



Center for Worker Health

Wake Forest School of Medicine

POLICY BRIEF

Mental Health of Latinas in Farmworker Families and Latina Farmworkers

Summary

Mental health is important to everyone's quality of life. The effects of poor mental health go beyond individuals to affect their families, their friends, and their ability to be productive at work. Women's mental health is a particular concern because of women's role in the care and nurturing of families and children. The mental health of women in vulnerable communities, such as migrant and seasonal farmworkers, is affected by their limited resources and by the demands of their domestic and paid work. The investigators conducted two separate studies. Study 1 examined the mental health of Latinas who were members of farmworker families. Study 2 examined the mental health of Latinas employed as farmworkers and compared them with Latinas who were not farmworkers. These analyses showed that Latinas in farmworker families and Latina farmworkers had relatively high levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. They did not exhibit behaviors suggesting alcohol abuse or dependence. Concrete steps are needed to address the mental health of Latina in the farmworker community, and to continue documentation of mental health in this population.

Why does it matter?

Poor mental health affects the well-being of women, and their ability to care for children and other family members. It affects their ability to address their domestic and paid employment responsibilities. Poor mental health is recognized for all segments of the US population, but limited resources are available to address mental health. The problem of limited mental health care resources is amplified among the members of vulnerable communities, such as migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Farmworkers seldom have health insurance to pay for mental health services, they have limited incomes to pay for these services, clinics serving farmworkers often do not have the resources to provide mental health care, and the number of Spanish speaking mental health care providers is limited.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted two separate studies.

Study 1: In 2012-2013, the researchers conducted interviews with 220 Latinas who were in farmworker families (at least one adult member of the family was employed as a farmworker), and who had a child between 3 and 5 years of age. The interviews included questions that measured stress and depressive symptoms.

Study 2: In 2012, the researchers conducted interviews with 35 Latinas employed as farmworkers and 60 Latinas who were not employed as farmworkers and who were not the members of farmworker families. The interviews included questions that measured stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and risk of alcohol dependence.



Research for this policy brief is reported in several research papers listed at the end of this document.

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What did the researchers find?

Study 1: Latinas in farmworker families

- **Latinas in farmworker families had high levels of stress and depressive symptoms.**
 - One-quarter (25.4%) had elevated stress levels.
 - Almost one-third (31.2%) had significant depressive symptoms, compared to 9.3% of the US adult female population, and 11.4% of the general Hispanic population.
- **Factors related to mental health among Latinas in farmworker families**
 - Being in a migrant farmworker family increased the risk for elevated depressive symptoms, compared to being a seasonal farmworker family. (Migrant farmworkers change their place of residence for employment in agriculture; seasonal farmworkers do not change residence for this employment.)

Study 2: Latinas employed as farmworkers

- **Latinas employed as farmworkers had high levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms**
 - Latina farmworkers' average stress score was 27.7, compared to 17.2 for employed and 16.9 for unemployed Latina non-farmworkers who participated in the study.
 - The average anxiety score of the Latina farmworkers was 61.9, compared to 54.9 for employed and 52.9 for unemployed Latina non-farmworkers.
 - 28.6% of Latinas employed as farmworkers had elevated depressive symptoms, compared to 11.7% of other Latinas who participated in the study. The percentage of Latina farmworkers with significant depressive symptoms was greater than the percentage in the US adult female population (9.3%) or the general Hispanic population (11.4%).
 - Very few of these women, whether farmworkers or non-farmworkers, reported behaviors suggesting alcohol abuse or dependence.
- **Factors related to mental health among Latinas employed as farmworkers**
 - Stress was significantly higher among all Latinas (those employed as farmworkers and those not employed as farmworkers) aged less than 45 years compared to older women.
 - Stress was significantly higher among all Latinas with fewer than 12 years of education compared to those with more formal education.
 - Personal characteristics (e.g., age, education) considered in the analysis were not related to anxiety or depressive symptoms among the Latinas.

Recommendations

Concrete steps are needed to address what is known about the mental health of Latina farmworkers, and to document further the mental health problems and factors causing mental health problems among these women.

- Clinics providing care to Latina farmworkers need to be aware of the high levels of mental health distress these women experience; they should assess and treat their mental health distress in accordance with best clinical practices.
- Clinic outreach workers and lay health advisors need to help Latina farmworkers develop behavioral strategies to improve their mental health.
- Organizations providing farmworker services need to consider providing programs and other support to mitigate the stress experienced by Latina farmworkers.
- Clinical and outreach mental health services should be provided in linguistically and culturally appropriate formats.
- Research is needed that documents the intersection of the mental health, domestic responsibilities, organization of work, and workplace occupational and interpersonal hazards of Latina farmworkers. This research can inform clinical practice, and public health and occupational health policies.

Research Papers

- Arcury TA, Trejo G, Suerken CK, Grzywacz JG, Ip EH, Quandt SA. 2015. Work and health among Latina mothers in farmworker families. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 57:292-99.
- Arcury TA, Sandberg JC, Talton JB, Laurienti PJ, Daniel SS, Quandt SA. 2018. Mental health among Latina farmworkers and other employed Latinas in North Carolina. *Journal of Rural Mental Health* in press.
- Pulgar CA, Trejo G, Suerken CK, Ip EH, Arcury TA, Quandt SA. 2016. Economic hardship and depression among women in Latino farmworker families. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 18:497-504.