

# The Impact of COVID-19 on Farmworkers *With Special Focus on the Black Dirt Region (Orange County, NY)*

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## Abstract

This paper explores how COVID-19 has impacted farmworkers and demonstrates the way a community in the Mid-Hudson region of New York State, the Black Dirt area, has responded. It provides both a historical and sociological framing of the global systems of food production and a discussion of the vulnerabilities of H-2A workers. The main challenges seen in the Black Dirt region included crowded living conditions, fear of testing and/or sickness due to immigration status, financial instability, food insecurity, and transportation challenges.

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COVID-19 has highlighted both the critical role farmworkers play on a national and international scale, and the ways. These two edges of vulnerability and essentiality were seen in several populations over the last several months - the ways in which it shows up for farmworkers deserve special attention because the position of farmworkers is already very much embedded in a global context. Both large, industrialized farms and smaller family owned farms are involved in this global context because their workers are derived from a global labor pool, and their products are often shipped to a global market. The Black Dirt region in Orange County, New York provides an example of this small farm model, and understanding how COVID-19 impacted this community on a local level is valuable in the context of

global food production systems. Thus, a global pandemic affecting food production, labor supplies, and border requirements provides a highly pertinent lens to analyze how agricultural systems affect public health. My own experiences serving as an AmeriCorps member at Hudson River Healthcare/ Alamo Community Center for farmworkers in the Black Dirt region in 2018 also gave me a rich perspective on how this community has been affected in the current pandemic.

Physician-anthropologist Seth Holmes has written extensively on how the current food production system comes at the direct cost of the health of farmworkers (Holmes, 2013). Since the dawn of a global economy, it has always been the most vulnerable who provide the labor pool for

agriculture. Due to the United States' economic dominance over Central and South America, formally enacted by policies such as NAFTA/CAFTA, the majority of agricultural workers are foreign-born and come from Mexico (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2018). Holmes questions the ethics of a system where workers come to the United States to work, with not enough responsibility borne by the United States to care for them as human beings - many will return to their home countries once their bodies are too damaged to continue to work. For temporary agricultural workers on a seasonal visa known as H-2A, they are heavily dependent on their employers for all medical and social care needs and complete this circuit of migration yearly. The primary reason for the necessity of a vulnerable labor supply for food production is that agricultural work is back-breaking work with diminishing returns. This is because of a current global system that prioritizes producing cheap food over equitable standards of living. For immigrants from Latin America, farm work is often a pathway for entry into the United States. Additionally, there are often no viable alternatives to make a living in workers' home countries (Holmes, 2013). This means that even with the harsh physical demands of agricultural work and low wages in the United States, migration for farm work remains an option for those who are already most desperate in their country of origin.

There are approximately 2.7 million farmworkers in the US, half of whom lack legal status (USDA ERS). Thus, poverty,

uncertain legal status and migration pile on top of the harsh physical demands of farm work – resulting in direct damage to the health of farmworkers. Certainly, there has been legislation to protect farmworkers, most notable of which is the Migrant Health Act of 1962, and which was the precursor to the modern-day community health center model for all underserved populations. Yet, even with federal and state protections in place, farmworkers continue to experience poorer health outcomes, food insecurity, and barriers to accessing care (Ramos, 2017; Minkoff, 2014). Understanding local level barriers, such as in those experienced by farmworkers in the Black Dirt region, give insight into where these legislative actions may have fallen short.

Several media outlets including National Public Radio and the New York Times have reported extensively on the plight of farmworkers in California, which is a state with one of the largest farmworker populations in the country (Doubek, 2020; Sengupta, 2020). High numbers of COVID positive cases amongst farmworkers, lack of adequate protective gear, and barriers to accessing testing and care have all contributed to the strain on farmworkers and their families. The recent wildfires have only exacerbated the situation in California's agricultural region, especially because farmworkers have been documented to already have a higher burden of respiratory diseases due to increased pesticide exposure (Linker & Smedley, 2002).

