

Planning Study of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in New York State: Understanding the Occupational Safety Environment Using Focus Groups

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Abstract

In this study, over a hundred migrant and seasonal farmworkers, growers, medical and social service providers, and researchers from around New York State were interviewed individually or in focus groups about the issues affecting farmworker occupational health and safety. The purpose was to understand the occupational environment in which these workers operate, and to determine the best approach for a future study.

The findings are: (1) that there is strong opposition interviewing farmworkers; (2) participants at all levels need to see some clear benefit in their participation; (3) interest and support exists in the grower community for such research; and (4) farmworkers are more willing to participate in research when they know the researchers. These findings will guide a future research design for a study of farmworker occupational injuries and illnesses in New York State.

Keywords. Migrant farmworkers, Focus groups, New York State, Occupational injury, Worker's Compensation.

Available data suggests that agriculture is one of the nation's most dangerous industries. National Safety Council estimates for 1995 are 24 deaths per 100,000, a rate second only to mining, and six times the average across all industries. Estimates of nonfatal injuries range from around 3% receiving medical treatment annually (Nordstrom, 1995) to 10% reporting some type of injury in 1994 (National Safety Council, 1996). Even when the definition is narrowed down to the "farm work" occupation (removing fishing and forestry from the category), farm work remains among the nation's most dangerous occupations (National Safety Council, 1996).

However, the occupational category of "farm work" is too broad to be useful in assessing the danger experienced by migrant and seasonal farmworkers. The conditions unique to migrant and seasonal farm work suggest that it is at least as dangerous as other types of farm work, although the risks maybe different in nature. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers are hired on a temporary basis, with few benefits, and work intensely for limited periods of time, often reaching or stooping for hours.

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Many lack training or language skills to be able to perform tasks safely. They may also be particularly endangered by pesticides, and unsafe transportation. The unique risks faced by this group warrants closer study.

Research on farmworker occupational injury in North Carolina (Ciesielski, 1989), Ohio (Isaacs, 1994), and South Carolina (McDermott, 1987) found injury rates of 8.4%, 9%, and 5.2%, respectively. This supports the assertion that farmworkers are likely to be at equally high risk as other workers.

The most recent research done in New York State on the health of migrant farmworkers was done by Peter Chi in the mid-1980s (1985a,b, 1986, 1992). Unfortunately, migrant and seasonal population appears to have shifted dramatically since the early 1980s, from a mix of Caucasian, African-American, Haitian, and Latino to predominantly Latino today, weakening the relevance of these studies.

Since migrant and seasonal farmworkers in New York tend to work short-term, on small farms exempt from injury reporting, and often do not assert their rights to Worker's Compensation when injured, traditional occupational injury surveillance methods are not effective for monitoring occupational safety for farmworkers in New York State.

The absence of a clearly superior study methodology for assessing the nature and extent of farmworker occupational illness and injury in New York indicated a need for a planning study using systematic qualitative research of the farm work occupational safety environment (Bauman and Adair, 1992; Krueger, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The purpose of this study is to gain the understanding of the social and political context of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in New York State to guide the design of a successful study of farmworker occupational injury and illness in this population.

Methods

In order to solicit as much descriptive data as possible focus groups and unstructured interviews were conducted, addressing the following five questions: (1) how do participants perceive occupational injury and illness; (2) how do farmworkers, growers, and service providers feel about participating in research; (3) what could be done to maximize participation of all groups; (4) what are the advantages and disadvantages of the various possible data collection models; and (5) how should the study population be defined?

Selection of Study Participants

Four types of individuals were sought as participants: migrant or seasonal farmworkers, growers who employ migrant or seasonal farm labor, medical and social service care providers of migrant and seasonal workers, and other researchers. The first three categories include everyone directly involved in migrant and seasonal farm work in New York, while the last, researchers, were important due to their experience.

