

Addressing California Farmworkers' Mental Health & Food Security During the Pandemic

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A joint publication from Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative & the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley

Farmworker communities are one of the most vulnerable and overlooked populations in the United States. To the National Agricultural Workers Survey from 2015-2016, around 83% of farmworkers self-identify as Latinx; their average annual income is less than \$20,000 a year, and around of farmworker families have incomes under the federal poverty line.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, they were deemed essential workers and had to continue their strenuous labor in the fields. This vulnerable population continued to work without proper PPE, social distancing, and general knowledge about protection from the virus, which led to their community having a 60% increase in mortality during one of the peaks of the pandemic-March and October 2020.²

There was also immense economic instability in the agricultural industry when COVID first hit; this instability led to a decrease in employment in the

1 Hernandez T, Gabbard S. Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: a demographic and employment profile of United States farmworkers; 2018.

2 Riley AR, Chen YH, Matthey EC, et al. Excess mortality among Latino people in California during the COVID-19 pandemic. *SSM Popul Health*. 2021;15:100860. doi:10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100860

“How did economic instability and additional factors from the pandemic affect the mental health of farmworkers?”

agricultural sector.³ The average farmworker income is under the federal poverty line, making it difficult to afford necessities such as food, rent, and utilities. How did economic instability and additional factors from the pandemic affect the mental health of Farmworkers? For the individuals working to place food on our tables, how did the pandemic impact their access to food? The following Journal article titled, “Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on California Farmworkers' Mental Health and Food Security” by Ana Mora, Joseph Lewnard, Stephen Rauch, Katherine Kogut, Nicholas Jewell, Maximiliano Cuevas, and Brenda Eskanzi (on behalf of the CHAMACOS-Project-19 Study Team) works to answer these questions. This policy brief aims to compress and provide policy critiques on the article.

In collaboration with Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas and the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, they worked with farmworkers in Monterey County, California. The research team conducted bilingual phone interviews with participants and asked farmworkers about their socio-demographic, household,

3 California Institute for Rural Studies. COVID-19 Farmworkers Study (COFS) phase one report [Internet]. California Institute for Rural Studies; 2021. Available from: <https://cirsinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CA-COFS-Phase-One-FinalReport.pdf>.



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occupational, and health-related information. Certain questions were geared toward understanding their mental health by asking them about their symptoms of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and lifestyle choices. The economic impact was collected by asking questions on food insecurity, bill payments, and remittances sent to family members outside of the US. Their team also did COVID Tests on participants.

After data analysis, the results showed that 24% of farmworkers believed the pandemic negatively impacted them greatly.⁴ Around 37% of participants experienced food insecurity.⁵ Since the start of the pandemic, several farmworkers have stated that they had more difficulty with upkeep on bill payments and saw a decrease in money sent to family members outside of the states. Both mental health and food insecurity correlated with farmworkers’ socio-demographic and household characteristics. Female-identifying individuals that lived with their children and had some COVID symptoms before the interview had higher symptoms of depression.⁶ Married farmworker couples speaking more than one language and working during the project had lower depression symptoms.⁷ Figure 1A clearly expresses these findings (all figures are at the end of this brief).

In Figure 1B, anxiety symptoms were higher with female farmworkers who lived longer in the States and

4 Ana M. Mora, Joseph A. Lewnard, Stephen Rauch, Katherine Kogut, Nicholas Jewell, Maximiliano Cuevas & Brenda Eskenazi on behalf of the CHAMACOS-Project-19 Study Team (2022) Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on California Farmworkers’ Mental Health and Food Security, *Journal of Agromedicine*, 27:3, 303-314, DOI: 10.1080/1059924X.2022.2058664

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

had more than one COVID-related symptom. Figure 1C highlights elevated substance use in individuals with COVID-related symptoms. Food insecurity was more prevalent with farmworkers born outside the United States and living with children (Figure 1D).

Beyond the physical impacts of COVID-19, it is evident that farmworkers faced mental health and economic insecurity during the pandemic. All three measurements for mental health (depression, anxiety, and substance use) attributed to COVID-related symptoms (Figure 1). Fear from the general public and isolation from community members during this time could explain such results. The study had certain limitations with randomization, compliance, and uptake. However, it does provide excellent insight into the COVID disparities of the Monterey farmworker community.

This study highlights policy implications. COVID-19 unveiled the cracks in social service programs in California. Many farmworker families are undocumented and are fearful of being seen as a “public charge” if they apply for or take up social service goods. They would rather struggle in silence than vocalize their concerns and possibly get deported from applying to these programs. California should expand its CalFresh program to provide food credit for undocumented individuals. Nobody should be food insecure regardless of their immigration status. Healthy diet options positively impact one’s mental and physical health. Farmworker communities should have grocery stores and farmers’ markets with healthy and culturally-related food options. Many times these communities buy fast food and heavily processed foods because that is typically all they can afford. Expanding CalFresh and implementing easier access to healthier foods can mitigate the risk of food insecurity.