### **COVID-19 in the Black Dirt Region**

The Black Dirt Region, located in the mid-Hudson Valley in Orange County, New York, is a unique place with several generations of farming immigrants. It is famous for its highly fertile soil which is particularly well suited to onion production. In the 1960s, the labor force of Black Dirt region was primarily made up of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, and in the decades that followed it started to be largely made up of immigrants from Latin America, the highest proportion of whom are from Mexico (Cashman 2019). In addition to onions, the Black Dirt region produces various vegetables and fruits. Currently, most of the workers are permanent residents that spend the summer and part of the fall working in the fields, and take on odd jobs in fields such as construction and landscaping for the rest of the year. Many farmworkers have American born children but lack legitimate legal status themselves. There is also a population of migrant workers who are on an H-2A visa, a temporary visa which allows workers to come to the United States to work for a season. Each of these groups had slightly different challenges in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The narrative described below is drawn from speaking with Katherine Brieger, director of patient experience for Hudson River Healthcare (HRHCare), a federally qualified community health center with branches all over New York State. HRHCare provides care for approximately 9,000 farmworkers in all of New York. In the Black Dirt region, it is partnered with the Alamo

Community Center, which offers a food pantry, youth enrichment programs and various other forms of support. The farming season typically runs from May to September. H-2A workers arrive at different times throughout the year, but a large majority arrives in May. While H-2A workers were tested for COVID-19 in their countries of origin, they often had to take multiple bus rides to arrive at their final destination. There were workers who became sick on the journey to New York, and it was a challenge for farmers to isolate these workers because they often live together in a communal facility. This presents the first key challenge in containing COVID-19 spread - all H-2A workers and many permanent resident workers are provided housing by their employers. Thus, containing the spread of COVID-19 also falls into the domain of farm owners. Housing for H-2A farmworkers varies - it can be a standalone house with up to twenty-five men, dormitory-style housing with beds, or multiple mobile homes in the fields. In each case, isolating men who showed symptoms of sickness proved a challenge and often caused tensions between workers. Providing proper face coverings and other protective equipment also proved a challenge due to lack of resources, though farmers and local community organizations banded together to amass face masks. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued guidelines on proper COVID-19 protocols rather than requiring agricultural employers to implement protections. Additionally, these guidelines came in June, while the peak of

the pandemic was in April and May in the Black Dirt region (OSHA National News Release, 2020). Having adequate masks has also been documented to be a problem in California counties, coupled with the fact that farmworkers on fruit and vegetable farms are often working in the scorching heat for long hours (Thompson, 2020). Compared to temporarily H-2A workers, permanent resident workers often live in groups of two or three families sharing one apartment or floor of a house. This noticeably increases the amount of people that would come into contact with a potentially symptomatic person.

Even one person falling ill and being unable to work puts the family's ability to stay afloat in jeopardy. According to a 2019 report by the Cornell Cooperative Extension, the average income of farmworkers in New York State is \$38,250 (Stup et al 2019). Farm work is often hourly wage or per weight wage labor (eg a rate set for picking a certain weight of crops), so missed wages for being sick have a significant impact. Due to nearly half of farmworkers nationally being undocumented, many are not eligible for safety net programs and were not eligible for the economic relief offered by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Having even one family member without a Social Security number disqualified families from receiving relief (COVID-19 Impact on Farmworkers, 2020). Furthermore, the food insecurity and low nutritional status of farmworkers has been well documented. Ironically, farmworkers are often not able to afford the

fresh fruits and vegetables that they themselves grow to sell, a phenomenon that has been called the "farmworker paradox" (Perelman, 2003; Minkoff, 2013). Brieger stated that to her knowledge, no farmworkers had been served by the CARES Act. To help alleviate some of this burden, the Alamo community organized to deliver several boxes of food at the homes of farmworkers.

As for many Americans, schools being closed starting in mid-March made childcare for young children a challenge. Many local farmworkers send children from the ages of 2 months to 5 years old to the local Agri-Business Child Development (ABCD) care center, a daycare center and pre-school established in 1946 by New York State growers associations with support from faith-based groups. The two local ABCD's were no longer able to provide transportation for children, and some farmworkers found it difficult to drive their children to this program. This may be due to lack of access to cars and also because driving is seen as a risk by farmworkers who lack proper legal status documentation or driver's licenses. This meant more older siblings were tasked with taking care of younger ones, while also juggling their own transition to a virtual learning setting. The overlap of summer vacations for children and peak working seasons for farmworker parents has always proved challenging. The Warwick Area Migrant Committee (WAMC) along with other community organizations has thus worked to provide a summer camp for approximately 200 children for the past

several years. This year, the summer camp teachers went out to farms to provide activities and engagement for children while observing social distancing practices.

