Florida’s Permeable Labor Markets

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Conventional analyses of labor markets assume their boundaries to be fixed. For example, urban geography long focused on the urban commuting sheds of workers, in which it was assumed that the high friction of distance involved in commuting limited the extent to which workers could travel for jobs. The existence of long-distance commuting patterns is simply inconceivable in such a perspective. In this light, wages for a given occupation could be assumed to be relatively equal within a particular labor market. This assumption is significant, for example, in the use of counties as the primary unit in the Census’ definition and measurement of Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs).

But increasingly, the notion of labor markets as discrete, spatially isolated phenomena has been empirically and theoretically suspect. Since the late 20th century, labor markets have become national, or even international, in scope, particularly those for skilled labor. Given the widespread shift from Fordist to post-Fordist systems of production, including the mounting use of part-time and contingent labor, which have dramatically changed the skills, wages, and conditions of employment for large numbers of people, it is not unreasonable to suspect that labor markets have changed in their spatial configuration too. Empirically, these qualms render questionable the use of counties to measure the size and extent of labor markets. While counties form the primary basis for aggregating data in MSAs, for example, their size and the prevalence of cross-county commuting tend to conceal the vast heterogeneity within and among them.

Of course, it is one thing to claim that labor markets have become more spatially permeable; it is another to demonstrate it empirically. Following an overview of contrasting perspectives on this issue, this paper seeks to demonstrate the permeability of Florida’s labor markets at three spatial scales. First, it addresses cross-county
commuting patterns among Florida’s counties, illustrating regions of labor surplus, deficit, and the net balance of these. Second, it turns to Florida’s labor exchanges with other states of the U.S., revealing its surplus (i.e., sending more workers than it receives) with most states and focusing in more detail on the special case of Florida and Georgia. Third, it points to the international dimensions of Florida’s labor force, including the foreign countries in which Floridians work and their counties of origin.

Varying Perspectives on Permeability in Spatialized Labor Markets

The literature on the geography of labor has focused on two distinct spatial scales. An older body of work (e.g., Vance 1960; Holm and Weissglas 1977), equated labor markets with urban commuting fields. From this view, workers with access to urban transportation systems can respond readily enough to job opportunities within commuting fields, a process that tends to equalize wages within localized areas. As Hanson and Pratt (1992) emphasize, the decisions of where to work and where to live in this context are inextricably intertwined, and workers must make complex decisions that minimize travel times subject to strict time and cost constraints. However, such works typically either ignore long-distance commuting altogether or dismiss its significance, and end up portraying labor markets as discrete, fixed entities whose motors of change are purely local in origin. Thus, while the functional spaces of individual workers are tied together to forge a collective whole, labor markets themselves are not seen as tied to one another in any meaningful way (Amrhein and MacKinnon 1988). Such a view is understandable given the historical circumstances of Fordist production; times, and labor markets, however, have changed.

A second line of thought has emphasized the mobility of labor and its response to interstate differentials in wages (Clark and Ballard 1981; Clark 1982). In this reading, labor is not nearly so fixed and immobile as it is often thought to be; rather, workers can, given sufficient time and inducements, respond by relocating to areas of greater job opportunity and higher income. Labor market equilibrium is therefore simply a matter of time, i.e., more or less inevitable given the lags that occur in the complex process of finding jobs. Herod (1995,
Warf 2000) has gone the furthest to demonstrate how the spatiality of labor markets is bound up in processes of globalization and class struggle, how workers have been forced to contend with the onslaught initiated by employers in the wake of rampant deindustrialization, job displacement, and technological change. The process of flexible production, therefore, applies as much to labor as it does to firms (Peck 1992). Moreover, the multiple scales at which labor is organized and labor markets constituted are deeply intertwined and interpenetrate one another (Walker, Ellis and Barff 1992). The implication from this form of analysis is that labor markets are not simply bound to one point in space, but exhibit a plasticity that renders them relatively permeable and open to exogenous shocks and changes. Such a view reflects the changed economic and political circumstances of the late twentieth century, the predominance of post-Fordism, the impacts of deregulation, the steady rise of low-wage, contingent labor markets, and the enduring effects of a global economy that restructures not only capital and places, but work and workers.

