

North Carolina's Migrant Farmworkers—An Essential Community Less Seen

George J. Hendrix

North Carolina's migrant workforce is a critical component of the state's economy, especially for agriculture. As such, during the COVID-19 pandemic migrant and seasonal farmworkers were deemed "essential workers" [1]. However, these workers, the majority of whom are Latino men [2], have faced significant challenges in following COVID-19 guidelines compared to others in the "essential" category, putting them at a much higher risk of contracting the virus. Difficulties such as often-substandard congregate housing and stressful, hazardous working environments, compounded by other preexisting barriers such as low English capabilities, income, and mobility, have contributed to making this demographic disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19. This phenomenon has previously been discussed in the context of natural disasters [3], but the extent of the impact of this specific public health disaster on these workers is especially disquieting. While much attention has been given and many actions were taken by the state to directly address the needs of migrant farmworkers during the pandemic, an abundance of research indicates that more efforts will be needed to not only better protect these workers during another disaster, but also to improve their standard of living in general.

North Carolina hosts the 6th-largest migrant farmworker population in the United States at an estimated 150,000 [2], and even before the outbreak of COVID-19 this substantial demographic faced persistent challenges. For example, despite legislation such as the 1989 Migrant Housing Act [4] and oversight by the North Carolina Department of Labor (NCDOL), studies indicate that migrant farmworkers' living conditions have not been strictly enforced to standard and are frequently in disrepair [5]. Similarly, a majority of these workers have reported overcrowding in provided sleeping quarters, communal areas, and sanitation facilities [6]. Whether due to fear based on documentation status, a lack of knowledge regarding NCDOL procedures, or simply the social structure within camps, farmworkers are often left conducting repairs and making accommodations themselves or negotiating individually with each employer

without institutional support [5].

On top of this, migrant farmworkers are affected by several other factors detrimental to their physical and mental well-being, notably occupational hazards, language barriers, food insecurity, and poor access to care [7]. These factors, combined with relative social isolation due to the nature of their work, yield significant levels of stress leading to anxiety and depression [8, 9]. It is important to consider that just as the difficulties faced by these workers have created challenges in taking preventive measures against the coronavirus, so too have the risks posed by the pandemic exacerbated an already strained quality of life.

Nonetheless, as this demographic has come to play such a critical role in the state's food supply, guidance specifically for migrant farmworkers and their employers was provided in both Spanish and English fairly soon after the initial pandemic Stay at Home Order [10]. In fact, bilingual outreach efforts to farmworker camps did leave workers with high levels of knowledge of both COVID-19 and respective safety precautions, as well as an understanding that the risks and severity of the virus were intensified by the limitations of their circumstances [11]. Policies and official guidance from state agencies took into consideration several of the factors mentioned previously and ranged from prevention planning to accommodations for quarantining and isolation [12, 13].

For instance, to ensure a best attempt at social distancing requirements, work and transportation schedules were to be completely rearranged to allow for smaller, separated cohorts of workers to limit exposure amongst a larger group. Food, supplies, and means of communicating with family were provided to any member suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 who needed to be isolated [12]. To supplement this, the state provided funding to furnish protective equipment for workers and noncongregate housing to better enable distancing requirements and facilitate isolation/quarantine [13]. Finally, migrant farmworkers were prioritized for both COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, with extensive efforts to ensure opportunities for access [13, 14].

Despite these supports, the structural and systemic aspects that define the experience of the migrant farmworker posed an unnecessary and unfortunate health risk from the onset of the pandemic—a time when seasonal agricultural work was beginning at scale while directives regarding COVID-19 were rapidly developing. The inability to stay and/or work in an uncrowded setting, language barriers to accessing initial critical information, and exclusion from safety nets and access to care were just a few obstacles faced by those in the community trying to achieve effective and informed self-prevention measures. After all, while an accurate account of COVID-19 cases specifically among migrant farmworkers is uncertain, the estimate from the governor's office that Hispanics and Latinos as a whole—only 10% of North Carolina's population—constituted 39% of all cases in the state reflects strongly on the subject [15].