As expressed in the study, the pandemic heightened negative mental health symptoms establishing clinics and more easily accessible mental health services to this vulnerable community is the first step. Simply obtaining health care services is already a barrier for undocumented individuals. California did become the first and only state in the US to implement universal access to health care coverage, regardless of one’s immigration status.⁸ This is wonderful for the farmworker community in California, but the quality of

8 Office of Governor Gavin Newsom (2022) Governor Newsom Signs Budget Putting Money Back in Californians’ Pockets and Investing in State’s Future. Available here: <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2022/06/30/governor->

care is now a concern. There should be bilingual medical providers and partnerships with local community-based organizations and local government to support mental health and physical services.

Policy Implications

COVID-19 disproportionately impacted farmworkers. From the study, it was clear that COVID brought a lot of fear and immensely impacted their mental and physical well being. In the future, if there is another pandemic, there should be policy implemented to protect this population. Certain protections include, but not limited to, free PPE, community outreach on the pandemic, and allowing individuals paid time off from work to avoid the risk of infection. Community based Farmworker organizations in California, such as Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) and Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), are some of a long list of organizations that help support these community members during the pandemic. Nevertheless, there needs to be active support and work from the government to address these human rights issues with farmworkers.

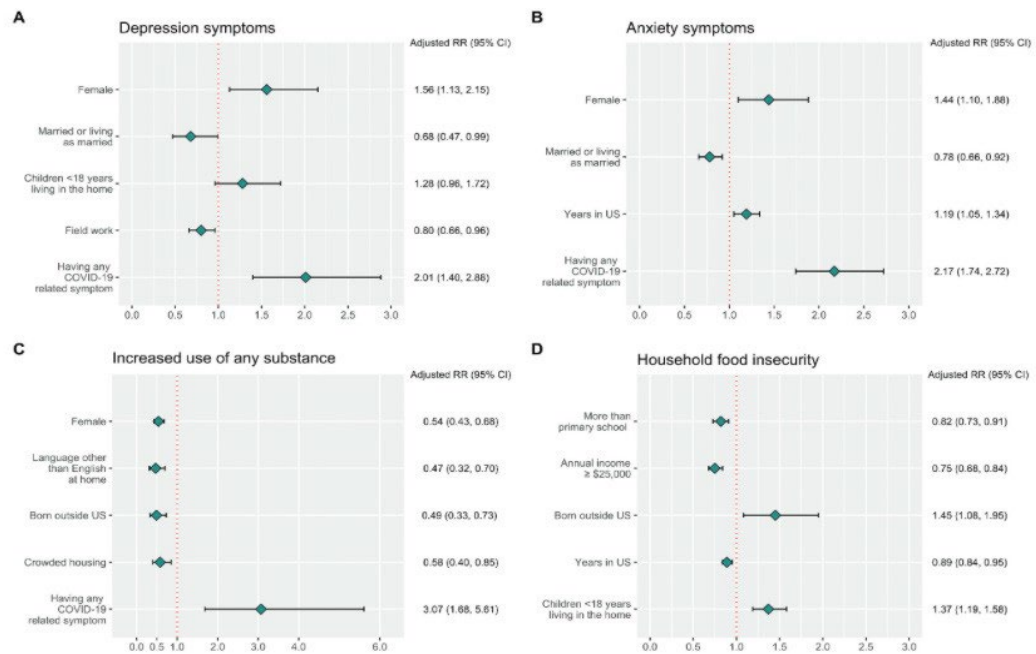


Figure 1. Predictors of (A) depression symptoms in the last 2 weeks, (B) anxiety symptoms in the last 2 weeks, (C) increased use of any substance compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, and (D) household food insecurity since the COVID-19 pandemic started [aRR (95% CI)] among farmworkers enrolled in a cross-sectional study, Monterey County, California, 2020 (n = 1,115). Final models accounted for recruitment venue and enrollment period.

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Citation

Chong, Graciela. 2023. Addressing Migrant Farmworker Injury in the United States. BIMi-HIFIS Policy Brief Series. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

Design & Layout

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Graciela Chong is a Graduate Student at UC Berkeley where she is getting her masters in Development Practice under the Goldman School of Public Policy. Graciela also holds a B.S. in Animal Science from UC Davis. Her research focus is in community development and working to support and address the needs of Latinx Immigrant community members -- more specifically essential farmworker families. She has a background in working and advocating for Farmworker community members through her work with Dr. Seth Holmes on a NSF funded project titled "Indigenous Oaxacan Farmworker Community Environmental and Occupational Health" and as a COVID-19 Statewide Agriculture and Farmworker Education Program project coordinator for the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety.