

Background

Agriculture remains one of the most dangerous industries for occupational health and safety. Among agricultural workers, health disparities exist according to an assortment of factors. Per NAVS (2016), only 47% of workers reported having health insurance, with only 43% reporting that they received government-provided health insurance and 29% employer-provided health insurance. Also, access to health services remains a luxury for rural populations (RHHub, 2020). Rural areas ranked poorly on 21 of 23 selected population health indicators, including health behaviors, mortality, morbidity, and maternal and child health measures. This has triggered the curiosity of different researchers, including social epidemiologists and social scientists, to seek to understand how health disparities affect farmworkers' health outcome. What are the social determinants and the ways to overcome them. The present study aimed at answering the following four questions: 1) How do farm and forestry stakeholders located in the southeastern United States perceive the agricultural industry from an occupational health and safety standpoint? 2) How do they think their industry is trying to improve occupational health and safety? 3) What are the main barriers to implementing health and safety in their industry? 4) What measures do they think could be taken to ensure better health and safety for people working in their industry?



Farmworkers providing essential services in during Covid-19.
Image Credit: <https://healthequityberkeley.edu/news/farmworkers-keep-america-fed-midst-covid-19>

Research Methods

We used a qualitative semi-structured interview approach. We selected industry professionals (N=11) based on the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The respondents included extension agents, farmworker's advocates, forestry association's representatives, fruit and vegetable association's representatives, a worker safety program's representatives, growers, and farm labor contractors. The vast majority came from Florida (9/11). Also, 7 of them represented the farm industry and the remaining 4 were from the forestry sector. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform using an interview guide after securing approval from the University of Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We collected the data over one month period, followed the Yin's (2016) recommended analytical five stages, and applied the constant comparative method for the emergence of themes.

Research Findings

Overall, the findings revealed that agricultural workers are highly vulnerable when it comes to health and safety. The participants highlighted multiple factors that compound to contribute to occupational health and safety disparities among agricultural workers. These factors may be considered as barriers to promoting health and safety among agricultural workers. Below are some quotations from our interviews that represent some of the main themes that emerge relevant to health disparities among farmworkers.

"These guys, you know, if they get a cold, they don't go to the doctor, they want to work, they came here to make money. They make really good money when they're here, certainly, in comparison to what they are able to make where they came from."

"They might not be feeling very comfortable to show up in a clinic because they may be undocumented." Other workers, even with documentation, such as those working under the H2A system, may decline to purchase health insurance due to the cost.

"Some of the companies provide training, but they never verify that the people understand the training... They put a video and among the workers, you've got different language. But, we got issues with Creole while you see more Creole people, working in the industry. I got surprised. Two years ago, when I went to the farm. I never saw so many people with Creole and there is a bunch of people with Creole and they need education."

"We see workers who don't speak English. So, providing training opportunities for them in other languages outside of English would be ideal."

"I think we need policies that protect workers. Workers are being affected by poor health, poor housing, crowded housing, by lack of access to educational material, by heat. We need to come up with protection plan for workers. Oftentimes I feel like a lot of the laws are designed to protect growers from lawsuits but I think in doing that, we oftentimes also ask again why these protections are in place."



Farmworkers are often paid by the piece, incentivizing working long hours without breaking.
Image Credit: <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/blog/post/poor-wages-and-unsafe-working-conditions-for-farmworkers-about-covid-19/>

Conclusion

Health disparities continue to be a big issue in America and take a big toll on agricultural workers' occupational health and safety. Many interconnected factors, including immigration and economic status, discrimination and cultural attitudes of workers and supervisors, access to education and healthcare, and the prevailing regulatory context, determine the prevalence of health disparities. However, per the participants, all is not lost because there exist opportunities to reduce such disparities at every level of the agricultural industry given that all the agricultural stakeholders including policy and decision makers, farmers and farmworkers agree to adjust their ways of doing business. Further, the study revealed that culturally acceptable approaches to providing education, including delivering trainings in appropriate languages and preventive healthcare, such as training physicians to identify agriculture specific types of illness, represent an opportunity to reduce health disparities among farmworkers in the southeastern U.S. coastal states.



Preventive healthcare is one way to reduce health disparities for farmworkers.
Image Credit: <https://www.nursing.umary.edu/pages/farm-worker-welfare-daily-health-program>

Implications

These findings may have important implications for policy debates over Workers' compensation benefits in the agricultural industry. Also, they may guide decision makers, community leaders, and agricultural stakeholders, including extension services, advocacy groups, to shape their health and safety plans and strategies to find the best way possible to address health disparities in the agricultural industry.

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