

“They say we are Criminals”: The Stress, Fears, and Hopes of Migrant Dairy Workers as a Result of US Immigration Policies

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Farm Workers in America

There are approximately 3 million seasonal and migrant farm workers in the United States (US) (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2012). Over the recent years, there has been a slight decline in the number of undocumented immigrants, however, they make up nearly 47 percent of the estimated 2.4 million farmworkers (Hernandez, Gabbard, Carrol, 2016).

Accounting for ranging estimates, the number of undocumented farm workers somewhere from 1.1-1.7 million farmworkers (U.S. Department of Labor’s National Agricultural Worker’s Survey, 2016). Immigrant workers, regardless of legal status, are a driving force in both the migrant and seasonal farm workers. This includes meat processing facilities, crop production, and dairy production (Andock, Anderson, Rosson, 2015).



Source: (Craig Walker, 2017)

Migrant dairy workers are an increasingly vulnerable population due to their hazardous working conditions, and more recently, the increase in anti-immigration policies, enforcement strategies, and deportations.

The purpose of this study was to better understand how this already vulnerable population was impacted by the increase in restrictive immigration policies and immigration enforcement by examining the existing literature about the health and wellbeing of migrant dairy workers, the current anti-immigrant climate, and the experiences and perceptions of migrant dairy workers.

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Undocumented immigrants are looked at negatively, since they are wrongly perceived as a cost and burden to the United States. Even though both state and local governments often collect more in tax revenues than what is spent providing services for undocumented immigrants, the false narrative that undocumented immigrants are costing the US money, is pushed to create tough immigration laws.

In dairy farms, more than half of the workers are immigrants (CNAS, 2015). The exact numbers are 76,968 workers of 150,418 (CNAS, 2015). Without immigrant workers in this field, studies have found that the price of milk would go up by 90 percent, exemplifying how important the contribution of migrant dairy workers is to the US economy and labor force (Becerra, 2019; CNAS, 2015). Despite the increase in anti-immigrant sentiment, policies, and the fact that most migrant dairy workers are immigrants, few studies have been conducted regarding how anti-immigrant policies impact immigrant dairy workers (Baker & Chappelle, 2012; Harrison & Lloyd, 2012).

The hazardous work environment of a US dairy worker makes agricultural and dairy work, among the most dangerous occupations. The risks associated with dairy work include, being kicked or crushed by cattle, but also skin complications, strains, sprains, and other musculoskeletal issues Baker & Chappelle, 2012; Kandel, 2008; McCurdy & Carroll, 2000), as well as asthma and bronchitis as a result of breathing the organic dust from animal feed (May, 2009). In addition, migrant dairy workers are at risk for mental health issues (Becerra, 2019). Increased levels of depression and anxiety attributed to inadequate housing, language barriers, decrease in social-networks, and isolation that can accompany being a migrant worker was also discovered in past studies (Grzywacz, 2009).

The undocumented status of some dairy workers, although a civil offense, comes with stressors due to immigration enforcement and criminalization (Harrison & Lloyd, 2012). On top of the physical health conditions previously mentioned, mental health issues like depression and anxiety are an added challenge undocumented migrant workers face (Harrison & Lloyd, 2012). Undocumented immigrants are looked at negatively, since they are wrongly perceived as a cost and burden to the United States. Even though both state and local governments often collect more in tax revenues than what is spent providing services for undocumented immigrants, the false narrative that undocumented immigrants are costing the US money, is pushed to create tough immigration laws (Becerra, 2019). Which contributes to an anti-immigration sentiment.

In the past, being a migrant worker entailed being able to migrate legally in and out of the US yearly, depending on the harvesting seasons. For those who were doing it without documentation, it was a lot easier to go back and forth through the Southern border. Now, with the militarized Mexican American border, migrant workers are choosing to stay in America, rather than risk not being able to return to the US to work the next harvest season. Instead of returning to their families back home, migrant workers bring their families to the US. Unfortunately, undocumented migrant families living in the US face emotional stressors due to the continuous threat of family separation, deportation, and being detected. These threats can also drive undocumented migrant workers to isolate further to avoid detection and deportation.



Current anti-immigrant policies along with anti-immigration sentiment directly impact migrant dairy workers, especially those migrant dairy workers who are undocumented. With the growing perceived discrimination among Latino's combined with the knowledge that discrimination and its correlation with poor physical and mental health; make it a necessity to examine risk and protective factors related to restrictive immigration policies and enforcement impact migrant dairy workers (Araújo & Borrell, 2006; Pulido, 2007; Lassetter & Callister, 2009; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).



Source: (Coburn Dukehart, 2017)

The Participants

The data for this study were collected in two separate dairies in Northern Colorado during the fall of 2010. The sample consisted of 14 individuals, of those 3 were women. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 30, the mean age was 33. There was one participant from Honduras, one from Guatemala, and the remaining 12 were from Mexico. The mean length of time living in the US was 7.5 years. Participants reported an income ranging from \$10,000 to \$29,000.

Measures

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited from two dairies in Northern Colorado in the fall of 2010. Potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study verbally and in writing regarding confidentiality, that participation was completely voluntary, and that they could choose to stop the interviews at any time. Once the supervisors at the dairy sites approved the research, participants volunteered to partake in an in-depth interview at the dairy sites. The participants filled out on a short demographic questionnaire. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and took about an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A research team of three, analyzed and transcribed the interviews.

Analysis

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed in Spanish for analysis. The interview data was coded for analysis using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The team reached a consensus of coding schemes, categories, and themes. Coding of the interview entailed four different parts. (1) Discovering, identifying, and labeling distinct activities or ideas; (2) Creating categories of identified activities or ideas and then grouping concepts that represent the same or similar phenomena; (3) naming or labeling the created categories; and, (4) developing the properties, dimensions, conditions, and characteristics which constitute the identified categories.

