running the communities. For instance, in an interview conducted with Señora Penelope, (her real name is redacted for confidentiality purposes) she talks about her firsthand experience with the Bracero Program while living in Mexico. "I would be the household's authority, I would direct my children most of the time," Penelope said.⁴³ This quote perfectly demonstrates the changing gender roles and increased female responsibility in Mexico that happened because of the Bracero Program.

The Bracero Program brought to light how many more opportunities there were in the United States, leading to a brain drain of professionals to the United States, which especially harmed the education system. The brain drain, a slang term that describes the movement of educated people away from a particular area, happened during the Bracero Program, as educated, high-class Mexicans were offered higher wages and exceptional opportunities in the United States. Many of Mexico's most educated people, including professors and financial experts, left the country, decreasing development. With less skilled professionals in Mexico, the country had a much harder time enticing foreign investment and trade. Many of Mexico's universities and research institutions now faced a shortage of qualified personnel, it worsened the quality of education and research from Mexico. Altogether, Mexico's capacity to advance and industrialize further was constrained by underinvestment in education and reliance on the United States economy as a result of fewer educated people remaining in Mexico.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ "Migration and Remittances Data," World Bank, accessed April 19, 2023,

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>.

⁴¹ Marjorie S. Zatz, "Review of Using and Abusing Mexican Farmworkers: The Bracero Program and the INS" *Law & Society Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 851–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3053955>.

⁴² "Rosie the Riveter Inspired Women to Serve in World War II," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/1791664/rosie-the-riveter-inspired-women-to-serve-in-world-war-ii>.

⁴³ Maristol H Castaneda, "EXAMINING THE BRACERO PROGRAM AND EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS," Sacramento State Scholars, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://scholars.csus.edu/esploro/outputs/graduate/Examining-the-Bracero-program-and-experiences/99257909862601671>.

⁴⁴ Douglas Massey and Zai Liang, "The Long-Term Consequences of a Temporary Worker Program: The US Bracero Experience," *Population Research and Policy Review* 8, no. 3 (1989), 199-226, doi:10.1007/bf00125401.

Immigration Reform

The Bracero Program demonstrated the need for immigration reform by not only showing the part racism played in previous immigration decisions and laws but also highlighting the benefits new cultures bring. By showing Mexico the economic benefits, that the US had, Mexicans after the Bracero Program tried to enter the US, both legally and illegally.

In the years before the Bracero Program, immigration laws in the United States were aimed to discourage overcrowding, utilizing quotas. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 actively prevented Chinese workers from entering the United States in order to preserve enough jobs for Americans. However, a large part of it was the Americans' deep-rooted feelings of prejudice and xenophobia, and many opposed Chinese people even being in the country at all. A few years later, the United States decided to create the Immigration Act of 1917, adding a literacy test and a quota system, further complicating immigration. The Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 further revised the quota system and effectively banned Asian immigrants.⁴⁵ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 all came to be because of the Bracero Program.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA), which abolished the preexisting quota system, was created after long discussions in Congress about guest worker programs. In addition, many in the government wanted another temporary worker program in the 1960s, but the INA was created instead to fix the Bracero Program's errors. On the other hand, proponents of guest worker programs claimed that temporary employees were required to overcome labor shortages in specific industries. Since the Bracero Program separated any families, a vital part of the INA was deciding to help family reunification. While some politicians viewed it as morally and ethically correct to keep families together, others believed it would propel an influx of immigrants. Led by Democrat Rep. Michael A. Feighan, the INA helped keep families together, with over seventy-four percent of permanent visas given to family reunification efforts.⁴⁶ Without the Bracero Program highlighting the racism and injustice faced by Mexicans, the INA would not have included many of its ethical and humane clauses.