Conceptually, there are important grounds for believing that labor markets have become markedly more fluid over time. In the past – i.e., the long years dominated by Fordist production, particularly during the post-war boom – labor tended to be relatively immobile, particularly in comparison with capital. In this context, it was reasonable to consider labor market boundaries to be synonymous with counties and metropolitan areas. In the late 20th century, however, given the enormous shifts associated with the transition to post-Fordism, the mobility of both capital and labor has increased significantly. The hypermobility of capital has received enormous attention in the geographic literature (Warf 1999); the mounting ability of workers to traverse distance, however, has not received the same degree of scrutiny. To be sure, labor, even in the most digitized, globalized, and flexible economies is considerably less mobile than capital, a factor that weighs heavily in firms' use of space in class struggle (e.g., threats of relocation). However, several factors have contributed to the rising mobility of labor and thus the increasing permeability of local labor markets, or, in the lingo of an earlier generation of geographers, the "friction of distance" has declined in the face of improved transportation
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systems. The deregulation of the airline industry, for example, fostered higher degrees of competition and lower prices; in some cases, it is not unusual for workers to fly considerable distances between home and work on a weekly or monthly basis. The completion of the Interstate Highway System and improved gasoline mileage in many automobiles allow commuting lengths that are unprecedented in comparison to those of only two decades ago. Immigration, which in the 1990s and early 21st century reached new heights, contributed an influx of foreign workers who often retained strong ties to their countries of origin. In this light, it is reasonable to expect that labor markets exhibit mounting leakages that extend outside of local confines, becoming more regional, national, or even international in scope.

Permeability of Florida’s Counties Vis-à-vis One Another

Within the South generally, including Florida, given its historic record of low wages, unskilled labor, few unions, and lack of investment in education, employers have generally preferred labor-intensive forms of production (Johnson 1985). The literature on Florida’s labor markets tends to focus on agricultural and immigrant labor (e.g., Duffield and Coltrane 1992). Whereas the state may have exhibited relatively self-contained labor markets in the past, given the changes that have buffeted Florida’s economy since the 1980s, from NAFTA to foreign investment to immigration to the steady rise of low-wage service jobs, it would be remarkable if the state did not exhibit a rising porosity in the spatial organization of its jobs and workers.

Data on commuting in the year 2000 are readily available from the U.S. Census at [http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/commuting.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/commuting.html). Unfortunately, these data are highly limited in several respects. They offer no clue, for example, of the occupations or incomes of the workers involved, nor do they reveal changes over time, yielding only a static snapshot. Nonetheless, this exercise is useful in demonstrating that it is not possible today, if it ever was, to consider labor markets as isolated entities; rather, they must be seen as interconnected webs in which workers cross local, regional, and even international borders with ease.
Florida's counties are hardly self-contained entities with respect to one another. In 2000, 1,169,038 people, or 17.1 percent of the state's total labor force, crossed county lines to work. These flows thus represent "exports" and "imports" among the state's counties, with wide geographic variations (Figure 1). By far the largest absolute exporter of
labor to other parts of the state was Broward county, of whose residents 171,561 people, or 15% of the labor force, worked in a different county, a number vastly exceeding even the second-largest exporter, Seminole county (with 89,569 residents working in other counties). Conversely, lightly populated rural counties (e.g., Franklin, Taylor, Lafayette) exported only a few hundred workers to other counties. In relative terms, however, small rural counties rely much more heavily on labor opportunities elsewhere: more than half of all workers of Union county find employment elsewhere, for example, whereas larger, urbanized ones such as Brevard county tend to be more self-contained (only three percent leaving for jobs in other counties).