Perceived Discrimination

"[The laws are] very bad, very racist because they say that we are criminals. I believe that there are undocumented Hispanics that are criminals but that's not all of us. And well they say that everyone, and well there are exceptions, but we dedicate ourselves solely to work, not being out in the street, and the kids to school. My son goes to school and home, and in the evening, he goes out with us to get groceries, or like I told you out to eat somewhere, or to visit some friend, but he always goes with us. And so then when you hear that we're all delinquents well no, I don't think it's fair."

Stress

"When one comes to work at night one is stressed. Because you're coming at night and it's full of police and I don't know. So, then you have to come, even if you're watching your speed, even if you're guarding your distance, even if you're driving well you're stressed because at any moment you can get detained."

Findings

After examining how migrant dairy workers were impacted by restrictive immigration policies and increased immigration, the major categories developed by the research team, after examining how migrant dairy workers were impacted by restrictive immigration policies and increased immigration enforcement were 1) fear, 2) stress, 3) perceptions of discrimination. In addition, a major category emerged which demonstrated the hope and resilience of participants in the face of an increasingly difficult socio-political environment. The hope and resilience was reported despite the persistent daily fear of police and being deported back to their home counties. Feelings of stress and anxiety were reported, given the anti-immigrant prevalence that was present in the US at the time the interview was conducted. This finding supports other studies that found stress and anxiety to be produced when fear of deportation and enforced immigration policies coexist. The participants felt that the immigration legislation across the country, represented anti-immigrant sentiments in the US and the discrimination of Latino immigrants. Despite the environment and the anti-immigrant sentiment of the country, participants were hopeful for themselves or their families.

Fear

The migrant's fear of deportation of loved ones or themselves stems from immigration policies and their enforcement (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). A participant in the study demonstrated his daily and constant fear of deportation: Participant 7: *I would just see a policeman and I would hide because I thought that he was coming for me. Right now, what I am seeing for example is very ugly with the families where they take away the mom or they take away the dad, and they leave the children here.*

Stress

Knowing that being apprehended, detained, and deported at any given time does create a sense of anxiety and stress among the participants interviewed. Participant 1: *When one comes to work at night one is stressed. Because you're coming at night and it's full of police and I don't know. So, then you have to come, even if you're watching your speed, even if you're guarding your distance, even if you're driving well you're stressed because at any moment you can get detained.*

Perceived Discrimination

It is no secret to the participants that the new immigration legislation are a representation of the anti-immigrant sentiments in the country. Participant 8: *[The laws are] very bad, very racist because they say that we are criminals. I believe that there are undocumented Hispanics that are criminals but that's not all of us. And well they say that everyone, and well there are exceptions, but we dedicate ourselves solely to work, not being out in the street, and the kids to school. My son goes to school and home, and in the evening, he goes out with us to get groceries, or like I told you out to eat somewhere, or to visit some friend, but he always goes with us. And so then when you hear that we're all delinquents well no, I don't think it's fair.*

Hope and Resiliency

Participants discussed strategies to cope with the fear and anxiety anti-immigration policies have created. Participant 13: *With my daughter and my wife I go to a park that's near my house. And I get out to, to distract myself. To forget about the stress.*

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Discussion

The results highlighted issues that dairy migrant dairy workers experience due to anti-immigration policies. In addition to the hazardous working conditions that can harm their physical health, migrant dairy workers have their mental health at risk because of the negative impact anti-immigration policies have on them. These issues may be exacerbated because migrant dairy workers often do not have health insurance, or access to mental health professionals. This study analyzed just how migrant dairy workers are being affected, specifically by the anti-immigration policies and sentiment across the country. As previously reported, participants reported fear of deportation for themselves or a loved one due to immigration policies and enforcement (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). This proved to be true when participants expressed fear for themselves or loved ones when immigration laws were passed outside of Colorado, like the SB1070 law in Arizona. Clearly the participants in Colorado were not being target directly, but it still caused direct fear of deportation. When law enforcement began to enforce immigration policy, the racial profiling of all Latinos, regardless of immigration status, also as a whole increased (Nier, Gaertner, Nier, & Dovidio, 2012). Migrant dairy workers, and other seasonal and migrant workers are important to the US economy. Given the current shortage in migrant workers, it is now more crucial to ensure their needs are being met, is in the greater interest of society. Even for the participants with great resiliency, it important to note that stress and anxiety for a prolonged time can have negative health consequences. Not to mention that discrimination alone is associated with poor physical and mental health (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Cavazos-Rehget al., 2007; Ding & Hargraves, 2009 ; Finch et al., 2001; Gallo, Jiménez, Shivpuri, Espinosa de Los Monteros, & Mills, 2010 Lassetter & Callister, 2009; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

Implications for Social Work

The negative consequences of anti-immigrant policies and political rhetoric affecting migrant dairy workers, not only impacts them, but their families as well. In cases when one or both parents are deported, the lives of children are flipped upside down. These children often experience both negative behavioral and mental health consequences like fear, anxiety, stress, changes in eating and sleeping and a decline in academic grades (Baum, 2010; Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chaundry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012). Social worker's need to not only advocate for families and the members that are affected, but also advocate for change in immigration policies that cause harm to families and communities. The mission of the social work profession is to promote social Justice and social change on behalf of oppressed and vulnerable populations (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2008). Social workers abide by the NASW standards (NASW, 2008). It is time that this ignored population is seen and treated humanely like the NASW calls for. The research pertaining to migrant workers has been extremely limited, thus further research should be done to determine needs of migrant workers and propose interventions to meet those needs. It is time the invisible population becomes visible.

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