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The COVID-19 Impact on Childcare in Agricultural Populations

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ABSTRACT

The corona virus pandemic pulled back the curtain on rural America's already fragile childcare system and shed light on the critical role that quality, affordable, accessible childcare plays in the lives of workers and families, as well as in the success of agricultural businesses. This commentary aims to describe how existing childcare problems were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially impacting both the health and economics of farm households and farmworker families. For solutions to be successful, efforts will need to be collaborative, with federal interventions spurred on by childcare stakeholders. Successful collaborations will result in a better childcare system that nurtures children while their parents contribute to our nation's production of agricultural products.

KEYWORDS

children; agriculture; COVID; childcare; daycare

Introduction

The corona virus pandemic pulled back the curtain on rural America's already fragile childcare system and shed light on the critical role that quality, affordable, accessible childcare plays in the lives of workers and families and in the success of agricultural businesses. This commentary aims to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on farm households and farmworker families. While limited empirical data are available on this unprecedented situation, one can speculate from reports in the media, observations, and personal stories that the fears and actual spread of disease has compounded the underlying weaknesses of our nation's childcare systems. The pandemic has closed many traditional childcare options, resulting in more children at home on farms and forcing some parents out of the agricultural workforce. These changes may negatively impact the safety of children. Additionally, disruptions caused by the pandemic have challenged parents and workers to re-assess priorities with respect to agricultural production, parenting responsibilities, and the well-being of their children.

Background

Prior to the shutdown of non-essential services associated with COVID-19 (March 2020), more than 12 million children under age 5 were in some form of childcare in the United States, and data indicate that childcare is one of the highest household budget items for families.¹ The cost of childcare nationally averages 9000–9600 USD annually, but many parents pay more.¹ Childcare is considered “affordable” if it costs no more than 7% of a family's income, but the cost to many families far exceeds this percentage: e.g., California families pay approximately 17.6%, and Nebraska families pay 14%.¹ For families living at or below the federal poverty level, these percentages are much higher, exceeding annual income in some instances.¹ Families working in agriculture are no exception to the need for childcare services and associated costs. The National Agricultural Workers Survey estimates that 55% of farmworkers have children, with an average of two minor-aged children per household.² Finding affordable childcare services for these families is challenging even in the best of times.

Rural and agriculture-related childcare shortages differ from urban areas in relation to

travel distance, scarcity of facilities, limited space, service hours mismatch to agricultural hours, and affordability.^{3,4} For migrant and seasonal farmworkers, challenges also include cultural and language differences⁴ and immigration status.⁵ While Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs offset some of these challenges, limited funding, documentation requirements, and eligibility criteria (e.g., income level, age limits) present barriers, further disenfranchising some farmworker parents from services.⁵ Overcoming barriers is important, because when childcare services are available, there are numerous benefits for children, parents, and employers (see Figure 1).^{3,4}

The impact of not having affordable childcare is far reaching. Millions of parents leave work, change jobs, or turn down job offers due to childcare issues, costing billions of dollars each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. Lack of childcare resulting in the inability to work exacerbates the need for government-sponsored programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), impacts career advancement and earning potential, and may influence decisions regarding family size.⁶

Childcare advocates believe the current business model for childcare is not sustainable without subsidies due to the costs of health and safety inspections, food, regulations in the industry that require specific ratios of adults to children, and worker expenses and benefits.⁶ Additionally, the worker expenses and benefits for the 1+ million people employed in childcare in the United States

do not reflect the need for higher wages, with a median annual income for childcare workers of 23,240.6 USD. Childcare workforce stability is another issue, as many childcare workers are vulnerable to exploitation because of undocumented immigration status.⁶

Childcare issues are exacerbated by COVID-19 impacts

In a recent TIME magazine article, author Abby Vesoulis shared a quote from Elliot Haspel, author of *Crawling Behind: America's childcare crisis and how to fix it*, who noted that prior to the pandemic, the childcare system was “so fragile that a stiff wind could have blown it over. Now we've got this hurricane that completely shattered it”.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many childcare centers closing or reducing capacity, and because the elderly and people with underlying medical conditions are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19,⁸ grandparents are not a good alternative for childcare. Other options, such as schools and summer camps, have also been closed or are at reduced capacity.

