

A Profile of Undocumented Agricultural Workers in the United States

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Agricultural workers in the United States not only support the US economy, but are also responsible for keeping people across the country and the globe fed. The agricultural sector contributed \$1.055 trillion to the US GDP in 2020, with \$134.7 billion coming just from farms.¹ US agricultural exports were worth \$139.6 billion in 2018.²

The agricultural sector in the United States relies on foreign workers; 86 percent of agricultural workers³ in the United States are foreign-born and 45 percent of all US agricultural workers are undocumented. Seasonal and agricultural labor demands are also growing in the United States. Requests for the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker Program, which brings immigrants from abroad for periods of up to eight months to meet agricultural workforce needs, have more than doubled from 2010 to 2019. The program increased from 79,000 H-2A workers in 2010 to 258,000 in 2019.⁴

CMS estimates characteristics of populations who would be eligible for general and population-specific legalization programs and for special legal status

programs.⁵ Due to the cyclical nature of agricultural work, it can be difficult to estimate exact numbers and characteristics of workers with an annual survey.

According to CMS estimates, there are approximately 283,000 undocumented immigrants who work in the United States as agricultural workers. These individuals make up approximately 4 percent of the total undocumented workforce in United States. Immigrants coming from Mexico comprise the majority of undocumented agricultural workers at 88 percent. Following Mexico, undocumented agricultural workers come from Guatemala (7 percent), El Salvador (3 percent), Honduras (2 percent), and Nicaragua (1 percent) (Figure 1). Approximately 63 percent of undocumented agricultural workers are male and 37 percent are female (Figure 2).

¹ USDA- <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy/#:~:text=What%20is%20agriculture's%20share%20of,about%200.6%20percent%20of%20GDP>

² Farm Bureau – <https://www.fb.org/newsroom/fast-facts>

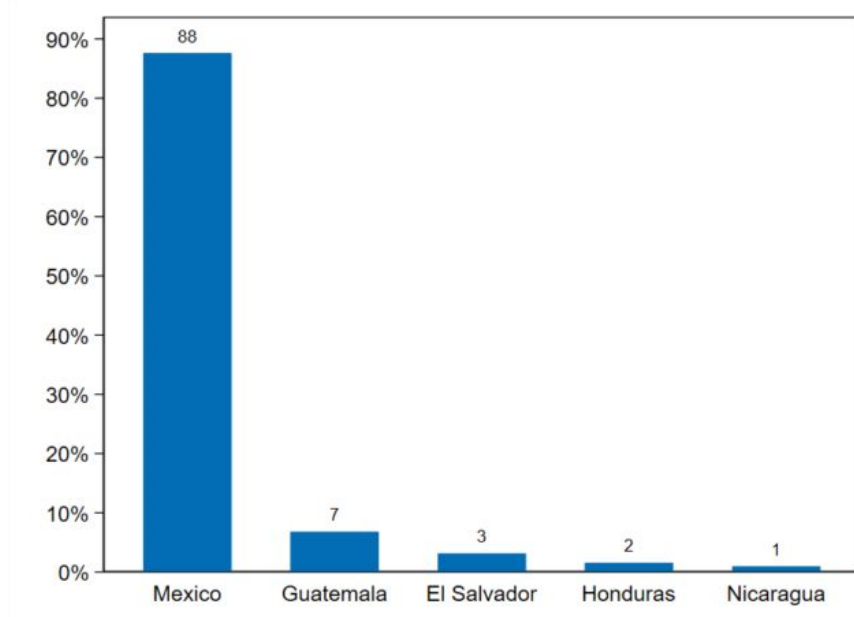
³ Agricultural workers defined by IPUMS ACS occupation codes 6010 (Agricultural Inspectors), 6040 (Graders and Sorters, Agricultural Products) and 6050 (Miscellaneous agricultural workers) – <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/volii/occ2018.shtml>

⁴ USDA economic research service – <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2021/september/use-of-h-2a-guest-farm-worker-program-more-than-triples-in-past-decade/>

⁵ CMS estimates are based on 2019 American Community Survey Microdata. For more information, see Kerwin, Donald, José Pacas, and Robert Warren. 2022. "Ready to Stay: A Comprehensive Analysis of the US Foreign-Born Populations Eligible for Special Legal Status Programs and for Legalization under Pending Bills." *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 10(1): 37-76.