Research Instrument

Questions for the various focus groups were designed based on the above study questions, but modified according to group. Table 1 illustrates how the five research questions were translated into focus group (or interview) discussion questions appropriate for each of the four types of participants. The development of each set of focus group questions from the original research questions was based on three factors: (a) which questions are most relevant to each particular group of

Table 1. Discussion questions for each of the four focus group types

Study Questions	Corresponding Questions for			
	Farmworkers	Medical or Social Service Providers	Growers	Researchers
How do participants perceive occupation-injury and illness?	Have you or people you know gotten hurt or sick at work? What is your boss' attitude about safety?	Do you think work-related accidents/illnesses are a problem for farmworkers? How do you feel about research? How do you think workers feel?	Do you think work-related accidents/illnesses are a problem for farmworkers? What do you think about our doing research?	
How do farmworkers, growers, and service providers feel about participating in research?	Has anyone ever come to you asking questions about you getting hurt or sick at work? What was it like?	Have you had past experience with research? What was it like?	Has anybody ever asked you or your farm to be part of a study? What was it like?	Would you tell us about research you have been involved in the past?
What could be done to maximize participation of all groups?	(covered by the second question)	(covered by the second question)	What would make a study worthwhile for you?	
What are the advantages/disadvantages of each model of data collection?	What is the best way to find out about farmworkers getting hurt? Are farmworkers willing to answer questions about it?	What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages of each model of data collection?	Are there certain things researchers should or should not do, from your point of view?	What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages of each model of data collection?
How should the study population be defined?	Do some farmworkers get hurt more than others?	How distinct are the experiences of the different ethnic groups in farm work? Do we need to study them separately?		How narrow should we be in selecting the study population?

participants; (b) how can the question be framed so it relates directly to each group's actual experience (as an employee, employer, service provider, or researcher); and (c) what vocabulary is most familiar to the group.

Recruiting Participants

All the migrant and seasonal farm work-related agencies known in New York were approached, and nine of these agreed to assist in recruiting participants. They assisted by arranging focus groups with farmworkers and community health center staff, farmworker advocacy coalitions, and university faculty. Similarly, grower service agencies assisted in recruiting growers.

Focus Groups

Focus group meetings were held in locations convenient for participants, and when appropriate, conducted in Spanish or Haitian Creole. The facilitator presented three or

four open-ended questions and audio-taped the ensuing discussion. The facilitator encouraged the telling of anecdotes and the expression of differences of opinion.

Individual Interviews

Twelve of the 116 participants preferred individual or small group interviews, due to the inconvenience of attending a group. Nine of these were growers, comprising the entire grower group. Seven were interviewed individually, and two were interviewed together, totaling eight grower interviews. Of the remaining three who were not growers, one was a medical service provider and two were researchers. The slight difference in setting between focus groups and interviews was determined to be permissible in light of the importance of the participation of the grower group. In fact, interviewing the growers individually may have helped compensate for their under-representation.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from each focus group and interview were reviewed for relevant statements relating to one of the five questions, and each grouped with similar statements made by others. Each group of statements was then given one summary statement. This reduced set of data could then be simply interpreted in response to the five key questions. Transcripts from two farmworker focus groups conducted by another agricultural health and safety research center were included in the study since they were essentially of the same content and had recently been conducted at a farmworker health center in Upstate New York.

Because of the subjectivity involved in interpreting the meaning of the statements, and the writing of summary statements to represent them, the data analysis was replicated by a researcher not directly involved with the study to assure that the same conclusions were reached (Krueger, 1994). While the second researcher's interpretation was more general and produced fewer summary statements, the same conclusions were reached and confirmed the original findings.

Results

In total 116 persons participated in the study, either in one of the ten focus groups or one of the eleven unstructured interviews. Forty-four participants were past or present migrant or seasonal farmworkers, forty-seven were providers of medical care or social services to farmworkers, nine were employers of farmworkers, and sixteen were researchers. Table 2 shows the characteristics and location of the focus groups and interviews. Each of the four groups emphasized different issues, as outlined below.

Farmworkers

Farmworkers expressed a sense of powerlessness, more than any other sentiment. Several identified problems with their working environment, such as long hours stooping, the constant pressure to keep a fast pace, few breaks, and total lack of control over working conditions. It also was frequently stated that there is a great deal of variability in working conditions, based on the character of the employer. There was skepticism among many workers that anything could be done to change conditions, and fear that telling researchers about one's work injuries would put their jobs in jeopardy.

