



# LAND, LABOR, LIBERATION: A JUNETEENTH REFLECTION ON RACISM IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

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## THE RACIST AGRICULTURAL PIPELINE: FROM SLAVERY TO SHARECROPPING TO MIGRANT WORKERS

On June 19, 1865, the last enslaved Black Americans in Galveston, Texas, learned of their freedom. That was the final day of chattel slavery in the United States and what we now know as “**Juneteenth**.” Although Juneteenth marked the end of slavery, emancipation did not immediately grant economic independence to newly freed Black folks. Enslaved labor was the backbone of American agriculture, and after slavery, **sharecropping** soon emerged as a replacement across the South: freed families farming land they rented from white landowners in return for a share of the crop instead of wages. Sharecropping kept most Black Southerners impoverished and immobile for decades to come. Landlords often cheated sharecroppers out of their fair share of crops, and those who tried to leave faced violence or charges of vagrancy and were sentenced to convict labor camps. The **13th Amendment** may have formally abolished slavery, but new systems like sharecropping and **convict-leasing** labor effectively became “**the new form of slavery in America**” for Black workers,

tethering them to the land without true economic freedom.

Yet even as Black Americans fought for land ownership and economic freedom, a new underclass was being drawn into America's agricultural economy under similarly exploitative terms. During World War II, the U.S. government launched the **Bracero Program** (1942–1964), inviting hundreds of thousands of Mexican laborers to fill farm jobs left vacant by soldiers sent overseas. Advertised as a pathway to good wages and opportunity, the reality for many migrant workers was starkly different.

Much like sharecroppers decades earlier, migrant workers who were promised fair treatment found themselves trapped by brutal working conditions, sub-minimum wages, and overcrowded, unsanitary housing often reminiscent of slave quarters. Many were coerced into debt cycles or left without the means to return home, effectively binding them to a foreign land under duress.

Today, this dynamic continues: many migrant workers are recruited under the promise of a better life, only to be paid pennies, **excluded from labor protections** and a pathway to citizenship, forced to live in isolation, and threatened with deportation if they speak out. The thread between slavery, sharecropping, the exploitation of migrant and immigrant labor, and the legacy of stolen Black land is strong. To understand one form of injustice, we must also confront the others.

## STOLEN BLACK LAND

Despite enormous obstacles, Black Americans built a legacy of farming and land stewardship in the decades after emancipation. By 1920, there were **nearly one million** Black farmers, comprising approximately 14 percent of all U.S. farmers. These families had amassed 15 million acres of farmland across the South, an impressive feat of resilience in the face of segregation and rampant discrimination.

This hard-won prosperity did not last. Between 1910 and 1997, Black Farmers lost **around 90 percent** of their land due to racism and being deliberately pushed off their land. White supremacist terror, including violence and lynchings, often drove Black families off valuable land. Predatory land grabs and legal trickery such as heirs' property loopholes and forced sales exploited Black owners. Perhaps most devastating was the **institutional discrimination** by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and federal programs that systematically denied Black farmers loans, insurance, and fair access to markets. A decades-long history of loan denials at the USDA is cited as a major reason Black farmers were **forced off of their land**—without credit or support, many fell into unpayable debt and foreclosure, or were simply unable to compete and sustain their farms.

Today, the legacy of stolen land from Black people is stark. Black Americans own just **1–2 percent of U.S. farmland**. Out of over 3.4 million farmers nationwide, only about 35,000 are Black, or roughly 1.7 percent. This represents a collapse from 14 percent a century ago, a decline unparalleled in any other demographic group; for example, white farmers lost only 2 percent of their land over the same period. Of the 1 billion acres of land with suitable soil for growing in America, Black farmers currently

cultivate barely a million acres. In other words, **more than 16 million acres** of Black land was taken away in the 20th century, an estimated loss of over \$250-350 billion in wealth and opportunity. The human cost is incalculable: entire generations were locked out of the economic security that land ownership provided to others.

