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New report highlights the numerous challenges faced by undocumented workers in Alberta

As details emerge about the working and living conditions of immigrant and temporary foreign workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry and their link to COVID-19 outbreaks in those plants, a new report by the Parkland Institute highlights the even greater challenges faced by migrant workers in Alberta who have lost their status.

Tens of thousands of foreign workers had their permits expire around 2015 as a result of policy changes by the federal government and the economic downturn in Alberta. In *In the Shadows: Living and Working Without Status in Alberta*, Jason Foster and Marco Luciano examine the fate of some of those workers who made the decision to stay in Alberta despite their loss of status.

"We are talking about people who saw few economic opportunities back home, and ultimately chose to stay in Alberta without status in order to support their family as best they can," says Foster, an associate professor of human resources and labour relations at Athabasca University. "Others had children who were born here and saw staying as the only way their children could exercise their citizenship rights."

The report points out the significant challenges faced by migrant workers even when they have valid permits. Through direct quotes from interviews with undocumented workers it then explores how much more intense those challenges become when permits expire. Work becomes casual, informal, and cash-based, and always precarious. Workers have absolutely no recourse when shortchanged in pay and can do nothing to challenge unsafe working conditions.

There is no access to basic services such as healthcare and education, and any attempts to interact with authorities or formal institutions risks having their status exposed. All of this results in excessive levels of financial and emotional stress, withdrawal from community interactions, and constant fear of being reported to authorities.

All of these pressures and stressors become especially aggravated at times of crisis like with the current COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying health, well-being, and financial implications. During the pandemic, undocumented workers' lack of access to health care becomes an acute problem for everyone.

"These are workers who came to Canada to work through official channels, and then saw the rules governing their status changed with absolutely no consideration of them or their circumstances," says Luciano, who is the Director of Migrant Alberta, an advocacy and self-help organization for migrant workers. "They're not looking for special treatment. They just want to work, provide for their families, and be able to fully participate in the communities where they live."

Foster and Luciano end the report with 27 recommendations directed at all levels of government, pointing out both immediate steps that should be taken to improve the lives of undocumented workers in Alberta, and systemic changes required to make Canada's immigration and temporary migration systems more fair and just for all.

Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. *In the Shadows: Living and Working Without Status in Alberta* is available for download on Parkland's website.

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For more information or to arrange interviews:

Ricardo Acuña
Executive Director
Tel. 780-951-7180
racuna@ualberta.ca