Migrant farmworkers were categorized as part of the essential workforce during the pandemic with due justification, yet this community must be seen and treated as essential during times of health and safety in all intents and purposes of the word. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the needs and hurdles of these workers and the response by state and health authorities to address the impact of the coronavirus on them has shown promise in resolving these issues. From improving housing and work conditions to ensuring language equity in order to provide equal opportunity for prevention and recovery, it is necessary for this level of attention to migrant farmworkers to continue, not only to better prepare for a future disaster such as this, but for humane sustainability of this demographic's role in North Carolina as a whole. **NCMJ**

George J. Hendrix, BA advocacy director, Association of Mexicans in North Carolina, Inc. (AMEXCAN), Greenville, North Carolina.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. No disclosures were reported.

References

- Governor Roy Cooper. Executive Order No. 121. Stay at Home Order and Strategic Directives for North Carolina in Response to Increasing COVID-19 Cases. Office of the Governor; 2020. Published March 27, 2020. Accessed June 3, 2020. <https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/EO121-Stay-at-Home-Order-text.pdf>
- NC FAN. About Farmworkers. Farmworker Advocacy Network. Published 2021. Accessed June 4, 2021. <https://ncfan.org/resources/about-farmworkers/>
- Burke S, Bethel JW, Britt AF. Assessing disaster preparedness among Latino migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Eastern North Carolina. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2012;9(9):3115-3133. doi:10.3390/ijerph9093115
- Migrant Housing Act of North Carolina, N.C. Rev Stat § 95-222 (1989).
- Vallejos QM, Quandt SA, Grzywacz JG, et al. Migrant farmworkers' housing conditions across an agricultural season in North Carolina. *Am J Ind Med*. 2011;54(7):533-544. doi:10.1002/ajim.20945
- El Consejo de Iglesias de Carolina del Norte. Farmworkers & Health. Farmworker Advocacy Network. Published 2021. Accessed June 4, 2021. <https://ncfan.org/resources/farmworkers-health/>
- Heine B, Quandt SA, Arcury TA. "Aguantamos": limits to Latino migrant farmworker agency in North Carolina labor camps. *Hum Organ*. 2017;76(3):240-250. doi:10.17730/0018-7259.76.3.240
- Hiott AE, Grzywacz JG, Davis SW, Quandt SA, Arcury TA. Migrant farmworker stress: mental health implications. *J Rural Health*. 2008;24(1):32-39. doi:10.1111/j.1748-0361.2008.00134.x
- Kim-Godwin YS, Bechtel GA. Stress among migrant and seasonal farmworkers in rural Southeast North Carolina. *J Rural Health*. 2004;20(3):271-278. doi:10.1111/j.1748-0361.2004.tb00039.x
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Interim COVID-19 Recommendations for Farms, Packhouses, and Related Facilities Adapted from CDC/NIOSH Recommendations. NCDHHS; 2020. Published April 24, 2020. Accessed June 8, 2021. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/189/open>
- Quandt SA, LaMonte NJ, Mora DC, Talton JW, Laurienti PJ, Arcury TA. COVID-19 pandemic among Latinx farmworker and nonfarmworker families in North Carolina: knowledge, risk perceptions, and preventive behaviors. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020;17(16):5786. doi:10.3390/ijerph17165786
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Interim Guidance for Migrant Farmworkers and their Employers. NCDHHS; 2020. Published October 8, 2021. Accessed June 8, 2021. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/363/open>
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Supporting North Carolina's Farmworkers During COVID-19. NCDHHS; 2020. Published September 21, 2020. Accessed June 8, 2021. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/591/open>
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. COVID-19 Vaccination Plan for Farmworkers. NCDHHS; 2021. Published February 2021. Accessed June 8, 2021. <http://www.ncagr.gov/disaster/documents/documents/NCDHHSVaccineNoticeForFarmersandFarmLaborContractorsEnglish.pdf>
- Governor Roy Cooper. Executive Order No. 143: Addressing the Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color. Office of the Governor; 2020. Published June 4, 2020. Accessed June 3, 2021. <https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/EO143-Addressing-the-Disproportionate-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Communities-of-Color.pdf>

Electronically published September 20, 2021.

Address correspondence to George J. Hendrix, AMEXCAN, PO Box 2744, Greenville, NC 27836 (ghendrix@amexcann.org).

N C Med J. 2021;82(5):341-342. ©2021 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2021/82508