When county imports and exports are compared on a net basis (in which case, the state’s labor market is represented as a zero-sum game), it is evident that most counties (48 out of 67) suffer a labor deficit, i.e., they import more workers from other counties than they export to them. Counties with the largest net surpluses included Orange (111,957), Duval (56,749), Miami-Dade (55,801), and Hillsborough (50,415), while those with the greatest deficits were Broward (69,854), Pasco (38,708), and Seminole (34,433) counties. The degree of labor market permeability, therefore, is highly uneven, reflecting not only job opportunities and differentials in wages, but also geographically differentiated patterns of housing costs, transportation facilities, skills, educational levels, and the demographic composition of local workers (e.g., younger workers are more likely to work far from home).

Florida's Permeability with the National Economy

Florida as a state is highly porous with regard to the remainder of the country. Every state in the U.S. exported workers to Florida, and every county in the state exported and imported workers to or from other states. Just as the state’s counties do not exhibit labor markets that are easily defined by county boundaries, therefore, so too are labor patterns in Florida only comprehensible by virtue of reference to the rest of the U.S.

In total, 70,490 Floridians lived in Florida, but were employed in other states, a number equivalent to roughly one percent of the state's total labor force. To the extent that Floridians working in other states
send or bring a share of their income earned in other states back to Florida (which cannot be ascertained from these data), the state "exports" labor, and the resulting revenues resemble the remittances sent by immigrant workers in the U.S. (or other developed countries) to their home countries. The destinations of Floridians working in other states varied widely (Figure 2), and tended to be highest along the East Coast and the industrialized Midwest. By far the largest destination was Georgia (13,143); other major states that employed Floridians included Alabama (9,460), New York (5,160), Texas (3,184), and Illinois (3,021).
Conversely, every other state in the U.S. had workers who resided there but were employed in jobs located in Florida. Such workers effectively comprise, from Florida’s standpoint, an “import” of workers and jobs, and to the extent that such workers remit a portion of their earnings to their home state, their incomes are “lost” to the state’s economy. A total of 47,180 people fell into this category, with residences unevenly distributed across the states (Figure 3), particularly in the Southeast, industrial Midwest, California, and New York. The major sources of Florida’s imported American workers were Georgia (12,647), Alabama (6,224), Texas (2,650), New York (2,547), and North Carolina (2,298).

When Florida’s “exports” and “imports” of workers to and from other states are compared, it is readily evident that Florida “exports” far

**Figure 3 Origins of Non-Floridians Working in Florida.**

Source: Author.
Figure 4 Florida’s Labor Deficits or Surpluses with Other States.

Source: Author.

more workers to most other states than it “imports” from them. In total, other states combined employed 23,310 more Floridians than they exported to Florida (Figure 4); the vast majority of states suffered a deficit in this regard, i.e., Florida enjoyed a net surplus of labor “exports” to many more states (45, including Washington, DC) than those with which it suffered a labor deficit (6). States that exhibited the largest deficits (or Florida surpluses) included Alabama (3,236), New York (2,613), Pennsylvania (1,843), Illinois (1,802), and New Jersey (1,700). While Florida’s labor deficits were relatively tiny, the primary beneficiaries included Washington (99), West Virginia (87), Idaho (43), and Montana (41), which is to say, Florida’s labor deficits are largely confined to the Pacific Northwest. Coincidentally, Florida and Oregon
Figure 5 Counties of Origin of Floridians Working in Other U.S. States, Destination Counties of Non-Floridians Working in Florida, and Net Labor Balance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin Counties of Floridians Working in Other States</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100-200</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-1927</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination Counties of Non-Floridians Working in Florida</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>0-100</td>
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</table>

Source: Author.

enjoyed an exact balance of labor imports and exports (175 each), or a zero deficit/surplus.

How do these interactions play out across Florida’s landscape? As Figure 5 reveals, imports and exports of labor to and from Florida form a complex mosaic. The origins of Floridians working in other states, for example, tend to cluster in the greater Miami-Ft. Lauderdale metropolitan area as well as the I-4 corridor stretching from Tampa to Orlando, as well as Jacksonville.