The Bracero Program significantly influenced the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 by establishing a precedent for guest worker programs and highlighting the difficulties and opportunities of temporary labor migration. The IRCA is most notably known for creating the H-2A visa program, which still exists today to help out when there are not enough domestic workers. To qualify to hire outside workers, employers must indicate they have a seasonal or short-term need for workers, that they have actually attempted to hire American workers, and that hiring international workers won't affect any American workers' salary or conditions. The IRCA significantly increased the resources provided to migrant or immigrant workers and helped to prevent employers from hiring unauthorized workers. Given the horrible treatment braceros were faced with, the IRCA included clauses protecting migrant workers, including better housing facilities and free transportation.⁴⁷ Overall, the IRCA was and is extremely helpful in providing many immigrants with legal status.⁴⁸

Because visa issues were prevalent in the Bracero Program, the US government decided to implement the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), ultimately streamlining visa usage.

⁴⁵ "Milestones: 1921–1936," Office of the Historian, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

⁴⁶ "Family Reunification Is the Bedrock of U.S. Immigration Policy," Center for American Progress, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/family-reunification-bedrock-u-s-immigration-policy/>.

⁴⁷ Katharine M. Donato, "Changing Conditions in the US Labor Market: Effects of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986," *Population Research and Policy Review* 11, no. 2 (1992): 93–115, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40229812>.

⁴⁸ Jorge Durand, *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004.

Workers from the Bracero Program that would often just overstay their visas and remain in the United States, actively breaking the law. The IIRIRA is one of the most concrete and strictest immigration laws ever passed in US history but was necessary due to rises in undocumented people living in the US.⁴⁹ Another significant effect of the Bracero Program proved to be that it created a pattern of migration that grew uncontrollable. Illegal immigration numbers skyrocketed after the program, as many Mexicans still wanted the economic prosperity that came with working in the United States. As a result, the United States border areas such as Texas pushed much harder for stricter reforms. Many proponents of this act, including Senator Walter Mondale, confirmed that the Bracero Program was responsible for prominent visa issues. Asserting that the program had aided in the rise of illegal immigration and that a new strategy was required to handle the problem, so the IIRIRA was created. Today, this act is responsible for millions of deportations of illegal immigrants and stricter eligibility requirements for potential citizens.⁵⁰

Still lasting today, the Temporary Protected Status Program (TPS), has allowed refugees since 1990 to come into the United States for protection when their original country is no longer safe, which can range from war to a natural disaster. Countries such as Haiti, El Salvador, Syria, Somalia, Honduras, and Nicaragua that have been devastated due to a number of reasons have sent people to live much safer in the United States because of TPS. Laborer vulnerability was one of the major problems throughout the Bracero Program, echoed by low pay and horrendous treatment. Since the Bracero Program caused the creation of much of the legal framework around different guest worker programs, it helped people under TPS come to and work in the United States.⁵¹

The Legacy on Civil Rights

In the 1960s, many minorities and oppressed groups became fed up with the blatantly prejudiced legal system in place, leading to a fight for equality. The Bracero Program created a bridge between Mexicans and Americans, leading to the rise of the Chicano Movement and creating movements for cross-racial solidarity, where multiple minorities helped each other for the same goal.

Employers that threatened to replace American workers with bracero to maintain low salaries and poor working conditions helped to plant seeds of conflict between the two groups of workers. The Bracero Program contributed to a commonly held view in the US that minorities were working to take away jobs from “true” Americans, helping fuel the emergence of anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation, which still influences social justice policy and reforms in the United States today. Since it seemed like Mexican workers would work for many fewer benefits, the migrant workers became viewed as disposable and replaceable, as there was a steady supply of workers coming in when needed. The deep-seeded feelings of hatred between the two groups have certainly gotten better, but still have a definitive impact on interactions between Mexicans and Americans.⁵²

American hostility towards Mexican workers took many different forms; in order to put Mexicans down, Americans perpetuated stereotypes about them being unskilled and bad workers. This treatment has been confirmed by historian and professor Adam Goodman in his book *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, stating, "The Bracero Program assumed that Mexican workers were a source of labor to be used, but

⁴⁹ Dara Lind, "The Disastrous, Forgotten 1996 Law That Created Today's Immigration Problem," accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/28/11515132/iirira-clinton-immigration>.

⁵⁰ Jeremy Slack, "Making Immigrants into Criminals: Legal Processes of Criminalization in the Post-IIRIRA Era," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 3 (2017), 694-715. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/233150241700500308>.

⁵¹ "What Is Temporary Protected Status?" Council on Foreign Relations, last modified January 10, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-temporary-protected-status>.

⁵² David G. Walls Gutiérrez, *Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (University of California Press, 1999).

not human beings with rights, needs, and aspirations of their own.”⁵³ This shown by the significant salary difference between Mexicans and Americans. In 1956, while the American’s minimum wage was one dollar per hour, a significant portion of braceros received a mere half of that amount, resulting in an average compensation of fifty cents per hour. The media also played a large role in spreading obviously wrong and ignorant stereotypes of Mexican workers. Publications in the United States would depict braceros as bad employees that were invading the country and stealing American jobs. Mexican employees were frequently represented in films and television programs as foolish and incompetent, which furthered these stereotypes. The notion that Mexican workers were inferior justified farmers to keep the braceros in cramped and poor living conditions. Broader cultural attitudes shifted against Mexicans and other immigrant groups, showing unfair prejudices against minorities.⁵⁴

The Chicano Movement, lead mainly by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, began in the 1940s and continued through the 1970s, with the simple goal to improve social justice and treatment for Mexican Americans. The Bracero Program helped to show the bad treatment for Mexicans in America, leading to a bigger cause. They exploited by their employers, inciting insecurity among working Mexicans, and encouraged them to band together to fight for equality. Additionally, the Bracero Program significantly changed the demographics in America, with many mor Mexicans in the western states. Many braceros decided to settle and immigrate into the United States permanently, bringing their families and Mexican culture along with them, enabling them to advocate for their rights.⁵⁵

The Chicano Movement also had an impact on the African American civil rights movement by inspiring cross-racial solidarity. The Bracero Program created a dismal situation in which Mexican and Black workers competed for low-paying, manual labor jobs. Since both oppressed groups realized their bleak environment, they worked together to gain more rights. For instance, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and National Farm Workers Association organized the March to Sacramento, in which farmworkers and assorted civil rights activists from Delano, California walked to the state capital of Sacramento, a nonviolent protest that Martin Luther King jr. greatly supported publicly. Since the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans and the Chicano Movement held the same goals, economic and social equality, there movements were very similar.⁵⁶

The combined work of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is another perfect example of cross-racial solidarity. While the CORE mostly represented African Americans and the MAPA mostly represented Mexicans, the groups shared common interests, highlighted by organizing a protest in Coachella Valley centered on worker exploitation of both races. The protest had relative success in improving the workers’ lives, but more importantly contributed to increasing awareness about oppressed communities and minorities. On the political side, the organizations helped and lobbied for candidates who were motivated to amend the plights of minorities by collaborating to register voters to increase representation.⁵⁷ This cross-racial solidarity proved instrumental in the fight for more justice across the United States, as it brought in many more people, forcing the government to recognize the large protests.

⁵³ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ "Martin Luther King Jr. Praised Cesar Chavez For His 'Indefatigable Work'," accessed April 18, 2023, <https://www.biography.com/activists/cesar-chavez-martin-luther-king-jr-telegram>.

⁵⁵ "Guest Workers Program with a Path to Legalization," American Immigration Council, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/guest-workers-program-path-legalization>.

⁵⁶ "Marching for Justice in the Fields (U.S. National Park Service)," NPS.gov (U.S. National Park Service), accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/marching-for-justice-in-the-fields.htm>.

⁵⁷ "Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/congress-racial-equality-core>.

Conclusion

As a cardinal program in history that provided vital labor during World War II, the Bracero Program was a flawed system in which many workers were oppressed and exploited. The program brought in many immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century, showcasing the genuine racist and xenophobic ideas held by many Americans. It forever intertwined the two economies of Mexico and the United States, while simultaneously allowing females to step up in Mexican communities. Most importantly, the groundwork for all social justice movements and immigration reforms coming after it were a result of the Bracero Program. By showcasing their discrimination, the braceros worked to help other marginalized groups gain more rights and more freedoms. Through learning about the little known Bracero Program, one learns the reasons and the history that proves vital to understanding critical social justice issues that remain today, such as immigration reforms and labor rights.

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