Black farm families who managed to hold on faced continual hurdles, from local banks refusing to lend to them, extension agents refusing to serve them, predatory tax laws, and outright sabotage by racist officials. It was not until 1999 that the federal government acknowledged some of this injustice in **Pigford v. Glickman**, a class-action lawsuit by Black farmers against the USDA. The Pigford settlements of 1999 and 2010 promised around \$2 billion in payments and debt relief for victims of USDA discrimination. Yet even those measures fell short: many Black farmers never received the promised debt cancellation and the USDA foreclosures continued. As recently as 2021, Congress attempted **\$4 billion** in debt relief specifically for farmers of color, only to see opponents attack it as "unfair" and sue to block it.

The decline of Black farming is not just a tale of the past. It actively shapes our present in the form of eroded generational wealth, the loss of Black cultural ties to the land, and fewer Black growers who can feed their communities. **On this Juneteenth, the history of Black land loss stands as unfinished business.**

## **A NEW AGRICULTURAL LABOR FORCE: IMMIGRANTS**

As Black farming declined over the 20th century, a new labor force stepped into America's fields: immigrant farmworkers. Today, the vast majority of people who plant, tend, and harvest our crops are immigrants, primarily from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. By the numbers, roughly **70 percent** of the 2.5 million hired farm workers in the U.S. were born abroad. These immigrant farmworkers, many of whom have lived in the U.S. for decades, are the unseen backbone of our food system. Their grueling work feeds the nation: picking fruits and vegetables under the hot sun, milking cows in predawn hours, processing meat and poultry in cold factories. Critically, a large portion of this workforce lacks an authorized immigration status, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. It's estimated that **40 percent** of U.S. farm laborers are undocumented. In certain sectors and regions, the share is even higher; for example, about half of all crop farmworkers have no legal status. In states like California, that figure can be even higher. These **workers live in constant uncertainty**, doing essential jobs while knowing a single immigration raid could upend their lives.

When immigration enforcement increases in rural areas, it doesn't just terrorize workers — it shakes the foundations of the agricultural economy. The presence of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents or harsh state laws targeting the undocumented create a chilling effect that can cause farm laborers to avoid work or flee the region entirely. Farmers have warned that aggressive crackdowns will lead to crops rotting in fields, dairy barns going understaffed, and businesses closing.

We have already seen examples of this: in 2023, Florida enacted **Florida SB 1718**, one of the strictest immigration laws in the country. Among other provisions, the law mandated that employers use **E-Verify** and criminalized transporting undocumented individuals. The result was immediate: reports emerged of migrant farmworkers **abandoning fields** and leaving the state out of fear even before the law took effect. Construction sites and crop farms alike began experiencing labor shortages as immigrants fled or went into hiding. The Florida Policy Institute estimated that nearly **1 in 10 workers** in Florida's most labor-intensive industries, like agriculture, were undocumented—and now many of those workers are uncertain about the future under the new law. Similarly, during past federal crackdowns, fruit and vegetable growers in states from California to Georgia have reported not having enough hands to pick produce because workers stayed away due to rumors of ICE raids.

Another example is taking place this week, as **ICE raids intensify across Los Angeles**. Thousands have taken to the streets in protest, demanding justice as images circulate of families being separated, neighborhoods under siege, and the National Guard patrolling communities that already live in fear. This is not just an immigration issue—it is a humanitarian crisis. The raids and military response are a painful reminder that our country still chooses surveillance and punishment over safety and dignity for the very people who help feed us. The recently passed House budget reconciliation bill further compounds these challenges by excluding many immigrants from **accessing SNAP benefits**, cutting off essential food support for families who already face barriers to fair wages, safe housing, and legal protection. Specifically, the bill eliminates eligibility for certain lawfully present immigrants—including asylum seekers and refugees—if they do not yet have a green card, further marginalizing groups who are already excluded from many public benefits and labor protections. All of this undermines our food supply chain and is not a sustainable situation for a nation that values food security. Simply put, you cannot separate immigration policy from agricultural policy. The two are deeply intertwined on the ground.

