

# Pandemic Impacts on Florida Farmworkers: Emerging Takeaways to Inform Outreach and Policymaking<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

While the food supply chain relies on the tasks farmworkers perform to provide food for American families (Arcury & Quandt, 2007; Koreishi, 2010), the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has revealed new and existing health, social, and economic disparities faced by the United States (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 we have seen for many other health-vulnerable groups, the pandemic has emphasized how decades of social and economic marginalization and under-valorization of farmworkers continue today and have 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 discuss both new challenges for farmworkers directly linked to COVID-19 and ways in which historic inequities and disparities have manifested and affected farmworkers 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 (Mutic 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

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masks (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021). Farmworkers are also commonly excluded from the social and labor protections 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). Complicating this constrained access to medical care is the lack of translation services and cultural awareness by 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 Latinx 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 Unsel (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, Unsel claims that some of the worst virus outbreaks have been among H-2A workers.

**Political and social blame and marginalization:** Before COVID-19, farmworkers long faced social barriers related to language, culture, and educational access. This marginalization has only increased in the pandemic amid the current immigration discourse. Moreover, influential politicians' anti-immigrant rhetoric and attacks against immigrants, minorities, and refugees have fueled hostility and even hate crimes against farmworkers (Medel-Herrero et al., 2021). The public discourse often promotes a narrative that farmworker communities are a burden to the American economy (e.g., "farmworkers take away jobs"), obscuring farmworkers' actual economic contributions (Areguin et al., 2020).

## How to Make Change: Actions to Reframe and Strengthen Support for Farmworkers

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 invaluable role that farmworkers play in the US food system and society. Efforts are needed to combat political and discriminatory rhetoric to build respect and empathy rather than "othering" and blaming. 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. An advantage of collaborating with these established groups is the trust and relationships they may already have built with Florida farmworkers. 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 support farmworkers 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 aims to push the boundaries of Extension beyond traditional white, English-speaking communities by translating content and partnering with local organizations to better meet the needs of Hispanic and Latino clientele in Florida (UF at Work, 2021).

- **Increase farmworkers’ awareness of rights and benefits:**

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 was to illustrate that although the pandemic has exacerbated injustices and inequities faced by farmworkers, these challenges have been decades in the making. Thus, quick, easy fixes will have little impact for entrenched and complex issues. We call for *systems change* approaches that address multiple levels of the system that constrain and burden 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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