Table 2. Key characteristics of focus groups and interviews

Group Type	Demographic Characteristics	N	Focus Groups (Ave. Size)	Inter-views	N.Y. Region Where Held	Contact that Arranged Focus Group (Interview)
Farmworker	Mexican, Haitian, Central American; 2/3 male; mix of legal and undocumented	44	4 (11)	0	Focus Groups-SW (2) NW (1) SE (1)	Farmworker Health Center (2); other agricultural safety research center (2)
Medical or social service provider	Majority social service/ outreach, several medical providers; nearly equal women and men; nearly half minority	47	4 (11.8)	1	Focus Groups-NW (1) SW (2) SE (1) Interview - at Florida conference	Farmworker Health Center (2); County Health Dept. (1); local farmworker service coalition (1)
Grower	All male; white; crops include apples, strawberries & onions	9	0 (NA)	8 (one had 2 respondents)	Interviews - W (1) NW (1) E (4) SE (2)	Grower association (4); Farmworker Health Center (2); Researcher contact (3)
Researcher	Nearly equal women and men; few minorities; one group from all over East	16	2 (8)	2	Interviews - E(2)	University (1); farm worker advocacy conference (1)

Medical and Social Service Providers

This group echoed many of the above sentiments of the farmworkers. In addition, this group felt that research had to have immediate benefits to everyone involved—the subjects and the community institutions that assist in carrying out the study. Specific suggestions of benefits included: financial incentives or free medical services for farmworkers, and providing extra staff to organizations asked to help with data collection.

The service provider group also attached great importance to researchers being known to, and having good rapport with farmworkers and the farmworker community. Many felt that this, more than any other factor, would determine the success or failure of any farmworker research.

Because of the possible reprisals against the worker and the lack of trust in the researcher associated with farmworker interviewing, using farmworker medical records as a basis for surveillance of occupational injury and illness was preferred.

However, shortfalls of such a design were also mentioned. For example, some types of injuries might not be treated at primary care centers, either because they are chronic, and farmworkers do not want to take time off from work to get treatment, or because they are so serious that farmworkers are treated at hospital emergency rooms. Efforts would need to be made to obtain data from hospitals, and from the population not served by health centers.

Worker's Compensation claim data or a small survey of a convenience sample of non-patient farmworkers were suggested to strengthen this design.

Service providers recommended using a broad definition of the study population, including migrant, seasonal, field and packing house workers, and agreed that the different ethnic and cultural groups could be studied together.

Unprompted by the researcher's questions, this group expressed frustration and outrage about the State Worker's Compensation system. Many had stories about growers pressuring workers not to file claims. Some also complained about the slowness of the process, explaining that migrant farmworkers would often have to leave the area before their claim was processed.

Growers

Growers were all interviewed either individually, or in one case in a group of two. Growers asserted that worker safety was a high priority for them, and on the whole they viewed their farms as safe places to work.

Most of the growers were supportive of the idea of a study of farmworker occupational injury and illness, and several made suggestions on how to do it. One grower suggested a consultative process of data collection, whereby researchers inspect the farm, and point out safety hazards and how to improve them.

Similarly, developing networks of support among farm owners was emphasized as a key to success. Not only was it seen as important for gaining assistance with a study, but also as a means to educate employers about the benefits for them of analyzing and improving work safety. It was suggested that getting farm insurers involved in the study would help make the cost-effectiveness of injury prevention clear to growers.

Many expressed the feeling of being under attack by the government and farmworker advocacy organizations. Several related experiences of trying to comply with the law, and being dealt with unfairly by the state or local governments. Others commented that all farmers were getting "a bad name" because of the abusive actions of a few.

Worker's Compensation was a favorite topic of growers also. Their overwhelming sentiment was that premiums in New York are too high. Each injury reported may result in increased premiums, according to growers. Several acknowledged that they often pay out of pocket for workers' medical expenses if they will consent to not file a Worker's Compensation claim.

Researchers

This group debated whether using a population-based farmworker interview study was feasible. Some researchers shared their own successes with farmworker interviewing, arguing that with trained farmworker interviewers from the local community and financial incentives for participation satisfactory levels of participation can be attained.

Others were skeptical about interview participation rates in New York without investing vast amounts of time and money into locating farmworkers, gaining trust, and compensating them for their time. There was no resolution to this debate, however, all did agree that there is a great need for more research in this area, and that even a quasi-scientific study could provide valuable information for future interventions.

Discussion

Finally, the collected data were applied to the original five research questions.

How do farmworkers perceive occupational injury and illness?

It is perceived as a problem by many farmworkers, although there is a sense of futility about addressing it due to their lack of power. Service providers confirm this perception. Farmworkers appear to agree that the problem warrants further study.