## SNAP IS AGRICULTURE

Agriculture isn't only about those who grow the food—it's also about ensuring that the food reaches all Americans in an equitable way. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, champions that effort and is just as much an agricultural and food justice program as it is a safety net program. By providing families with low incomes with the funds to purchase groceries, SNAP guarantees a baseline demand for American-grown food. In fact, SNAP is authorized under the **Farm Bill** precisely because it serves as a bridge between producers and consumers: it helps millions afford food, while funneling billions of dollars to grocery stores, food processors, and farmers. Roughly **41 million Americans** rely on SNAP to help put food on the table, including families in inner cities, suburbs, and rural farming communities alike. When these families use SNAP at their local supermarket or farmers' market, they are supporting the entire agricultural supply chain.

## POLICY ATTACKS THREATEN FOOD JUSTICE

Despite the clear connections between nutrition, agriculture, and equity, recent policy proposals threaten to unravel the fragile progress we've made. On top of the attacks on immigrant families, the **reconciliation bill** imposes stricter work documentation requirements that are likely to lead to a loss of benefits for many individuals and families, particularly among people already working low-wage or unstable jobs who may not be able to comply with increased paperwork. As my previous work has shown, work requirements **don't promote** meaningful employment outcomes—they simply create bureaucratic hurdles that punish people for living in poverty. Many participants lose benefits not because they are unwilling to work, but because they fail to meet reporting requirements or navigate confusing and rigid compliance systems.

Of equal concern is the bill's imposition of a state cost-sharing structure that mirrors the **block-granting programs**. Beginning in 2028, states will be required to **pay a portion** of SNAP benefit costs, starting at 5 percent and potentially rising to 25 percent based on federal assessments of payment error rates. The last time a federal public benefits program was block granted, it resulted in the end of the program as we knew it and a sharp reduction in recipients.

This shift will strain state budgets and incentivize restrictive eligibility practices, as states look for ways to control costs and reduce liability. It will also exacerbate the administrative burden on already overstretched agencies, redirecting limited resources away from client services and toward compliance and auditing functions. For SNAP recipients, this will mean more documentation requests, longer wait times, and more procedural denials. These burdens will **fall hardest** on Black, immigrant, and rural communities that are already disproportionately harmed by administrative churn.

Weakening SNAP in this way will not only increase hunger but also destabilize local food economies. By undercutting the program that serves as the foundation of demand for U.S.-grown food, this approach threatens the viability of small grocers, farmers, and entire food systems that rely on a consistent, accessible safety net.

## A JUNETEENTH CALL TO ACTION

Juneteenth reminds us that freedom delayed is freedom denied. True liberation requires more than the end of physical bondage—it means access to land that was promised and never delivered, the right to labor with dignity rather than under coercion, and the power to feed one's family and community without fear. From slavery to sharecropping to the exploitation of migrant farmworkers, the American agricultural system has been built on the backs of those who were excluded from its promises. Still today, those same communities—Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrant, poor—continue to sustain this country's food system while being denied its most basic protections. History, as it so often does, repeats itself, shifting faces but maintaining the same underlying injustices. The

oppression of Black people in this country, sadly, has laid the foundation for systems that continue to harm other marginalized communities. But the opposite is also true: when we fight for Black liberation, we are also creating the conditions for **freedom for all**.

To truly honor Juneteenth is to demand a food system that reflects the values we claim to hold. Policymakers must protect and strengthen SNAP as a cornerstone of food access and agricultural sustainability, not weaken it through budget cuts, more red tape, and racist policies. They must invest in Black farmers—ensuring equity in land ownership, USDA support, and the full delivery of promised debt relief. And they must reform immigration policies, not with raids and family separation but with policies that uplift dignity, stability, and legal pathways to the farmworkers who make our food system possible.

This is how we honor the Ancestors who toiled in fields without ever being paid and the descendants still fighting for what they're owed. The work is far from finished. But if we listen to history in a concerted effort to not repeat it—and to the communities who have lived it—we can build a food system rooted in freedom, sovereignty, fairness, and nourishment for all.

Happy Juneteenth!