

Overview

Agricultural workers are an integral part of our food system, yet they experience health and social inequities rooted in structural racism. This study sought to describe the perspectives of agricultural workers on how labor and social policies affects their work environment and health. In this qualitative study, we interviewed agricultural workers in Washington State from February–March 2023.

Thirty-two Latino agricultural workers participated in the study, half were female and over half had 10+ years of experience working in agriculture. We identified three themes: 1) differential implementation of labor laws, 2) agricultural workers experience mistreatment at work, and 3) agricultural workers face barriers accessing healthcare and workers' compensation due to marginalization.

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This work was supported in part by the UW Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences ERC NIOSH Training Grant (T42OH008433) and the UW Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies.

Supporting Underserved Workers through Collaborative Research

The Work Equity Research Center (WERC) is a part of the SHARP Program. It's purpose is to work with communities to co-create research projects and develop solutions to improve work-related outcomes for historically and currently underserved workers. Learn more at: <https://www.lni.wa.gov/WERC>

Research Findings

Work conditions, labor policies, and health among Latino agricultural workers

"A veces no aguantas lo pesado que es el trabajo": A qualitative study on work conditions, labor and social policies, and health among Latino agricultural workers in Washington State

SSM - Qualitative Research in Health, 2025

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Key Findings

- Starting in 2018, WA passed legislation to require all employers in WA to provide paid sick leave to employees. However, participants shared that employers did not always allow workers to use earned paid sick leave, employers did not accurately record workers' earned sick hours, and/or retaliated against workers for asking about or using their sick leave hours.
- WA passed legislation in July 2021 to phase-in overtime pay to agricultural workers by 2024. However, participants described how employers found ways to avoid paying overtime by reducing workers' weekly hours and/or hiring additional workers. As a result, participants were paid lower wages due to the shorter hours worked.
- Most participants shared that they or their coworkers were negatively impacted by nepotism, had experienced verbal harassment, and/or mistreatment at work. This mistreatment led to anxiety, feelings of depression, and not feeling valued at work among participants.
- Participants expressed the lack of health insurance options, cost, language barriers, mistreatment and discrimination by medical and clinic staff, and lack of doctors and medical appointments in rural areas as being barriers they experienced in trying to access health care.

Impact

Our findings offer insight into opportunities to intervene and implement policy changes to improve labor standards and access to health care for agricultural workers. State policymakers should address enforcing labor policies, like overtime and sick leave laws. States and other industries looking to implement similar laws should identify alternative solutions so that all workers, including agricultural workers, can benefit equitably from these policy changes.

Find the article here:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2024.100507>