

# For beginning nontraditional farmers, stress is a constant: Study

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Farming is already a stressful occupation, but the stress is compounded for nontraditional beginning farmers, a small study in the Midwest suggests.

Researchers surveyed and interviewed a group of mostly first-generation [organic farmers](#), half of whom were women, and some of whom were racial and sexual minorities.

Results showed that 58% of survey respondents reported mild to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression, said Fiona Doherty, lead author of the study and a doctoral candidate in [social work](#) at The Ohio State University.

"They have all the stressors that other farmers have, but many face additional obstacles because they are women or racial and [sexual minorities](#)," Doherty said.

The study was [published](#) in the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*.

Ohio State researchers worked with the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) on the study, with OEFFA identifying farmers to participate in the study.

"This is not a representative sample of farmers. We worked with OEFFA to capture the experience of new organic farmers on small to medium-sized farms," Doherty said.

Data for the study came from a survey of 62 farmers and in-depth interviews with an additional 20. All were from the Midwest and most were from Ohio and Michigan. Most were certified organic (16%) or were using organic practices but not certified (65%).

The researchers also sought out farmers who were not traditional white males from multigenerational family farms. About half of the farmers interviewed were female, and 20% were nonbinary or transgender. One-fourth of those interviewed were not white, and 90% were first-

generation farmers.

Many of those surveyed got into farming because they wanted to sell what they produced directly to their communities, said Michelle Kaiser, co-author of the study and associate professor of social work at Ohio State.

"They tended to gravitate toward this work because they wanted to feed and interact with their communities in the most equitable, healthy way possible," Kaiser said.

Many of the issues they faced were the same as all farmers. "Too much to do and too little time" was the top stressor of survey respondents, mentioned by 89%. And 79% of [survey respondents](#) listed "not having enough person power" as a stressor, making it the third most prominent source of stress.

The survey was done in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, so, not surprisingly, COVID-19 was the second most prominent stressor.

Women, racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ farmers faced additional stressors that majority farmers don't face.

"Some of the farmers we interviewed have identities that are likely different than most other farmers and others in their communities," Doherty said.

"They face challenges of feeling invisible, not being trusted or taken seriously as a [farmer](#) due to their identity."

Some talked about going to [farmers markets](#) and seeing customers pass them by to go to stands run by "what they think looks like a 'real' farmer,

like a white male," she said.

Some study participants also identified climate change as a source of stress. Most of those interviewed identified unpredictable weather as a source of stress, but did not identify climate change specifically, the study found.

Some said they didn't bother worrying about climate change because it was beyond their control.

For many of those interviewed, both the good and the bad were intertwined in their lives as farmers. One of the themes in many interviews was the farm as "both the cause and the cure," Kaiser said.

"The farm was a cause of a great deal of stress in their lives. But they also talked about the therapeutic nature of working in the outdoors, being in the soil and spending time with animals," she said.

"It provided a sense of purpose, and it was rewarding playing this important role in their community."

Doherty said that many farmers interviewed in this study wanted to feel they were supported by their community.

"One of the things that could help them deal with the stress is just hearing from folks that they are valued, and their work providing food is valuable," she said.

"Greater appreciation and respect and support for local farmers would go a long way."

This includes structural support such as policies that improve equity, accessibility, and representation for beginning, women, racial and ethnic

minorities and LGBTQ+ farmers, Doherty said.

**More information:** Fiona Doherty et al, "The farm has an insatiable appetite": A food justice approach to understanding beginning farmer stress, *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.5304/jafscd.2023.123.011](https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.123.011)

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