

“Essential” but Expendable: Farmworkers During the COVID-19 Pandemic—The Michigan Farmworker Project

For “essential” blue-collar workers, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health, social, and economic inequities by race, ethnicity, and immigration status—particularly for Black and Latinx populations.¹ Inequities in COVID-19 infections, illness, and death result from historical and current racist and anti-immigrant policies and practices that affect access to health, social, and economic benefits for minoritized communities.²

On March 16, 2020, President Trump issued an updated “Coronavirus Guidance for America,” stating that the essential agricultural workforce has “a special responsibility to maintain [its] normal work schedule” (<https://bit.ly/2Ew3Q1W>).³ The “normal” for farmworkers often involves labor exploitation and a precarious working environment. Yet, limited attention has been directed to understanding how these factors hamper efforts to protect this population and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The agricultural sector workforce is predominantly composed of US and foreign-born Latinx workers, with an estimated half who are undocumented (<https://bit.ly/2G00PHX>). Overall, farmworkers face a cluster of

vulnerability factors (e.g., poverty, lack of educational opportunities, language barriers, lack of rights afforded to citizens) that make them more susceptible to occupational risks and labor exploitation and trafficking. Farmworkers have been historically excluded from social and labor protections, despite working in one of the most dangerous and lowest-paying occupations in the country.⁴

In our qualitative community-engaged research—the Michigan Farmworker Project—we conducted 55 in-depth interviews (34 with female and male farmworkers and 21 with stakeholders). Our results highlight how the precarity of farmworkers’ working and living conditions can be exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We report findings and recommend protective policies. Supporting quotations are presented in the Appendix (available as a supplement to the online version of this article at <http://www.ajph.org>).

WORKING CONDITIONS AND COVID-19

Our project showed that farmworkers have physically and

mentally demanding work conditions, such as working 10 or more hours a day with limited breaks and no rest days, a piece-rate system based on extremely high levels of productivity, unpredictable work schedules, no provision of protective equipment, subminimum wages, and penalties or even loss of employment for minor damages to crops. These demanding and adverse working conditions promote a stressful and unsafe working environment and unequal power dynamics with supervisors and crew leaders. This leaves workers with low decision-making power, making it difficult for workers to trust supervisors and report symptoms or illnesses and increasing the risk of COVID-19 infection.

Farmworkers in crop packing plants mentioned washing crops

with chlorine and other chemicals in areas with poor ventilation and close to co-workers. Poor sanitation while working, with limited or no access to water and soap and portable bathrooms that are not regularly cleaned were other concerns for workers. Such working conditions can increase the risk of COVID-19 infection, as they are not compliant with basic infection-prevention measures related to sanitation, proper ventilation, and use of protective equipment. The demanding and stressful working conditions, combined with the lack of adequate rest and preexisting health conditions common among this population (asthma, diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease), can affect immune response, leaving workers more susceptible to viral infections (bit.ly/3ibWNdf).

WORKPLACE DYNAMICS AND COVID-19

We identified instances of dehumanization of workers (e.g., abuses), racism, discrimination, and coercion (e.g., threats to report farmworkers to immigration

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enforcement). Power differentials in the workplace could influence the risk for COVID-19 because farmworkers feel unable to report violations of workplace regulations, request protective equipment, or ask their employer for accommodations to help reduce COVID-19 risk.

The fear of job loss, being labeled as unemployable, or being reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are important deterrents to requesting adequate safety and occupational standards. This working environment fosters a culture of silence, condones abuses, and exacerbates mistreatment of workers, which can be particularly dangerous for these workers during the pandemic.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND COVID-19

The State of Michigan—like other states—has minimal legal regulations for farmworker housing. Housing units in agricultural labor camps where workers reside must have one toilet and hand sink for every 15 people and one washing machine for every 30 workers.⁵ Our interviews showed that, within the minimal legal standards, housing conditions for farmworkers are poor and overcrowding is common (e.g., several farmworkers sleeping in bunk beds). Non-related single farmworkers and families often share the same trailer or housing unit. Poor housing conditions can increase risks associated with infection and illness owing to the inability of farmworkers to follow COVID-19 sanitation guidelines and limit contact with nonfamily individuals in the housing unit. Poor ventilation can increase the risk of COVID-19 infection, particularly if housing is shared

with numerous individuals. Exposure to toxicants such as mold and pesticides may increase the risk of severe COVID-19-related illness and mortality owing to potential exacerbations of respiratory diseases such as asthma (bit.ly/3ibWNdf).

HEALTH, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC INEQUITIES

In terms of health equity and justice, the legacies of plantation slavery and Jim Crow and New Deal era policies weigh heavily on the farmworker population,⁴ perpetuating farmworkers' exclusion or minimal labor protections (e.g., minimum wage, workers compensation, overtime pay provisions), exposure to longstanding patterns of structural racism and discrimination, social exclusion, segregation, substandard living conditions, and oppressive and unfair working conditions. These historical exclusions likely contribute to occupational health inequities for farmworkers and pose a threat during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they may impede access to social institutions, health care services, and community resources.

Current US social and immigration policies play an important role in shaping occupational health inequities. Fear of deportation or incarceration in ICE detention centers, empowerment of hate groups by anti-immigrant rhetoric rooted in racism, and persecution of immigrants through raids contribute to undermining workers' rights and institutional protection of occupational safety and worker health.⁶ A silent workforce is dangerous during this pandemic because workers may be willing to endure unsafe and unsanitary labor practices. This working

environment may result in minimal or no occupational and safety training for workers, lack of or minimal protective equipment, and workers opting to delay or forego medical attention when needed.

Efforts to limit COVID-19 risks in this population require an evidence-based, comprehensive multifactorial approach that involves farmworkers, employers, stakeholders, policymakers, and government entities in the state of Michigan. We recommend that enforcement actions be taken to ensure compliance with COVID-19 protection and mitigation guidelines, rather than relying on employers' self-compliance in agricultural labor camps. Our specific recommendations to prevent and mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection among farmworkers are based on public health and epidemiological approaches and focus on (1) promoting public health and access to health care, (2) promoting a healthy and safe working environment, and (3) providing access to essential needs for workers, as detailed in a policy brief (<https://bit.ly/31knIhs>).

CONCLUSIONS

The challenges faced by farmworkers are longstanding and go beyond this pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a harsh light on the historical inequality, lack of labor and social protections, and precarious and exploitative labor conditions that farmworkers face. Precarious employment is an important social determinant of health that hinders the opportunity to have a cohesive society and a robust public health infrastructure.⁷ Both are essential for the public well-being, to fight discrimination and racism, and to

create a sense of belonging, offering the opportunity for upward mobility to all regardless of social identity. **AJPH**

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Note. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health, the CDC, or the Department of Health and Human Services.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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