Over 90% of Head Start programs temporarily closed during the pandemic, including most MSHS programs, worsening childcare problems for agricultural workers. This population is particularly vulnerable to the virus, and many are excluded from stimulus relief. For childcare centers that remain open, the downsizing to essential workers often prioritizes services for health care workers over agricultural workers.⁹ Remaining childcare options for farm and farmworker



Figure 1. Perspectives on childcare.

parents, such as family/friends, siblings, having one parent work, or paying higher fees for childcare, may limit the quality of care and/or negatively impact family income. Parents sometimes consider taking children to work, but this is not feasible. Not only is it not legal in most instances, it also endangers children by exposing them to pesticides, livestock, extreme temperatures, and farm equipment.⁹ Having children at home for more hours on farms or in farmworker housing may impact their health as well. Sanitation during COVID-19 is essential, but shared bathrooms and poor quality, crowded living conditions make safe hygiene practices challenging in farmworker labor communities. Water supplied to farmworker camps often does not comply with standards, and overcrowded housing aides the spread of illness.⁵

Further complicating childcare issues are inconsistent regulations for COVID-19 from state to state, and sometimes from county to county, resulting in a “patchwork” of childcare availability, potentially limiting full access to childcare for months to come.⁷ In many areas, some parents are recalled to work while childcare facilities remain closed, or the services are not affordable.⁷ Public health recommendations for social distancing and “safer at home” strategies often limit typical childcare alternatives. Further, as some childcare facilities re-open, new COVID-19 cases cause them to close again, repeating the cycle of hardships.

The pandemic has also presented challenges to interventions and programs aimed at enhancing childcare services for agricultural workers. For example, the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety collaborated with Migrant Clinicians Network on the “Protecting Children While Parents Work” project. This project aims to strengthen ties between farmworkers, farmers, agricultural industry leaders, childcare providers, and other stakeholders to develop and foster safe childcare options for farmworker children while parents work in the fields. The project team had planned to promote and disseminate our culminating product, *A Roadmap for Delivering Child Care in Agricultural Communities*¹⁰ (Figure 2), but work has been re-directed to address COVID-19. More importantly, the project team deliberately paused promotional efforts as the pandemic narrowed the relevancy of this product, with farmworker parents

and growers focused largely on COVID-19. The same reasons that many existing childcare centers are not open nor operating at a normal capacity would make it difficult to expand existing services or establish new centers.⁵ The hiatus in the implementation of the Roadmap is not unique, as other programs and interventions designed to address the child care problem are experiencing similar challenges.

Potential solutions

Potential solutions to address farmworker childcare issues related to COVID-19 will need to include federal interventions. Federal aid packages included temporary sick/family leave benefits, with up to 12 weeks of paid time off and up to 2/3 salary. However, this provision included exemptions for businesses with more than 500 and fewer than 50 employees, leaving more than 59 million people uncovered,⁷ including many farm workers. Recognizing the need that still exists, legislators are being urged to address childcare issues. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus wrote a letter to House and Senate leaders outlining policy recommendations to support the nation’s essential agricultural workforce, including funding for MSHS programs. The Center for American Progress also called for additional federal funding for MSHS. The National Head Start Association urged Congress to include mental health support for children, families, and staff, as well as technology to support remote services in the next relief package.⁹

Economists agree that effective solutions must come from some level of government investment in childcare, as well as better paid parental leave policies. In fact, childcare and paid family leave are being addressed more in this election cycle than in previous ones.⁶ However, it may be some time before large-scale federal support for child care becomes a reality, because of the current overriding priority for public health approaches to handling the pandemic.

Federal intervention, however, is not the only strategy to improve rural and agricultural childcare services. Other stakeholders need to be involved. The United Farmworkers Union called on agricultural employers to offer childcare assistance and advocated for hazard pay to help cover childcare costs.⁹ This approach, described in the

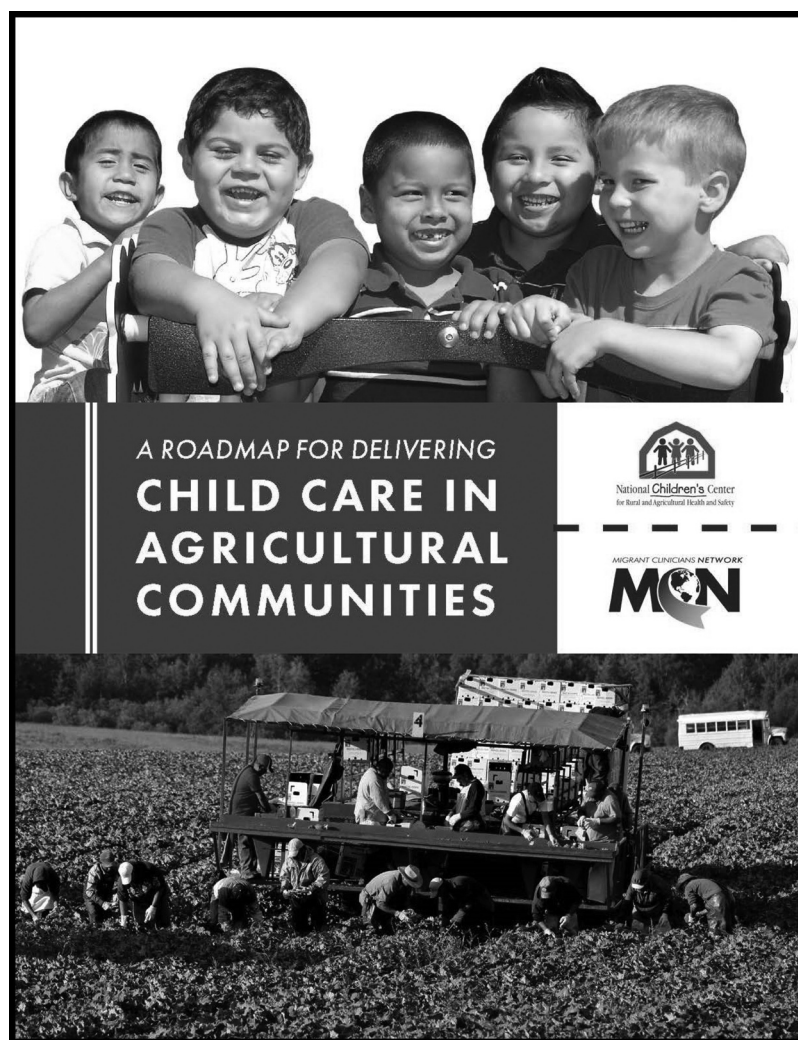


Figure 2. Roadmap cover image.

Roadmap, calls for agricultural employers to partner with communities, childcare providers, and farm parents to improve childcare services.¹⁰ And while this strategy may prove helpful, the child care system will never be strong in the United States until there is consistent commitment and funding from federal and state government.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the corona virus pandemic pulled back the curtain on rural America's already fragile childcare system and shed light on the critical role that quality, affordable, accessible childcare plays in the lives of workers and families and in the success of agricultural businesses. It is abundantly clear that federal intervention is warranted to address our

fragile childcare programs, both those related to COVID-19, as well as those that will remain following the pandemic. To be successful, these efforts will need to be collaborative, with federal interventions spurred on by childcare stakeholders. Together, we can build a stronger, better childcare system that nurtures children while their parents contribute to our nation's production of agricultural products.

Disclosure statement

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