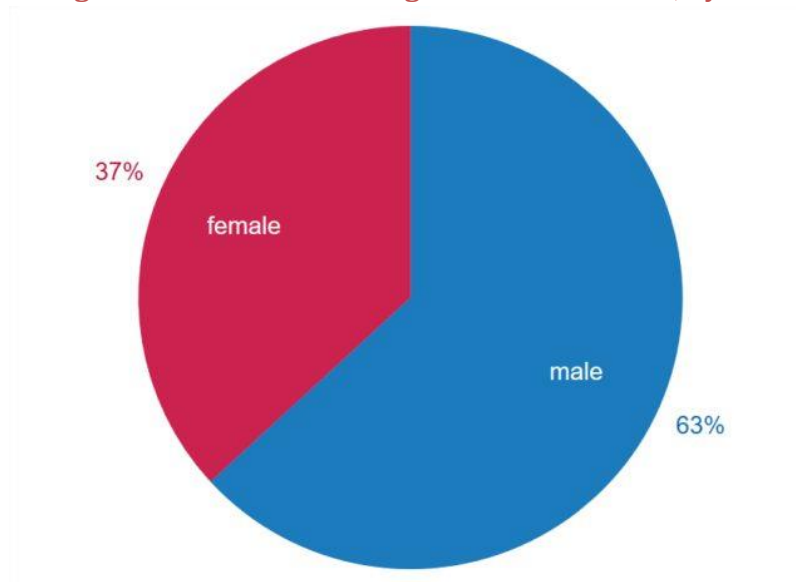
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024211065016>

Figure 1. Undocumented Agricultural Workers, by Country of Origin



Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)⁶

Figure 2. Undocumented Agricultural Workers, by Sex



Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

⁶ Ruggles, Steven, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek. 2021. *IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]*. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>

According to CMS estimates, approximately 71 percent of this population has been living in the United States for more than 10 years. The top five states hosting the largest share of undocumented agricultural workers are:

- California (49 percent)
- Washington (9 percent)
- Florida (7 percent)
- Texas (5 percent)
- Oregon (4 percent)

California, which hosts nearly half the undocumented agricultural worker population, is also the largest producer of cash farm receipts in the United States, responsible for 13.7 percent of the US share in 2020.⁷

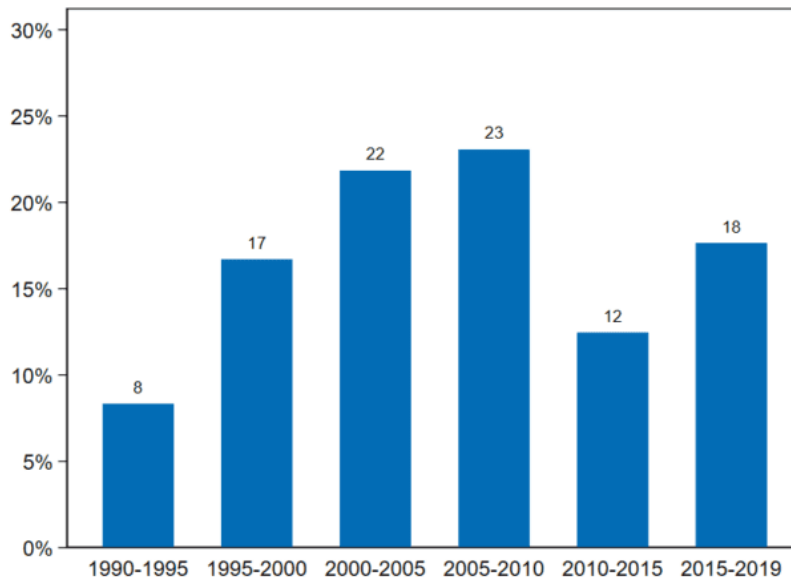
Figure 3 depicts the percent of undocumented agricultural workers in the United States by their year of arrival. Only 8 percent of undocumented agricultural workers currently in the United States entered the country between 1990 and 1995, and 17 percent entered between 1995 and 2000. Nearly half of the undocumented agricultural workforce arrived between

