

Mistreatment of Michigan farmworkers: Researchers document abuses, push for change

October 30 2023, by Kim North Shine



Concept illustration of immigrant farmworkers. Credit: Nicole Smith/University of Michigan, made with Midjourney

Denied drinking water. Timed bathroom breaks. Threatened or fired for bruising apples while picking them. Unsafe exposure to chemicals and pesticides. Working into the middle of night or in extreme heat or rain.

Unpaid or unfairly paid wages with no recourse.

This sampling of experiences was shared by farmworkers who work in Michigan crop fields, greenhouses and packing plants and who were interviewed for the Michigan Farmworker Project, a community-based participatory research project led by University of Michigan social epidemiologists Lisbeth Iglesias-Rios and Alexis Handal.

Their [latest research](#), published in the *Labor Studies Journal*, documents a range of dehumanizing, stressful, unsafe and unhealthy workplace and living conditions. In their qualitative research effort, the researchers specifically explore the effects of precarious employment and [labor](#) exploitation on how they affect the [health](#) of farmworkers.

"There are multisystem failures in the protection of farmworkers in Michigan," said Iglesias-Rios, a research investigator at the U-M School of Public Health. "We identified dimensions of precarious employment and labor exploitation that involve lacking access to fundamental labor and social rights, including dehumanization, discriminatory occupational practices and insufficient access to health care and social benefits."

The study comes as Michiganders reap the benefits of annual fall harvests made possible by thousands of farmworkers whose work each year and in every season is critical to the states' agricultural industry, which contributes nearly \$105 billion annually to the economy, according to the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The researchers' goal is to shine a light on changes that could right commonplace abuses against a group of workers who are denied workplace protections afforded most U.S. employees.

Other conditions and situations reported by farmworkers in the research

include hostile and abusive work environments that include workers being denied basic rights such as drinking water or using the restroom, threats of being reported to Immigration Customs and Enforcement, and disregard for the health and safety of workers overall.

The 35 farmworkers in four Michigan counties interviewed for the study work with a variety of crops and food production: strawberries, blueberries, apples and asparagus, among other fruits and vegetables. The researchers collaborated with the Office of Migrant Affairs, which is part of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Michigan Immigrants Rights Center and Farmworker Legal Services, organizations which have a long history of working with the farmworker community.

Michigan is second to California when it comes to diversity of commodities grown and produced.

"I think when people think of farmworkers being treated in these ways, they think it is a California or a Florida problem, but this is very much a Michigan problem also," Iglesias-Rios said. "I think people don't make the connection between the amount of commodities produced in Michigan, the people who do the work, and the labor and living conditions."

It's important, she says, for consumers to know where and how food is produced.

"A system where consumers can learn of farms with labor violations or of workers' complaints may convince more employers to change their labor practices and allow consumers to make informed decisions when purchasing products," Iglesias-Rios said.

Currently, there is a need for stronger laws and better enforcement of

existing laws, the researchers say. For example, the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration currently has 850 inspectors responsible for the health and safety of 130 million workers employed at more than 8 million worksites around the nation. This translates to about one compliance officer for every 70,000 workers.

Iglesias-Rios and Handal recommend transparency, accountability and higher fines for the industry and farms with labor violations, and accessible information for consumers. They say legal and regulatory definitions are limited and often don't apply to conditions that should be deemed labor violations and labor exploitation, including using deportation and other threats to control workers.

"This focus is even more critical as legal proceedings in cases of labor violations or exploitative labor practices, including labor trafficking, for farmworkers are lengthy, complex, emotionally draining for the worker and can even jeopardize other employment opportunities," Iglesias-Rios said.

It is also important to continue institutional support and funding for academic-community research, as it is "key in identifying conditions such as precarious employment and labor exploitation, both public health issues that contribute to unfair, unjust and avoidable causes of disease and unsafe conditions for farmworkers," said Handal, associate professor of epidemiology and global public health at the U-M School of Public Health.

"The struggles of farmworkers are not new but are in fact the legacy of slavery and the plantation system in America that has created oppressive social and [economic systems](#) that are driven by racism, discrimination, economic interests and politics creating unequal opportunities and benefits for workers," Handal said.

She says progress reports by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission show little improvement in the working and living conditions of farmworkers in the state. The U-M research corroborates those reports, which document an array of abuses, lack of enforcement and low fines, even in cases of serious harm or injuries.

Handal and Iglesias-Rios also endorse the formation of a community-based model that supports farmworkers organizing in unions to advocate for workers' rights and the development of farmworker leaders. That, along with the support of state and community agencies and other organizations, could be an important step forward to improve industry standards and protections for farmworkers, they say.

"Our community-academic research approach provides a voice for an invisible and often ignored population of workers," Handal said.

Ultimately, precarious employment and labor exploitation intersect with many other key social determinants of health, including housing access, food security, access to [health care](#) and structural racism, the researchers say.

"Policy reform is fundamentally needed," Iglesias-Rios said. "It needs to address the shortcomings with current occupational health and safety standards for [farmworkers](#) and the long-lasting health effects across generations."

More information: Lisbeth Iglesias-Rios et al, The Michigan Farmworker Project: A Community-Based Participatory Approach to Research on Precarious Employment and Labor Exploitation of Farmworkers, *Labor Studies Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/0160449X231196227](https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X231196227)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Mistreatment of Michigan farmworkers: Researchers document abuses, push for change (2023, October 30) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-mistreatment-michigan-farmworkers-document-abuses.html>

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