

Temporary Foreign Workers Program? No accurate data

WORKERS FOR LABOUR SHORTAGES

Temporary Foreign Worker Programs (TFWPs) have operated in Canada since the 1960s. Until 2006, such schemes operated without much public attention except for serious concerns about poor working conditions and unfair treatment by many employers. These programs were designed by the government to provide workers for limited periods when there was a labour shortage, which primarily meant jobs in the areas of seasonal agricultural work and child/eldercare work that would not attract national workers because of the working conditions (especially live-in requirements) and low pay. To make the decision that a labour shortage existed, government agencies used to conduct a labour market assessment of the rate of unemployment in a certain region for the particular type of work.

Public concern about these programs began to grow with the dramatic increase in the use of temporary foreign workers for a rapidly expanding list of low-skilled jobs, despite rising unemployment rates. When I started to research this issue, I found it difficult to find out how many of these workers were in Canada. The most recent Statistics Canada count was for 2012 with an estimate of 340,000. In 2013 there were 85,000 work permits reportedly issued and 50,000 for the first half of 2014, bringing the total to 475,000. If one adds another 50,000 for the latter part of 2014, the total is just over 525,000. However, there is reason to believe that the number of temporary foreign workers is actually going up, despite recent changes to the program designed to limit the number of new entrants in response to charges that the program was out of control and had moved too far from its original policy goal of filling tempor-

BY PATRICIA McDERMOTT

Patricia McDermott teaches in the areas of Gender Studies and Sociolegal Studies at York University. She is in the Department of Social Science.

Public concern ... began to grow with the dramatic increase in the use of temporary foreign workers for a rapidly expanding list of low-skilled jobs, despite rising unemployment rates.

ary labour shortages. At the end of March 2014, it was reported that the number of low-skilled temporary workers continued to grow and was in fact 6 percent higher than the average for the first quarter in 2013 despite promise to cut back the program.

Since the 2011 expansion of the TFWP, most workers entering the country were issued work permits for four years, but they have to leave the country for four years before they can re-apply. These work permits expired on April 1, 2015. No one has any idea of how many temporary foreign workers left and how many stayed in the country, moving into the most precarious undocumented status. Note that most seasonal agricultural workers must return home to their country of origin for 4 months of a 12-month contract, and are not typically living in the country on Decem-

ber 1, when a key labour force survey is undertaken, which leaves them out of the count.

LACK OF DATA

As of May 2015, most research reports typically use data only up to 2012 and are essentially unhelpful for the formulation of up-to-date economic policy and planning. For example, a March 2015 report issued by the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), *Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada: A Look at Regions and Occupational Skills*, states:

The initial purpose of this report was to evaluate the impact of foreign workers on local labour markets for various occupations. There was particular interest in assessing whether there was a quantifiable need for foreign workers in low-skilled occupations arising from labour shortages. ... [T]he lack of disaggregated data on labour demand and labour supply at the regional and local level *prevented us from achieving this original goal*. [Emphasis added.] (PBO 2015, 4)

According to this report, there is no information about the critical issue of skill type or level for the about 45 percent of the total number of temporary foreign workers who entered Canada since the program was expanded. This makes it very difficult to assess whether appropriate resident/national workers are available before jobs are open to temporary foreign workers. Significantly, approximately 70 percent of the entrants came in under programs that do not require a labour market assessment—making the monitoring of labour shortages essentially impossible. Another issue that makes labour market policy

Temporary Foreign Workers Program, page 32

Temporary Foreign Workers Program continued from page 35

development difficult is the fact that the federal government, which “routinely boasts that it has created more than one million jobs over the last seven years,” includes temporary foreign workers in their totals (Nuttall 2015). This practice could, as noted by Kendra Strauss, a professor of labour studies at Simon Fraser University, “provide a false picture of the labour market” (Nuttall 2015).

COUNTING PEOPLE

Every month, Statistics Canada surveys 54,000 households to collect employment data. First Nations reserves are not included in these surveys. It is no wonder that a non-Aboriginal cafeteria owner on the Ermineskin Cree Nation reserve in northern Alberta was given a permit to hire temporary foreign workers even though there is an estimated 70 percent unemployment rate on the reserve (Friesen and D’Aliesio 2014). The omission of First Nation peoples from what is referred to as a “quick, accurate and timely measure” of job market conditions “is largely due to the high costs of gathering data from remote areas” (Grant 2015). A similar response is given when Statistics Canada is asked why it cannot give an accurate estimate of the number of foreign temporary workers in the monthly survey: “these workers live in hotels and bunkhouses that would be difficult to reach for the survey” (Nuttall 2015).

In a Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) report on the role of migrant labour in Canada, Stan Kustec notes that to keep accurate data on the number of people entering Canada, the gov-

[T]o keep accurate data on the number of people entering Canada, the government must move from the system of counting the number of *documents* issued ... to a system based on the number of *people*.

ernment must move from the system of counting the number of *documents* issued, a practice which can lead to “significant and sometimes substantial double counting” to a system based on the number of *people* and the length of authorization for each work permit (Kustec 2012, 19–20). This June 2012 report offers good advice, yet the data remain fragmented and unreliable in 2015. Recently, the *Toronto Star* (May 10, 2015) noted that there are now an estimated 340,000 people classified in “temporary,” non-permanent jobs in Toronto, many of which are part-time, but we have no idea how many of these are actually “temporary” workers with a limited work permit. How many may have “become” undocumented when approximately 70,000 work permits ran out on April 1, 2015? How can a country make good labour market policy when the data for this critical issue are so seriously dated and flawed? 🍁

WORKS CITED

Friesen, Joe, and Renata D’Aliesio.

2014. Statistical black hole opens door to foreign workers. *Globe and Mail*, October 20. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/>

national/canadas-skewed-labour-data-tips-balance-in-favour-of-foreign-workers/article21158372/.

Grant, Tavia. 2015. Budget limits create logistical challenge for first nations labour data. *Globe and Mail*, March 10. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/economy/budget-limits-create-logistical-challenge-for-first-nations-labour-data/article23397341/>.

Kustec, Stan. 2012. *The role of migrant labour supply in the Canadian labour market*. Ref. no. RR20120705. Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/research/2012-migrant/>.

Nuttall, Jeremy J. 2015. It’s misleading to count temporary foreign workers in jobs-created ledger: Expert. *TheTye.ca*, February 19. <http://thetyee.ca/News/2015/02/19/Temporary-Foreign-Workers-Count-Misleading/>.

Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO). 2015. *Temporary foreign workers in Canada: A look at regions and occupational skill*. March. http://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/files/files/TFW_EN.pdf.



Excellence and diversity in research is central to York’s mission and is fundamental to the university’s ability to contribute to the economic, scientific, cultural, and social health of our society.

www.yorku.ca/research