2000 and 2010, having been part of the US economy for more than a decade. Only 30 percent of undocumented agricultural workers arrived in the United States within the past 10 years.

Eighty-nine percent of the undocumented agricultural worker population is of prime working age (25 to 54 years old). Nearly 30 percent are of young working age (25 to 34). The age distribution below shows the estimated number of school-aged children (age 5 to 18) is approximately .20 percent, and the share of those ages 18-20 and above 65 years are only 2.5 percent and 1 percent respectively (Table 1).

Overall, undocumented agricultural workers in the United States are not highly educated, with 73 percent having less than a high school education. Among undocumented agricultural workers in the United States, 20 percent have a high school education, and approximately 8 percent have some college education, a Bachelors degree (BA), or higher education (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Percent of Undocumented Population of Agricultural Workers, by Year of Arrival



Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

⁷ https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/Statistics/PDFs/2021_Ag_Stats_Review.pdf

Table 1. Age Distribution of Undocumented Agricultural Workers

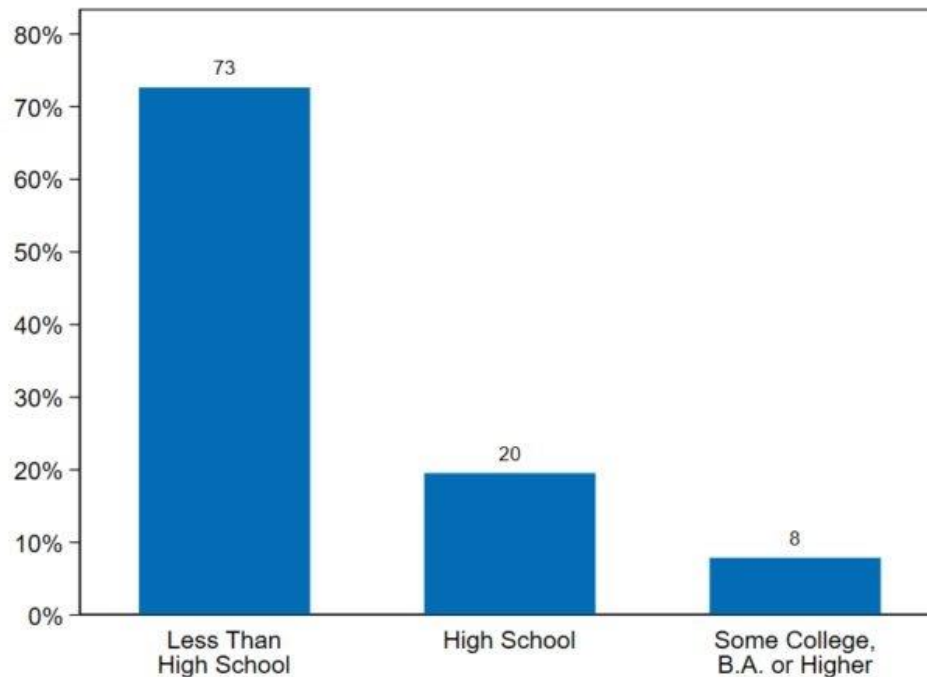
Age	Total	Percent
5 to 17	586	.20%
18 to 20	7,155	2.5%
21 to 24	20,313	7%
25 to 34	84,224	30%
35 to 44	91,450	32%
45 to 64	76,557	27%
65 and over	2,728	1%

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest 100.

