

IRSA - CONGRESSO MUNDIAL DE SOCIOLOGIA RURAL (01/10/2025 A
20/01/2026) - IRSA 29 - WORK, MIGRATION, AND VIOLENCE IN THE
CONTEMPORARY RURAL WORLD

**THE VULNERABILITY FIX: HOW U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICIES
INSTITUTIONALIZE WORKER PRECARIETY**

Annabel Ipsen (aipsen@ou.edu)

Jane Collins (janecollins2@gmail.com)

This article brings together theories of the political economy of labor with theories about labor market inequality to construct the concept of vulnerability fix and explore its use in U.S. agriculture. An increasingly dysfunctional immigration system in the United States has created categories of workers for whom the rules are different. By mobilizing these differences, employers, sanctioned by the state, are able to exert greater control over workers, limit worker mobility and organizing, and restrict the claims workers can make. We refer to this strategy as a vulnerability fix. To ground this concept in the literature and in the current political context, we focus on the ways that laws and policies have facilitated the recruitment of workers with attenuated rights in three main domains: the underground market for unauthorized labor, guestworkers visa programs, and resettled refugee employment. We analyze how employers and the state draw on racial, ethnic, and legal hierarchies to weaken the rights of some workers. To

do this, we draw on semi-structured interviews with labor organizers, refugee resettlement organizations, and labor lawyers, and perform document analysis on primary and secondary data on immigrant labor and relevant labor laws and executive orders. We find that in each case, the vulnerability fix creates precarity and despotic work conditions, not just for those workers, but for all those who labor alongside them.

Palavras-chave: immigration; labor; precarity; agriculture; inequality.