

The Michigan Farmworker Project

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

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Prepared by academic researchers from the Michigan Farmworker Project

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.

Purpose

This policy brief 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.

Why does this matter?

Farmworkers are considered “essential critical infrastructure” workers for Michigan’s food supply chain and their work contributes \$104.7 billion annually to the state’s economy.¹⁻⁴ The agricultural workforce is predominantly composed of U.S. and foreign-born Hispanic/Latina(o) (>80%) workers who work in one of the most dangerous and lowest-paying occupations in the country.⁵ Despite their vital role to feed Michigan and their contribution to the state’s economy, they remain an underserved, “hidden,” and highly marginalized population.⁶ Farmworkers have been historically and continuously affected by insufficient social and labor protections that may worsen detrimental effects on workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

State and federal executive orders have stated that “essential” workers have a special responsibility to maintain their normal work schedule.³ For farmworkers, “normal” work conditions are already precarious and challenging, and these conditions are exacerbated during the pandemic.

What did the researchers do?

The Michigan Farmworker Project (MFP) was conducted in the Summer and Fall of 2019 as a community-engaged 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. We conducted 55 in-depth interviews with 19 female farmworkers, 15 male farmworkers and 21 key 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 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.⁷ 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.



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What did researchers find?

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 COVID-19 pandemic:

Health Conditions

- Limited or no access to health care
- Inability to purchase or afford needed medications (e.g., insulin)
- High prevalence of chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, asthma, epilepsy)
- Poor mental health (e.g., anxiety and depression) and need for mental health services
- Frequent injuries and accidents
- Poor quality of drinking water at the agricultural labor camps and when working in the fields

Working Conditions

- Lack of access to clean restrooms, water, and soap to wash hands
- Crowded living and working conditions—particularly for those working in the production line in packing crop plants—that are not favorable to maintain a safe distance between employees
- Little or no personal protective equipment provided; protective equipment must be purchased by low-wage farmworkers
- Personal threats and reprisal if workers complained about health, safety and working conditions
- Working 10+ hours per day, 7 days a week
- Limited or no breaks
- Physically and mentally demanding work
- On-call and unpredictable work schedules, particularly for those living at labor camps
- High pressure for productivity with pay based on a "piece rate" system
- Frequent instances of contractors, growers, and crew leaders cheating workers out of their earned wages

- Exposure to pesticides while working and when living in agricultural labor camps due to the close proximity to agricultural fields and farmworker's housing
- Minimal information and education about occupational safety and health
- Working under adverse and extreme weather conditions (e.g., rain, snow, heat)
- Asked to sign work-related "contracts" or "forms" in English when many farmworkers lack English literacy
- Limited and controlled breaks to access restrooms when working
- Withholding of personal documentation and payments; control of mobility of workers; threats by employers and contractors
- Unequal power dynamics among workers and with supervisors and crew leaders
- Low job decision-making power about work and living conditions offered to them



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Living Conditions

- Substandard living conditions in some “agricultural labor camps”
- Crowded living conditions in housing provided to farmworkers
- Farmworkers and their children often have to sleep on dusty and dirty mattresses which can exacerbate respiratory infections
- Housing provisions are very minimal (e.g., bathrooms and showers are often located outside of the room where they sleep) and are often shared by multiple occupants and families living in the labor camps
- Some labor camps lack washing machines and workers have to store their work clothes inside their house until they are taken to the public laundromat, causing potential exposures to chemicals within the home until the clothes can be laundered. This situation is a key concern as sanitation and social distancing are critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, and opportunities for both are jeopardized due to the need to use public laundromats.