This pattern mirrored the spatial distribution of employment of non-Floridians employed in Florida. The bulk of Florida counties enjoyed a labor surplus with the U.S., i.e., they sent more workers out of state than they received from elsewhere; the largest surpluses were to be found in
Palm Beach (2,387), Broward (2,311) and Escambia (2,311) counties. Conversely, counties that suffered particularly large deficits with the rest of the country included Duval (1,927), Dade (1,492), and Leon (1,095) counties, two of which lie adjacent to Georgia.

Given the magnitude of Florida’s labor exchanges with Georgia, which far exceed that with any other state, a closer look is warranted. As Figure 6 portrays, the origin counties of Floridians employed in Georgia tend to be located either close to the Florida-Georgia border (e.g., Leon county) or to be stretched along the Atlantic coast, e.g., Volusia, Brevard, Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties. Conversely, Georgians who work in Florida tend to live either in the Atlanta metropolitan area or in counties located within striking distance of the border with Florida. Such a pattern points to the likely existence of a significant number of commuters who drive on a daily basis across state lines.

Floridians Abroad: Global Permeability

The permeability of Florida’s labor markets extends beyond the national scale to encompass substantial parts of the globe. Of course, this phenomenon is readily evident in the numbers of immigrants in the
state, many of whom originate in Latin America. Yet Florida also exports workers internationally, including a total of 7,609 people working in 93 different countries (Figure 7). As might be expected, given the uneven spatial dynamics of growth among the world’s major regions, the distribution of Floridians working in foreign countries reflected, among other things, American foreign direct investment abroad and the activities of multinational corporations, exports of goods and services, and likely ethnic ties between immigrant groups in the states and their counterparts in their countries of origin. Thus, one-half of Floridians abroad worked in Latin America (Table 1), followed by Europe (23.7%), Asia (10.4%), North Africa and the Middle East (7.7%), and Canada (5%). The major countries in which Floridians

Table 1 Regional Distribution of Floridians Working Abroad, 2000.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>3,841</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa/Middle East</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,609</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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Source: Author.
abroad were employed included Puerto Rico (608), Mexico (475), the Bahamas (416), Canada (384), Germany (335), the United Kingdom (311), and Saudi Arabia (255). Intriguingly, 59 Floridians reported working in Cuba, a country from which most Americans are officially banned.

The counties of residence of these Floridians abroad reflected the population distribution of the state as well as the varying degrees to which its counties are immersed in the global economy (Figure 8).

The bulk of Floridians working abroad originate in the greater Miami-Ft. Lauderdale metropolitan region, which is not surprising given its well known status as a global city and hub of international business (Nijman 1997). The northern and central parts of the state, in contrast, send relatively few people overseas, although the Tampa-St. Petersburg region is well represented.

Concluding Thoughts

The view of labor markets as self-contained entities with sealed borders – always dubious – is no longer credible. In an age in which economic and political borders have exhibited mounting porosity, labor has increasingly acquired the ability to cross significant distances. Within Florida, one out of five workers lives in one county and works in another, forming complex webs of labor surplus and deficit that are
matched by workers who commute considerable distances. In addition, 70,000 Floridians have residences in the state, but have jobs distributed throughout every other one in the Union, and, conversely, 47,200 non-Floridians residing in states ranging from Alaska to Wyoming held jobs in Florida. While these numbers are not huge, they point to the permeability of the state’s labor market as a whole, and may be particularly significant in individual industries or locales. Georgia is by far the leading source of non-Floridian labor and job opportunities for Floridians working outside the state, but other populous states are also significant. If the labor fields that cross Florida’s state boundaries resemble a gravity-style pattern, therefore, it is one warped and deformed by the “mass” of population size and economic potential. Finally, although only a handful of Floridians live in the state but work abroad, they symbolize the growing importance of international employment opportunities, indicating that not simply immigration, but foreign jobs, also play a role in shaping the spatiality of work in the state. Latin America looms particularly significant in this regard.

These comments and analysis, in short, should be taken as an indication that economic and urban geography must take seriously the changes in spatial scale through which labor is organized. It is no longer sufficient – if it ever was – to view urban labor markets in isolation from one another. Rather, the local, national, and global scales through which flows of workers are constituted are hopelessly entangled with one another.
References