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

Figure 4. Educational Attainment of Agricultural Workers (Age 18 and over)



Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

The average level of education of undocumented agricultural workers varies by country of origin. Figure 5 shows the education levels of undocumented immigrants from the top 10 countries of origin with the largest undocumented agricultural worker populations in the United States. More than half the undocumented agricultural worker population has less than a high school education for the top four sending countries; Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Undocumented agricultural workers from Nicaragua tend to be more highly educated, with 42 percent having some college education, a BA, or higher, and an additional 51 percent having at least a high school degree.

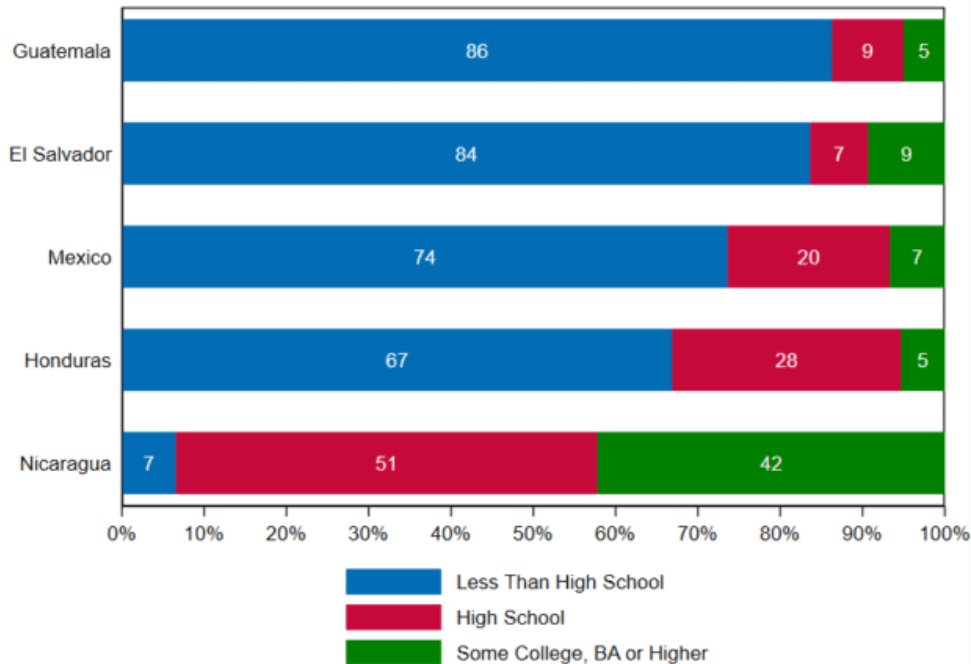
Most undocumented agricultural workers speak a language other than English at home. The vast majority speak Spanish (93 percent), followed by English (4 percent), South and Central American Indian languages (2 percent), German (.25 percent), Filipino/Tagalog (.20

percent), and Afrikaans (.15 percent).

Undocumented agricultural workers overall all have low levels of English proficiency. The majority do not speak English (42 percent) or speak English, but not well (34 percent). The language proficiency breakdown in Table 2 below shows 12 percent speak English well, 9 percent very well, and 4 percent speak only English.

A number of pending bills and special legal status programs would give undocumented agricultural workers permanent residence in the United States, including the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021 (ADPA), the Dream Act of 2021, the Citizenship for Essential Workers Act, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, and the US Citizenship Act of 2021. The populations eligible for the legislation and programs are detailed in Table 3 with estimates of numbers and characteristics.

