

Stress among farmworkers of Mexican descent in the Northwest United States

Josephine Saltmarsh, Maternal & Child Health Program, Dept. of Health Services, University of Washington

joephin@u.washington.edu



Background

- > 5 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers employed annually in U.S.
- Majority are immigrants and of Mexican descent.
- Migrant workers move from one locale to another. Seasonal workers live in one place year-round and work on a seasonal basis.
- Workers are exposed to chemicals, pesticides, dangerous machinery and frequently do not have access to medical or social services.
- Work is frequently unpredictable and low-paying and workers are often exploited and discriminated against.
- Farmworkers of Mexican descent face many potential 'stressors', however little is known about the perception and impact of stress in this population.

Research Objectives

- Describe stressors reported by adult farmworkers of Mexican descent.
- Explore relationship of different stressors to demographics and other personal characteristics.
- Explore relationship of different stressors to mental health concerns and trauma.

Sample Characteristics

- 299 farmworkers: 145 male and 154 female.
- 11 locations in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.
- Majority reported were married or living with partner.
- Average of 2 children, range of 0 to 8 children.
- 53% earned ≤ \$12,000 a year, 18% earned > \$12,000.
- 96% born in Mexico (mainly in Oaxaca and Michoacan).
- 95% identified as Mexican, 3% as Mexican American, .01% as Chicano.
- 82% speak mostly in Spanish, 1% in English, 5% Trique, 6% Mixteco.
- Lived in U.S. for average of 7.4 years, range of 1 month to 32 years.

Methods

- Used data from a previous PNASH study
- Participants were asked 6 questions about particular stresses including:
 - Health worries
 - Difficulties with their partner
 - Stress at work or at school
 - Financial problems or worries
 - No one to turn to when have a problem
 - A recent bad event.
- Analysis (Pearson Chi-Square) of associations between demographic characteristics and stress.
- Analysis of associations between stress and a mental health diagnosis.
- Analysis of associations between stress and sexual assault and domestic violence among the women.
- Analysis of responses to the question, "What is the most stressful thing in your life right now?"

Results

Stressors

Stressor	Not bothered	Bothered a little	Bothered a lot
Health worries	56%	33%	11%
Partner difficulties	82	10	8
Work/school stress	85	11	4
Financial worries	61	29	10
Lack of support	72	20	8
Recent bad event	88	5	5

Table 1: Percent of workers who reported feeling "not bothered", "bothered a little", or "bothered a lot" by six stressors.

Associations

Demographics	Stressor	Mental Health Concern
Older age (>40), more children	Health worries	Depression, Anxiety, SA
--	Partner difficulties	Depression, Anxiety, Alcohol, SA, DV
More children, Mexican identity	Work/school stress	Depression, SA, DV
State, more children	Financial worries	Depression, Alcohol, SA, DV
Camp, female gender	Lack of support	Depression, Anxiety, SA, DV
--	Recent bad event	Depression, SA, DV

Table 2: Statistically significant associations between demographic characteristics and stressors and stressors and a mental health diagnosis or a report of sexual assault (SA)/ domestic violence (DV). Stress classification: "not bothered or bothered a little" to "bothered a lot".

Self-identified stressors

In response to the question, "What is the most stressful thing in your life right now?", 32% responded "nothing." Many people cited *work*, the lack of work and the lack of stable work as stressful. A significant number of workers reported their *family or children* as stressors and others reported that they were stressed about being *separated from their family members*, including their children, partners and parents. Respondents also indicated that they were worried about their *health* or the health of a significant. A number of respondents reported *financial problems* and the relationship with their *partners* as stressful.

Conclusions

- Majority of workers reported little or no stress. This may indicate resilience in this population or may reflect flaws in the questions.
- Few workers reported being "bothered" by work/school stress, however the majority identified work as the most stressful thing in their life.
- The results confirm previously documented associations between stress and mental health concerns and trauma.
- Study substantiates the need to develop programs and policy that aim to improve the working and living conditions of farmworkers of Mexican descent, increase their income and access to social services, and work to reunite separated family members.
- More research, using qualitative methods is needed to explore the self-identified stressors in this population.

