

The Michigan Farmworker Project

Improving Working and Living Conditions for Michigan Farmworkers amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary

The Michigan Farmworker Project conducted by University of Michigan School of Public Health researchers, found that farmworkers (migrant, seasonal, and H-2A)—considered "essential workers"—faced challenging working and living conditions that are critical to address during the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to limit COVID-19 risks in this population require an evidence-based, multifactorial approach that involves workers, employees, and stakeholders. We recommend that enforcement actions be taken to ensure compliance with COVID-19 protection and mitigation guidelines instead of reliance on self-compliance. Recommendations should be provided to farmworkers regardless of their legal status.

What did the researchers do?

The Michigan Farmworker Project (MFP) was conducted in the Summer of 2019 as a communityengaged qualitative study that aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the complex working and living conditions of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the state of Michigan. With stakeholders, we discussed their current knowledge, experiences and barriers to the adoption of the 15 recommendations made by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission of 2010 and 2019 in response to the Report on the Conditions of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Michigan. We also sought to understand gaps in service provision and recommendations from farmworkers themselves to address their current working and living conditions from the perspective of farmworkers and stakeholders who provide services directly to farmworkers health, legal, outreach, and educational services. We conducted 55 in-depth interviews (with 19 female farmworkers, 15 male farmworkers and 21 key stakeholders) in various rural areas of Michigan.



Purpose

This diagram describes preliminary findings from the Michigan Farmworker Project and highlights the challenging working and living conditions that Michigan farmworkers face, which may be exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We present recommendations to improve working conditions, worker safety, and the overall well-being of Michigan farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Michigan Farmworker Project Research Team

- Principal Investigator: Alexis Handal, PhD, MPH, Associate Professor, Department of Epidemiology
- Co-Investigator, Senior Study Coordinator and Field interviewer: Lisbeth Iglesias-Ríos, PhD, MPH, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Epidemiology
- Co-Investigator: Marie O'Neill, PhD, Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Department of Environmental Health Sciences
- Co-Investigator: Paul Fleming, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education
- Research Assistant: Mislael Valentín Cortés, MPH, MSW



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What's happening?

Working conditions

- Limited access to proper hygiene and crowded working conditions
- Physically and mentally demanding
- Little or no protective equipment
- Minimal information and education
- Low decision-making power about work and living conditions offered to them
- Environmental exposures (i.e. pesticides, chemicals, & extreme weather conditions)

Psychosocial conditions

- Prejudice and differential attitudes and treatment against workers based on race and ethnicity
- Retaliation from growers and contractors (e.g. threats to report farmworkers to immigration enforcement)
- Threats and reprisal if workers complain about health, safety, and working conditions

Living conditions

- Crowded living conditions in housing provided to farmworkers
- Housing provisions are very minimal and often shared by multiple
- Substandard and unhygienic living conditions in some agricultural labor camps

Health conditions

- Limited or no access to healthcare
- High prevalence of chronic medical
- Inability to purchase or afford the cost of medications
- Poor mental health and need for mental health services
- Poor quality of drinking water at labor camps and in the fields

High risk for COVID-19 infection and health complications

What can be done?

Public Health & Healthcare

- Consistent action plan of safety and health measures
- More access to soap and clean water in camps and worksites
- Free and regular testing and treatment
- Provide social-distanced living arrangements
- Enforcement to ensure compliance with sanitation requirements in agricultural labor camps and in fields

Promoting a Healthy & Safe Working Environment

- Ongoing information about
 workplace prevention of COVID-19 in
 native language
- Social distancing measures in all areas and provide enhanced PPE
- 15+ day paid sick leave
- Employers, contractors, and growers should not retaliate against sick workers
- Employers, contractors, and growers should not use as leverage to hire H2A workers and discriminate against workers with children, women, and U.S. based workers.

Access to Essential Needs

- Deploy mobile health units for COVID-19 testing and monitoring
- Identify health care organizations in labor camp regions and verify eligibility, fee for services, access to medical interpreters, and type of medical services provided
- Provide effective ventilation among living and working quarters
- Families should have their own living unit instead of sharing units

Prevention & mitigation of potential COVID-19 effects