Figure 5. Educational Attainment of Undocumented Agricultural Workers, by Country of Origin (Age 18 and over)



Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

Table 2. English Language Proficiency Distribution of Undocumented Agricultural Workers

English Proficiency	Total	Percent
Doesn't speak English	117,800	42%
Yes, but not well	95,900	34%
Yes, speaks well	34,600	12%
Yes, speaks very well	24,200	9%
Yes, speaks only English	10,500	4%

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundreds.
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: CMS calculations using the American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021)

First, the **American Dream and Promise Act of 2021 (ADPA)**⁸ establishes conditional permanent resident status for immigrants who entered the United States as minors and removes conditions on permanent resident status for persons who meet requirements, such as completing specific programs at educational institutions, serving in the military, or being employed. The bill also adjusts lawful permanent resident (LPR) status for immigrants eligible for temporary protected status (TPS) and deferred enforced departure (DED). All of the undocumented agricultural workers potentially eligible for conditional permanent residence and removal of conditions on permanent residence under this bill have completed high school, and 19 percent have some college, a BA, or higher education. Sixty-nine percent speak English well, very well, or only English (Table 3) and 66 percent have been residing in the United States for over 15 years or more (Table 3).

For undocumented immigrants who were younger than age 18 when they initially entered the United States, have lived continuously in the United States for the four years prior to the bill's enactment, and meet educational and other conditions outlined in the bill, the

Dream Act of 2021 provides conditional permanent residence and removal of conditions on permanent residence.⁹ The Dream Act of 2021 would impact approximately 26,500 undocumented agricultural

workers. About two-thirds (64 percent) of this population are long-term residents (in the US for 15+ years). Nearly everyone in this group has completed high school (97 percent), but CMS estimates show a drop in higher education levels, with only 18 percent having gone on to receive some college education, a BA, or higher. As individuals who have grown up and gone through high school in the United States, securing their legal status through the Dream Act of 2021 would allow them to obtain college degrees and continue to grow and thrive in the United States.

The **Citizenship for Essential Workers Act**¹⁰ gives lawful permanent resident status to undocumented immigrants who held essential jobs during the pandemic, including in the agricultural industry, and extends to their spouses, parents, and children, as well as to the spouses, parents, and children of immigrants who were essential workers and died from COVID-19.

⁸ H.R.6 – 117th Congress (2021-2022): American Dream and Promise Act of 2021. (2021, June 15). See

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6>

⁹ S.264 – 117th Congress (2021-2022): Dream Act of 2021. (2021, February 4). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/264>

¹⁰ Citizenship for Essential Workers Act, S. 747, 117th Cong. (2021-2022). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/747>

The bill would offer 254,000 undocumented agricultural workers and their surviving family members legalization and a pathway to citizenship. Half of this group are long-term residents and the majority have limited levels of English proficiency and low educational attainment.

Approximately 235,600 undocumented agricultural workers would be eligible for legal status under the **Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021**, which would provide undocumented farmworkers and their family members with a path to legalization and

citizenship.¹¹ Fifty-one percent of undocumented agricultural workers eligible for this opportunity have lived in the United States for 15 years or more. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food chain and labor shortages are still reverberating in the agricultural sector and supply chains globally. Legalizing undocumented immigrants in the agricultural sector will allow for improvements to their work conditions and job security, and provide stability as they make essential contributions to the food chain and US economy. [Farmworker Justice](#) and [Fwd.us](#) are two organizations

Table 3: Estimates of the Number of the Agricultural Workers by Legislative / Administrative Programs: Estimates Derived from 2019 ACS Data