Fear of deportation if immigration status was asked for or if workers were deemed unfit to work due to a positive test result were major deterrents to accessing care in the beginning of the pandemic. There was also a fear of ability to pay for testing among H-2A workers, who were not familiar with New York State's free testing options or HRHCare's structure of a sliding fee scale (highly subsidized payments based on income) and waived fees for those unable to pay. New York State's initial testing sites in the region would not have been accessible to the Black Dirt region H-2A workers because the closest site to open was still about 30 minutes away by car, and most H-2A workers do not have cars. However, concerted health education and outreach efforts helped alleviate these fears and HRHCare was able to conduct 8,000 screenings and 400 tests on farmworkers on farms through their mobile van program.

### **Policy Implications**

Fears of uncertain immigration status, lack of worker protections, hourly wage-based labor, crowded living conditions and the essential, time-sensitive nature of agricultural work all have made this population especially vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, their designation as "essential workers" has been brought into contrast with the way undocumented immigrants are routinely

narrativized in the media as "taking away jobs from native-born Americans." The Department of Homeland Security issued a memorandum declaring agricultural workers among those considered "essential workers" (Dept. of Homeland Security, 2020). A New York Times article described this irony through the case of a particular farmworker, saying "Ms. Silva, who has spent much of her life in the United States evading law enforcement, now carries a letter from her employer in her wallet, declaring that the Department of Homeland Security considers her "critical to the food supply chain" (Jordan, 2020). In contrast to their popularized hard line on immigration, the federal and local government kept the pipeline for agricultural workers open knowing full well the threat to food security possible if that labor force were disrupted (Garcia-Colon, 2020). In fact, the amount of workers coming in through the H-2A farmworker program was higher than ever before, up 20% from March 2019. As of August 20th, 2020, the Department of Homeland Security added increased flexibility into the H-2A program to extend the total time workers are allowed to stay in the country. This measure was put into effect to "ensure that agricultural employers have access to the orderly and timely flow of legal foreign workers, thereby protecting the integrity of the nation's food supply chain and decreasing possible reliance on unauthorized aliens" (Dept. of Homeland Security, 2020). Firstly, this does not address the root problem of why agricultural work has not been a sustainable option for most

domestic workers. Additionally, this is only making H-2A workers more vulnerable because they will now spend more time living and working in the United States in a system where their health is being put at risk. As seen in the case from the Black Dirt region, H-2A workers were more vulnerable to unsafe living conditions due to their housing, transportation and legal status all being tied to their employer. It has been long suggested that the structure of the H-2A program means H-2A guest workers are also less likely to speak out against unsafe conditions due to fear of their employment being put in jeopardy (Holley, 2000).

The designation of farmworkers as “essential workers” bestowed legal protections on them, but this did not necessarily manifest as tangible support in practice. When considering federal legislation that were put into place during the pandemic, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) allowed for up to 80 hours of paid sick leave for those who have worked for their employer for at least 30 days and have fewer than 500 employees. Under this, farmworkers (both documented and undocumented) as well as H-2A workers would be eligible. However, small business with under 50 workers can apply for exemption from this rule due to possibility of significantly jeopardizing their operations or risking major financial loss by paying workers for sick leave (Rural Migration News, 2020). The majority of the farms in the Black Dirt region have fewer than 50 employees and would thus qualify for this exemption. Katherine Brieger shared that to

her knowledge, workers had not received paid sick days. This could possibly be due to lack of enforcement of Department of Labor regulations or lack of awareness amongst employees.

As seen in the case study above, while it was federal agencies enacting policies for the protection of the food production system and farmworkers, many of the challenges experienced by Black Dirt region farmworkers during this time were alleviated by local community and non-profit organizations. While this is undoubtedly laudable, the health and security of those who are the backbone of the food production system should not rely on goodwill. It should be a national priority to develop equitable and effective systems to care for farmworkers - not just in the desperation of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to protect the nation’s food supply, but because it is a moral imperative to ensure that the people who grow our food are not risking their health and living in poverty to do so.

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