How do farmworkers (and other potential participants) feel about participating in research?

Many farmworkers indicated that they are too much at risk to participate actively in safety research. Research methods will need to accommodate their need for anonymity, and not ask for too large a degree of participation.

Service providers welcomed research but with the caveat that they needed some reward to outweigh the extra work on their already overburdened staff, and that care is taken not to jeopardize farmworker income, or raise farmworker expectations too high. Researchers support studying the problem in New York, despite the inherent difficulties.

Most surprising to the authors was the interest expressed by growers in safety research. Even though this group was not representative of all New York growers, it did show that there are some who would participate in a study and perhaps a resulting intervention, acting as agents of change in the grower community.

What could be done to maximize participation of all groups?

All groups agreed that talking with them and getting their ideas at the outset of conducting research was the most important part of securing their participation. In this way, this planning study had an additional beneficial impact. It acted not only as an information gathering mechanism, but also a network-builder, so that by the end of it, participants appeared interested and ready for a next step. This communication will need to be made more formal and long-lasting, perhaps by the formation of an advisory committee to guide implementation of the study.

It also appears that working with farmworkers and farmworker organizations in New York to develop long-term relationships will be very important to successful research, in light of the importance farmworkers place on trusting researchers before fully participating.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the various possible data collection models?

The disadvantages of poor participation and possible retribution associated with a population-based farmworker survey stand out the most. In contrast, it appears that using farmworker medical records offers the opportunity to gather information more safely, although it has its own disadvantages of being selective of the health center patient population, relying on medical recordkeeping, and possibly not tracking the most serious nor the most minor health problems.

These disadvantages may be mitigated by supplementing this method with other methods, such as a small population-based survey, reviewing State Worker's Compensation data, and supporting improved medical record keeping at participating health centers.

How should the study population be defined?

The consensus was that a fairly broad definition of participant should be used, including migrant, seasonal, field and packing house workers, and that the different ethnic and cultural groups can be studied together. While there was some disagreement as to how much culture and ethnicity affects occupational injury and illness, all participants felt that the individual experience of different cultural groups could be adequately studied by simply noting subjects' group membership.

Worker's Compensation

In addition, the fact that Worker's Compensation came up over and over again without prompting suggests that it is at the center of the health and safety concerns of many. No group was happy with it, and the fact that several workers described filing a Worker's Compensation claim as "suing" the employer suggests that Worker's Compensation is not well understood by at least some workers. A future study should look at Worker's Compensation.

Limitations

There are limitations to the study, mainly based on its qualitative methodology. Key among them is the somewhat biased manner in which participants were recruited. In particular, researchers relied heavily on migrant program coordinators from the federally funded Migrant and Community Health Centers, and so participating farmworkers were almost entirely of their patient population.

Similarly, growers who were the most supportive of the research idea, and possibly the most ethical were over-represented because they were much more likely to consent to being interviewed.

Another limitation that always exists with the study of a migrant population is that the migrant farmworker population changes every year. Any demographic shifts in the farmworker population could easily diminish the usefulness of the data collected. Finally, the subjective nature of the data analysis is a limitation, although replication of the analysis process by outside researchers can reduce this effect.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this method proved quite useful in answering researchers questions regarding whether and how to pursue occupational health and safety research on migrant and seasonal farmworkers in New York State. In particular, researchers learned about the risk involved in interviewing workers, and the need to consider the needs of assisting institutions in research planning. The data also showed the interest and support that exists among some growers, and suggested some new ideas about implementation. Finally, it emphasized the need to develop a long-term relationship with the farmworker community in the State.

This study methodology informed researchers in great detail about the occupational environment in which migrant and seasonal farmworkers function in New York State. It allowed individuals to speak in their own voices, and did not limit what they had to say. Because of the open-ended nature of the questions, participants were able to offer their own unique ideas about implementing a future study, and many of them did. By identifying the key groups involved in the setting researchers wish to study, and

systematically soliciting open-ended commentary, researchers entering any new field of study could use this method begin the research process.

Implications for a Future Study

Based on these findings, a future study of farmworker occupational injuries and illnesses should use farmworker patient records as a data source, supplemented with other methods such as data from New York Worker's Compensation office and a small survey of non-patient farmworkers. The study population ought to be defined broadly, and the planning and implementation process must be inclusive; listening to both the suggestions and needs of the collaborating groups and the study subjects.

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