

Pandemic Impacts on Florida Farmworkers: Emerging Takeaways to Inform Outreach and Policymaking¹

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Introduction

While the food supply chain depends on the critical work performed by farmworkers to help ensure food reaches American households (Arcury & Quandt, 2007; Koreishi, 2010), the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic highlighted both longstanding and emerging health, social, and economic challenges experienced by the US farmworker population. Expectedly, when society halted activities and locked down in 2020, farmworkers were quickly declared “essential workers” who should maintain their normal work duties (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021), placing the already vulnerable farmworker population at an increased risk for health issues (Flocks, 2020; Handal et al., 2020). As with many groups facing heightened health risks, the pandemic has underscored how longstanding social and economic challenges affecting farmworkers persist and continue to have significant consequences. This publication aims to synthesize emerging takeaways from reporting and literature on the challenges experienced by US farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting examples from Florida, when possible. Extension and outreach practitioners and policymakers are the target audience for application of the publication’s findings and recommendations.

What COVID-19 Has Taught Us about Farmworker Challenges

We synthesized key insights from research, media reporting, public data, and interview sources to understand farmworkers’ daily challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine both the emerging challenges farmworkers have faced as a result of COVID-19 and how longstanding social and economic conditions have shaped their experiences during the pandemic.

Unavoidable exposure and working conditions: A Purdue (2020) model estimated farmworkers to be approximately twice as likely as the overall population to contract COVID-19. Well before the pandemic, farmworkers were often pushed to work long hours under grueling conditions (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006), which has historically placed the group at an increased risk for heat-related illness and health issues (Mitic et al., 2018). In addition to farmworkers being expected to continue working throughout the pandemic, the agricultural industry’s concentration on labor-intensive horticultural production (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables) makes physical distancing extremely difficult, especially with a lack of protective equipment such as masks (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021). Farmworkers are also commonly excluded from the social and labor protections

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most Americans can enjoy, which may exacerbate grueling working and living conditions (Handal et al., 2020). Furthermore, many farmworkers are paid a piece rate (i.e., paid according to the amount harvested), without paid benefits such as sick leave, which increases the pressure to not miss work for health reasons such as a positive COVID-19 test result or exposure (Mutic et al., 2018).

Unavoidable exposure from housing and transportation:

Even outside of the workplace, economic conditions and inadequate infrastructure increase the risk of disease spread. Farmworker housing is often cramped with bunk beds, shared bathrooms, and kitchens used by over a dozen farmworkers. Furthermore, transportation to and from work sites is commonly provided in packed buses or shared vehicles (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021). These conditions not only increase the risk of disease transmission but also make isolation and containment of outbreaks very challenging.

Lack of access to testing and medical care: Testing and monitoring COVID-19 among farmworkers has been inconsistent and fallen short on multiple fronts. Reporting indicated some growers attempted to obscure US farm disease rates by excluding workers from testing (Reiley & Reinhard, 2020). Testing was not required by Florida's state and local authorities, and even if farmworkers were tested, following up with them posed significant challenges for tracing (Lauzardo et al., 2021). Additionally, many farmworker communities lacked internet connectivity, which disconnected them from telemedicine resources and emotional support during this crisis (Lee et al., 2020). In Collier County, Florida, where Immokalee's tomato fields are located, the county officials opted against participating in the State's testing program (Perdomo, 2020). Fundamentally, farmworkers' lack of social protections, fear of deportation, and economic status have likely been significant hindrances to testing and seeking medical care: "Testing and social distancing guidelines may help prevent illness but cannot prevent job loss. Personal protection is no substitute for social protections" (Fawcett & Gupta, 2020, p. 1). Further limiting access to medical care are challenges such as the availability of language support services and the need for greater awareness of participants' backgrounds and communication preferences among some healthcare providers (Flocks et al., 2018; Herbst & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2018).

Immigration status and fear: The agricultural workforce in the United States is predominantly comprised of immigrant workers, with half estimated by the US Department of Labor (2018) to be undocumented. Some US farmworkers'

fear of deportation and removal from their jobs discourages them from speaking out against inadequate conditions or treatment by employers (González, 2019). This, along with little time afforded away from work, may deter farmworkers' pursuit of medical assistance and public services. Additionally, many farmworkers may not hold Social Security numbers, which would be required to access federal safety net programs and pandemic stimulus and aid (Onel et al., 2020). A significant number of farmworkers are also registered as H-2A guestworkers, and according to Unseld (2020), COVID-19 has added to already challenging circumstances for H-2A farmworkers, who are frequently transported in large groups via buses and housed closely together in barracks or hotels, where social distancing is nearly impossible. Unsurprisingly, Unseld claims that some of the worst virus outbreaks have been among H-2A workers.

