

Engaging Indigenous Farmworkers in Promoting Occupational Health and Safety

Agriculture ranks among the most dangerous industries in the United States. The 2015 fatal injury rate for agriculture, forestry, and fishing was the highest of any industrial sector, at 22.8 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers compared to 3.38 per 100,000 for all workers in the US.¹ Furthermore, an average of 160 agricultural workers per day suffer lost-work-time injuries, 5% of which result in permanent impairment.²

Fair, safe, and dignified working conditions are critical elements of a healthy, just, diverse, and resilient food system. Achieving these conditions depends on empowered workers who are able to advocate for their rights and for needed changes. The ultimate goal of this work is transformative change in the role workers play in agricultural systems, such that workers are engaged and feel that they have the self-efficacy and agency to advocate for themselves.

Objectives

1. Build the foundation for a sustainable and effective partnership among indigenous farmworkers, trusted indigenous organizations, and university researchers.
2. Assess indigenous farmworkers' and other stakeholders' perceptions and experiences about occupational health hazards, ability to take action, and challenges and opportunities for interventions.
3. Use findings from this formative research and partnership development phase to set the stage for an intervention research program that uses a theoretical framework of community-based participatory research, capacity building, and social network analysis.



Farmworkers in Oxnard, California. Photo by Alex Proimos.

Methods

- Focus groups with indigenous farmworkers: two in Spanish and one in Mixtec (32 participants total)
- In-depth interviews with indigenous leaders and community representatives: five interviews with staff from Frente Indígena Organización Binacional, California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc., Central California Legal Services, United Farm Workers, and Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño

Findings

Health hazards and problems in the field

Workers reported a range of health hazards, including: falling from ladders, getting cut from shears and tools, heat, poor quality tools and equipment, pesticides sprayed near workers, slipping and falling, stress, working at fast pace, sexual harassment, and verbal abuse.

Factors that influence risk

Individual and interpersonal factors:

- Accepting hazardous conditions as the norm
- Distrust of people outside the indigenous community
- Lack of unity within crews
- Fear of retaliation

Organizational and work site factors:

- Workers responsible for providing their own equipment (shears, gloves, boots, etc.)
- Lack of knowledge of indigenous languages
- Crew leader attitudes and discrimination
- Piece-rate system rewards fast work pace
- Lack of medical care if injured
- Enforcement of heat regulations (one focus group noted significant changes since Cal/OSHA began enforcing heat regulations)

Extent to which workers feel they can advocate for themselves

There was a strong sense of vulnerability and powerlessness among many of the workers. Issues such as immigration status, language, and a perceived scarcity of available work contributed to the workers feeling like they had little standing or recourse in the face of unsafe working conditions, harsh treatment, or unfair practices.

In each group, some workers shared stories of actions taken, for example, to clarify wages and payment before starting work, to demand higher wages, or to call Cal/OSHA when they lacked water. Factors that may influence workers' ability to take action include their length of time in US, belief in having experience needed by employers, training as community educators, and personality. Pay rate and wage theft were reported as the most important issues among workers.

Crew leaders' role in working conditions

Crew leaders play a critical role as a link between workers and contractors or growers. Many focus group participants felt that crew leaders often exhort employees

to work faster, have abusive attitudes, are not responsive to concerns, and are not well prepared for their role.

Conclusions and Implications

The themes raised in the formative research stage highlight the importance of multiple points of intervention in order to enhance the health and well-being of indigenous farmworkers effectively, including efforts to influence growers and labor contractors to improve working conditions. Implications for future interventions with workers include framing occupational health as a social justice issue, working with trusted community members, and addressing language needs. In terms of policy, adequate enforcement of labor and safety regulations is critical in influencing employer behavior and policies that incentivize training and professional development for crew leaders. The research team was successful in establishing a partnership and is pursuing follow-up research opportunities.

Research Team

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References

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