

Addressing Migrant Farmworker Injury in the United States

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

“The ‘normalcy’ of their unfair working conditions belittles the pressing issue of being susceptible to various injuries and constant pain from the job.”

The agricultural food industry is held upright by the underappreciated and underpaid work of Farmworkers. They are a vulnerable population that is mostly immigrant, approximately 73%, and more than half of immigrant farmworkers, 68%, were born in Mexico.¹ What goes unnoticed, is the indigenous migrant farmworker community that speaks various languages native to Mexico. Several individuals migrate from the state of Oaxaca, in Mexico, where there are indigenous communities of Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui within the United States. Their work in the fields is underappreciated. Farmworkers generally work long hours in back-breaking conditions, and perform repetitive movements. Nevertheless, they receive either abysmal health care and social services or no access to any services.

The harm from this physically draining repetitiveness of their work in the fields is seen as a “normal” experience for farmworkers. The “normalcy” of their unfair working conditions belittles the pressing issue of being susceptible to various injuries and constant pain from the job. There are few ramifications from higher-up positions on the manners they treat and provide for their workers. In many ways, this treatment is tied

to heavy xenophobia and antagonization with migrant communities from predominantly Black and Brown countries. The following journal article titled “Migrant Farmworker Injury: Temporality, Statistical Representation, Eventfulness” was written by Dr. Seth Holmes and highlights the need for visibility in farmworker injuries within statistics and society to create meaningful change in the agricultural field. This policy brief aims to compress and provide policy critiques on the article.

Dr. Holmes uses a personal story from his book, *Fresh Fruit Broken Bodies*. It re-encounters his ethnographic research on indigenous farmworker populations to study social and health inequalities within these communities. Ethnographic research is a method that collects data through observations and interviews, where researchers can then conclude from that data.

The personal account he describes is from an individual named Abelino, a 35-year-old farmworker. He migrated to the US, but like many of his migrant counterparts, involuntarily. There is this narrative that when people immigrate, it is because they choose to move, either for an education, a family, a career path, etc. However, life is not that simple. Indigenous Oaxacans are migrating to the US because they cannot afford to live in their hometowns and need to immigrate

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. 2016. Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2013–2014.



to survive.² Many family members migrate, then provide remittances to their families in their hometowns for survival. This creates a path for people like Abelino to work in the fields. Abelino describes the physically demanding nature of his job. He explains how the constant position of picking fruit elicits back, knee, and hip pain which causes a lot of suffering for him.³ The story recounts an instance where he experienced significant pain in his right knee that led him down a long path to finding adequate care and attention for his injury.⁴

When he initially told his supervisor about the injury, there was no follow-up or concern for Abelino, which confused him about the next course of action. Abelino had to see four different doctors before being diagnosed with tendonitis- a tendon inflammation caused by repetitive stress. The doctor that saw him said he can perform “light duty” work that doesn’t strain his knee. However, the farm office did not accept this diagnosis and work recommendation. It took various hurdles to allow the farm to provide Abelino “light work.” Nevertheless, the term “light work” is vague and subjective, allowing Abelino to continue harvesting berries, the exact labor that caused him pain in the beginning. Abelino’s determination for adequate care is immensely inspiring.

There is various statistical data that unveils the commonality of farmworkers’ pain and injury on the job. However, Dr. Holmes explicitly tells the reader that statistics alone do not fully explain the depth of this issue within time and space. One can read a statistic of the percentage of farmworkers injured on the job, but what is often detached is that each statistic is a collective representation of an individual’s experience. Each injury a farmworker faces will likely stay with them for a long period of time, creating chronic pain. That is not presented in statistics. Policy changes are yielded from statistics, yet people do not analyze why certain conditions or systemic challenges create such numbers.

From the journal article, policy implications and suggestions arose. First, California is the first and

only state in the US to implement universal access to health care coverage, regardless of one’s immigration status.⁵ This is a wonderful first step in supporting farmworkers and undocumented community members. Nevertheless, this policy takes time to implement, and it is only limited to the state of California. Many undocumented individuals live outside of California and might have their roots planted in another state. How can we best serve and protect them? The answer is to implement federal universal access to health care coverage. The coverage should allow farmworkers to receive genuine, adequate care. These programs and clinics need medical staff from the community and must speak Spanish or even different indigenous languages.

Secondly, the presidential committee on migrants began the Federal Migrant Health Program, where they provided health services to the migrant population.⁶ In a 2000 study, only 5% of farmworkers actually benefited from this program from their employer.⁷ There needs to be work to expand and reach this target farmworker audience. Implementing state-owned programs similar to the federal Migrant Health Program would be a wonderful step to properly and more personally reach these audiences.

Third, both social and health services, on a federal level, should be accessible for undocumented migrants. Migrant farmworkers move from state to state for work, creating a barrier for them to utilize social and health services.⁸ Fourth, accountability for labor violations from higher-up positions. Farms must provide proper rest and break stations for their employees.

5 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-newsom-signs-budget-putting-money-back-in-californians-pockets-and-investing-in-states-future/>

6 Holmes, S. 2020. Migrant Farmworker Injury: Temporality, Statistical Representation, Eventfulness. *Journal of Agriculture and Human Values*, 37(1). DOI: 10.1007/s10460-019-09965-8.

7 Lighthall, D. 2001. The Poor Health of Farm Workers. *Western Journal of Medicine* 175 (4): 223–224.

8 Holmes, S. 2020. Migrant Farmworker Injury: Temporality, Statistical Representation, Eventfulness. *Journal of Agriculture and Human Values*, 37(1). DOI: 10.1007/s10460-019-09965-8.

2 Holmes, S. 2020. Migrant Farmworker Injury: Temporality, Statistical Representation, Eventfulness. *Journal of Agriculture and Human Values*, 37(1). DOI: 10.1007/s10460-019-09965-8.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.



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The demanding nature of harvesting, fueled by poor management, makes resting impossible. If farms break labor laws created to protect individuals from unfair labor practices, then they should be held accountable for their actions.

Fifth, worker’s compensation for farmworker populations is very restrictive and minimal. Only 36 states require higher-level farm employers to provide this to their employees, and five of those 36 states only require worker’s compensation for large farms.⁹ All 50 states need farm employers, no matter the size, to require worker’s compensation for their employees. Due to the dangerous nature of their job, worker’s compensation should be a right for any employee regardless of their immigration status.

Farm industries should allow flexibility and variety in the type of work farmworkers can perform on duty to limit the continuous, repetitive nature of their work. Systemically and as a society, we must support and uplift the farmworker community. They are the individuals who place food on our tables, and their concerns should be listened to.

I was fortunate enough to speak with Dr. Holmes and get insight into his work and future projects. He highlighted that his book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* provided the content for the journal article. His book has been used for organizations, unions, politicians, the CDC, etc. providing further context and knowledge surrounding the everyday lives of migrant farmworkers. He is currently working on more research supporting migrant populations and is showcasing a film he helped produce titled “First Time Home.” The film is directed and shot by young indigenous Triqui individuals who tell their story of the meaning of family and indigenous immigrant identity pride.

9 Rural Migration News. 1996. Minimum Wages/Workers Comp. <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=113>. Accessed 20 Dec 2018.



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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.