Public scrutiny and social exclusion: Prior to COVID-19, farmworkers faced persistent social barriers related to language, cultural differences, and access to education. These challenges have been further amplified during the pandemic, particularly in the context of ongoing national discussions around immigration. Additionally, public rhetoric from some influential figures has contributed to negative perceptions and heightened tensions affecting farmworker communities (Medel-Herrero et al., 2021). Narratives suggesting that farmworkers negatively impact the economy—such as claims that they displace American jobs—can overshadow their significant contributions to the agricultural sector and the broader economy (Areguin et al., 2020).

Approaches to Address Barriers Affecting Farmworker Wellbeing and Participation

The following recommendations are based on the findings presented above and existing examples, especially in Florida, to better provide support and protection for farmworkers.

- Make farmworkers visible:** Extension and outreach professionals and others in communication and policy positions should work to shift public perceptions toward recognizing the essential role that farmworkers play in the US food system and society. There is a need to address communication and public messaging in ways that promote understanding and mutual respect, rather than reinforcing divisions or assigning blame. Relatedly, Piccinni (2020) encouraged public officials to formally

acknowledge migrant workers' contributions to society, especially during the pandemic, and promote an "in-this-together" narrative to build social cohesion and inclusion (p. 1).

- **Support and build on existing efforts where possible:**

For example, the [Farm Worker Association of Florida](#) has been mobilizing support since the 1970s among farmworkers, activists, and others from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to improve conditions, benefits, and policies that impact farmworkers. Partnering with organizations that have established relationships with farmworker communities can strengthen program implementation by improving access, communication, and participant engagement. These partnerships can help Extension and similar programs reach intended audiences more effectively and ensure that program efforts are aligned with real-world conditions, ultimately enhancing relevance and impact. These groups have organized COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites that assist with delivering culturally sensitive and responsive information and language translation. UF/IFAS Extension has also increased efforts tailored to improve program delivery through the establishment of the Coalition of Florida Extension Educators, or CAFE Latino, described as "a grassroots organization with the goal to create science-based educational materials for the benefit of Spanish-speaking communities" (UF at Work, 2021, p. 1). CAFE Latino addresses identified program needs by translating Extension content and partnering with local organizations to improve relevance, accessibility, and engagement for Hispanic and Latino communities in Florida, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of Extension programming (UF at Work, 2021).

- **Enhance Farmworker Access to Reliable Program and Policy Information:**

Farmworkers are extremely busy with taxing work schedules. Furthermore, farm managers and contractors may not fully inform farmworkers of their legal rights and opportunities, such as COVID-19 stimulus and aid, in all the necessary languages. Furthermore, resources may need to be made accessible at various literacy levels. Hence, practitioners can help disseminate sound knowledge for farmworkers (specific to their legal status and situations) and support to navigate different systems and access assistance. Rodriguez et al. (2018) suggested that practitioners leverage mobile learning platforms, when possible, using smartphones, tablets, or other devices, to deliver language-appropriate health and safety information and trainings to farmworkers in remote work environments.

- **Come up with systemic solutions:** A key aim of this article is to demonstrate that while the pandemic highlighted and intensified challenges experienced by farmworkers, many of these issues are rooted in longstanding structural and systemic conditions. Thus, quick, easy fixes will have little impact for entrenched and complex issues. This article highlights the importance of applying systems-oriented approaches that consider the multiple levels of factors influencing the conditions experienced by farmworkers (Kania et al., 2018). Namely, evidence suggests practitioners should consider the policy environment level (including the social safety net), the public discourse and perception level, and the individual farmworker level (e.g., individuals' capacities and access to information and resources) when designing and evaluating interventions.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified issues for US farmworkers that stem from multiple decades of neglect, invisibility to consumers, and systemic oppression, which created preconditions for farmworkers to disproportionately suffer. As Xiuhtecutli and Shattuck (2021) explain, "the social and spatial inequalities that have always put farmworkers at risk are the same conditions that have allowed COVID-19 to devastate farmworker communities" (p. 75). Given the challenges and opportunities discussed, specific needs exist to explore multifaceted systemic solutions, build on and strengthen existing efforts in Florida and beyond, and positively shift public perception and awareness.

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