Program	Total	In the US 15+ years	Speak English well, very well, or only English	Completed high school	Some college B.A. or higher	Household income above poverty level
American Dream and Promise Act of 2021						
Conditional permanent residence	25,100	66%	69%	100%	19%	83%
Removal of conditions on permanent residence	19,500	69%	67%	100%	19%	83%
Direct adjustment to LPR status for TPS recipients under the Promise Act	4,500	90%	42%	39%	7%	94%
Direct adjustment to LPR status for DED recipients under the Promise Act	300	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Dream Act of 2021						
Conditional permanent residence	26,500	64%	68%	97%	18%	83%
Removal of conditions on permanent residence	10,300	89%	79%	99%	23%	84%
Citizenship for Essential Workers Act						
Adjust to LPR status for essential workers and surviving family members	266,300	50%	24%	27%	8%	80%
Essential Workers	254,000	50%	24%	28%	8%	81%
Spouses	10,400	54%	24%	14%	4%	65%
Children	800	37%	88%	40%	3%	67%
Parents	1,100	55%	21%	34%	0%	75%
Farm Workforce Modernization Act						
Certified Agricultural Worker Status	235,600	51%	25%	27%	8%	82%
US Citizenship Act of 2021						
General legalization program	283,000	51%	24%	27%	8%	79%
LPR Status for DACA recipients and childhood arrivals	19,500	69%	67%	100%	19%	83%
DACA recipients	10,200	89%	79%	100%	23%	83%
Other childhood arrivals	9,300	47%	54%	100%	15%	83%
Total TPS-DED recipients	4,500	90%	42%	39%	7%	94%
Spouses	1,700	99%	24%	24%	9%	100%
Agricultural workers	235,600	51%	25%	27%	8%	82%
Spouses	135,700	54%	25%	23%	6%	80%

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundreds.
 Source: Center for Migration Studies. Estimates derived from data collected in the 2019 ACS; see Appendix in Warren (2021) (Warren, Robert. 2021. "In 2019, the US Undocumented Population Continued a Decade-Long Decline and the Foreign-Born Population Neared Zero Growth." Journal on Migration and Human Security: 9(1): 31-43. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2331502421993746>.) for methods of estimation. Source of ACS data: Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V11.0>.

¹¹ H.R.1603 – 117th Congress (2021-2022): Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021. (2021, March 22). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1603>

advocating for the enactment of the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.

Finally, under the **US Citizenship Act of 2021**, which offers lawful prospective immigrant (LPI) status to undocumented immigrants who were physically present in the US on or before January 1, 2021,¹² all undocumented agricultural workers would be eligible for a legalization program. Eligible noncitizens would be able to apply for permanent resident status after five years under the LPI status. The bill also provides permanent resident status to eligible noncitizens who entered the United States as a minor, are eligible for TPS or DED, or worked a certain amount of agricultural labor in the five years prior to applying. The eligible population of undocumented agricultural workers under this bill appear to be long-term residents with low levels of English proficiency and education.

The enactment of pending bills would provide legal status and a path to citizenship to many undocumented agricultural workers currently living and working in the United States. In general, this population has both limited education and English proficiency but has lived in the United States long term. Approximately 83 percent live above the poverty level. Providing legal status to these immigrants would not only provide them with job security and expand their educational opportunities, but it would also support the US economy by increasing tax revenue and decreasing labor shortages in the agricultural sector. In addition to passing bills providing legal status for undocumented immigrants currently in the United States, Congress should consider expanding H2-A seasonal workers programs to build more legal employment pathways for Central Americans.¹³ These programs have proven successful across the Americas and globally. For example, established seasonal worker programs in Canada have succeeded in both meeting domestic labor

needs and offering legal pathways to migration.¹⁴ Canada's seasonal worker programs includes the Canada/Guatemala Temporary Guest Worker Program¹⁵ which facilitates worker recruitment, integration, and protection. The aforementioned legalization programs and broadening of other options for legal migration pathways will support the agricultural sector, the US economy and community, and migrants and their families.

¹² US Citizenship Act of 2021. H.R. 1177 and S. 348, 117th Cong. (2021-2022). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1177>

¹³ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/alternatives-irregular-migration-central-america>

¹⁴ <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Grown-Locally-Falconer.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://gsp.cgdev.org/legalpathway/canada-guatemala-temporary-guest-worker-program-tgwp/>

About Center for Migration Studies of New York

The Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) is a think tank and an educational institute devoted to the study of international migration, to the promotion of understanding between immigrants and receiving communities, and to public policies that safeguard the dignity and rights of migrants, refugees, and newcomers.

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