

Q&A: Protecting essential farm workers during COVID-19

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State and federal executive orders have deemed seasonal and migrant farmworkers "essential." Yet, few protections have been granted to this population, which may be at higher risk of exposure to coronavirus,

according to a policy brief by researchers at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

Alexis Handal, associate professor of epidemiology, and Lisbeth Iglesias-Rios, a postdoctoral research fellow, discuss findings from their Michigan Farmworker Project, a 2019 community-engaged [qualitative study](#) with migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the state of Michigan.

What did you think of the recent executive order signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer that requires COVID-19 protections for farmworkers?

We certainly support an approach to address this pandemic based on scientific knowledge. The executive order is an important protective measure because it creates an enforceable standard for the agricultural industry to ensure safer living and working conditions for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. It explicitly states that employers must follow executive orders to provide agricultural labor camp residents with the same safeguards as other employers are required to provide their workers while at work.

The situation for these farmworkers in Michigan is historical and complex. The challenges that farmworkers are facing go beyond this pandemic and involve issues related with unsafe working conditions, racism, discrimination, precarious employment, substandard living conditions, labor exploitation, and so forth. We do not expect to tackle all the issues at once, but we hope to start conversations and actions that lead us in the right direction to improve the working and living conditions of these "essential" farmworkers now and in the future.

What's the Michigan Farmworker Project?

The Michigan Farmworker Project evolved as a community-engaged qualitative study intended to provide a deeper understanding of the complex working and living conditions of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the state of Michigan. We assessed indicators of labor exploitation and perceptions of labor trafficking in farmworkers and related this understanding to psychosocial, occupational and environmental health risk factors.

We conducted in-depth interviews with farmworkers and stakeholders who provide services directly to farmworkers (health, legal, outreach, and educational services), in various rural areas of Michigan. With stakeholders, we discussed their current knowledge, experiences and barriers to the adoption of the recommendations made by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission in response to the Report on the Conditions of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Michigan in 2010 and 2019. We also aimed to understand gaps in service provision and collected information on recommendations made from farmworkers and stakeholders to address their current working and living conditions.

Why focus on these workers?

Historically, farmworkers who are mainly U.S. and foreign-born Hispanic/Latina(o) workers (above 80%) have been a highly marginalized population that face difficult challenges such as limited social mobility, low education, poverty, lack of access to [health care](#), and so forth. Despite these challenges, these workers are the pillar of the multibillion-dollar agriculture and food system in the country.

When we consider the issue of health equity and [social justice](#), farmworkers are a very important population because they inherited the legacy of the era of plantations, Jim Crow era policies; perpetuating their exclusion or minimal labor protections (e.g., minimum wage, workers compensation, no overtime pay provisions), exposure to longstanding

patterns of structural racism and discrimination, social exclusion, segregation, substandard living conditions, as well as oppressive and unfair working conditions.

We focus on farmworkers because precarious employment promotes unsafe and sometimes unfair or unlawful labor practices by employers, performed sometimes in conditions of inequality, or in violation of human dignity. Labor exploitation is a consequence of precarious employment and has negative consequences for workers, their families, their communities and is a hindrance for a cohesive society. A cohesive society works toward the well-being of all its members, fights discrimination and racism, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers all its members regardless of their race, sex, age, and legal status the opportunity of upward social and economic mobility. And from a public health perspective, there is good evidence that more cohesive societies are healthier.

Was there something that surprised you while doing this research?

One of the things that really struck us was the level of dehumanization of farmworkers (e.g., mistreatment, humiliation of workers or treatment of workers as less than human) based on their race and ethnicity that was commonly reported to us by workers. We heard heartbreaking stories of workers being treated or considered as part of the "farm equipment" and not as humans or workers with needs and rights as any other person or worker in America.

What are some of the conditions that you found that might exacerbate farmworkers' exposure to coronavirus?

Our preliminary results on farmworkers' "normal" work environment in Michigan prior to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights important challenges that are further exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in three areas:

Health care services: Farmworkers have limited or no access to health care and they are not able to purchase or afford medications that they need, like insulin. In this population, chronic diseases often linked to the working and living conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, and cardiovascular problems, are prevalent. These diseases are particularly important risk factors for severe illness due to COVID-19. Mental health is overlooked in this population despite the fact that farmworkers have physically and mentally demanding jobs and often little to no social support or strong social networks in the communities where they work.

Living conditions: Overcrowded and substandard living conditions in some agricultural labor camps that we visited is a major issue. Legal provisions for housing are minimal. For example, one bathroom for every 15 people; and bathrooms and showers are often located outside of the room where workers sleep and are often shared by multiple occupants and families.

Working conditions: Farmworkers in our study reported limited access to clean restrooms, water, and soap to wash hands. For those working in the production line of crop packing plants, conditions are not favorable for maintaining social distancing, and the buildings tend to have poor ventilation, with some reporting that they work with a plastic apron that does not protect them and then have to work all day in wet clothes. Farmworkers reported they use little or no personal protective equipment, and often they need to purchase their own, which is difficult given their low wages.

Another issue that farmworkers described is related to the power

dynamics and the dependency of workers with employers, crew leaders and contractors. These dynamics often promote the inability of workers to make complaints about their health, safety or working conditions as they are afraid of reprisals (e.g., threats to report undocumented farmworkers to immigration enforcement) or even receiving personal threats.

What are some solutions you propose in your research?

It is important to emphasize that efforts to limit COVID-19 risks in this population require an evidence-based, comprehensive multifactorial approach that involves workers, employees, stakeholders, policymakers and government. Our overall recommendation is that enforcement actions be taken to ensure compliance with COVID-19 protection and mitigation guidelines instead of reliance on self-compliance by employers in agricultural labor camps. We also recommend the protection of workers against any type of retaliation including immigration enforcement for those workers that are undocumented. Protection should be provided to all the workers regardless of their legal status.

Our specific recommendations in the policy brief are based on public health and epidemiological approaches and focus on three interconnected and overlapping major areas: public health and health care, promoting a healthy and safe working environment, and providing access to essential needs for workers. It is essential that our recommendations are considered in light of the fact that these workers are a very vulnerable population. Workers reported in our study that it is common to be fired or alienated if they speak up or file complaints. These situations are exacerbated for those workers who are undocumented.

What do you want people to remember/learn from your research and why is it important now?

The challenges that farmworkers faced are longstanding and go beyond this pandemic. Farmworkers have high dependency on employers, crew leaders and contractors, and have low decision-making power or control over their working and the living conditions offered to them. This lack of autonomy increases the vulnerability of farmworkers in terms of precarious employment, labor exploitation, and other types of unfair or health harming situations for these workers.

This is the first study that we are aware of that has collected primary data on occupational and environmental risk factors related to the working and living conditions in this population of workers in Michigan. It is our goal that the findings from our study will be helpful to inform the development of COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies for this vulnerable population based on scientific knowledge. We hope our work will spark important conversations and inform actions that will address the working and living conditions of these "essential" farmworkers now and in the future.

Provided by University of Michigan

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