Psychosocial Conditions

- Dehumanization of workers (e.g., mistreatment, humiliation of workers or treatment of workers as less than human) based on their race and ethnicity
- Prejudice and differential attitudes and treatment against workers because of their race and ethnicity
- Female workers facing unwelcome and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances in their workplace
- Retaliation from growers and contractors (e.g., threats to report undocumented farmworkers to immigration enforcement)



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Recommendations to Prevent and Mitigate Risk of COVID-19 Infection

The conditions faced by farmworkers and identified in the Michigan Farmworker Project contribute to the risk of COVID-19 infection among farmworkers. Based on our findings, we recommend the following:

Public Health and Health Care

- Have a consistent action plan of safety and health measures, including medical emergencies needs, developed by stakeholders in collaboration with growers, contractors, and employers
- Provide more opportunities for hand washing with soap and clean water in agricultural labor camps and worksites as sanitation is key to control the virus
- Testing and treatment of COVID-19 should be done regularly, free, and accessible for all farmworkers, regardless of legal status
- Deploy more mobile health care units with authorized providers in the state. Mobile health units can help with COVID-19 testing and monitoring farmworker health (e.g., temperature checking, assessing symptoms and monitoring ill workers).
- Provide adequate social-distanced living arrangements that adhere to CDC recommendations in each of the agricultural labor camps
- Identify health care organizations in all regions where labor camps are located and verify eligibility, fees for services, access to medical interpreters, type of medical services provided and specifically related to COVID-19 (e.g., testing)
- Instead of automatically quarantining migrant farmworkers arriving in Michigan, each employer or housing provider must provide COVID-19 symptoms screening first, and implement consistent public health protocols to ensure workers have information and access to resources (e.g., COVID-19 testing) to mitigate or address the spread of the virus.
- For those workers who fall ill with COVID-19, immediately contact local health care entities and provide food, medical care, and paid sick leave for the workers regardless of their immigration status

- Farmworkers need to receive ongoing information and on-site training on preventive measures to identify and avoid COVID-19 infection in the language that is accessible to the worker.
- Enforcement to ensure compliance with sanitation requirements in agricultural labor camps and in fields, including the provision of soap, clean water, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, female sanitary towels, paper tissues, and clean portable bathrooms more regularly or more than is required under current regulations
- Social distance measures should be implemented and enforced in all working and living areas, including in the packing plants and in the fields, and if not possible, employers should provide enhanced personal protective equipment.
- Paid time (at least 20 minutes) should be provided to workers to clean their living headquarters daily. Disinfectant products (e.g., chlorine, gloves, wipes) and hand sanitizer should be purchased and provided by growers, employers, or contractors in every housing unit in labor camps.
- An independent enforcement agency for COVID-19 should be consolidated to follow up with the recommendations mentioned above.

Promoting a Healthy and Safe Working Environment

- Ensure employers or farm labor contractors are providing effective and durable protective equipment (e.g., masks, gloves, goggles, gowns) at no cost for farmworkers.
- Employers, contractors, and growers should not retaliate against workers or lay off workers who get infected with COVID-19 and require sick leave.
- Employers, contractors, and growers should provide payment of at least 15 days paid sick leave to allow for quarantine of workers infected with COVID-19. Thus, preventing sick workers in the workplace because of the fear of losing their jobs.
- Information on prevention, mitigation and action plans should be provided to workers in their native language by using different media and considering that some farmworkers are illiterate or speak indigenous languages and not necessarily Spanish.

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- Prior to providing housing to workers and their families, employers, contractors, and growers should be responsible for providing adequate accommodations that are appropriate to quarantine workers and their families if an outbreak were to occur in the labor camp.
- Employers, contractors, and growers should not use the pandemic as a leverage to justify the hiring of H-2A workers and discriminate against hiring workers with children, women workers, and U.S. born workers.

Access to Essential Needs

- Provide more opportunities to wash clothes or have additional washer and dryer machines at agricultural labor camps.
- Provide effective ventilation inside living headquarters and particularly among those farmworkers working in packing plants where crops are usually cleaned with chlorine. Effective ventilation is crucial for avoiding respiratory problems.
- Disposition of living conditions and beds in labor camps must adhere to social distancing rules whenever possible.
- Families with children should have their own living unit instead of placing two families in the same house, apartment, or trailer.
- If a worker is infected while working, employers, contractors and growers should be responsible for paying medical expenses including medications. Employers, contractors, and growers should work closely with entities providing Medicaid coverage and worker's compensation.
- Employers, contractors, and growers should provide regular food and clothing for workers in need.
- Instead of restricting workers of going to supermarkets to do their shopping, check temperatures of workers, provide information about COVID-19 and social distancing in public places, provide masks and hand sanitizer.

References

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For more information

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