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Farmworker Health in California

Merced, CA—The UC Merced Community and Labor Center has released “Farmworker Health in California,” a report on the health and wellbeing of California farmworkers. The report is drawn from the UC Merced Farmworker Health Study, **the largest academic study ever conducted on the health and wellbeing of the nation’s most disadvantaged workforce.**

The UC Merced Farmworker Health Study collected interviews with 1,242 California farmworkers in six different languages (English, Spanish, Mixteco, Triqui, Zapotec, Ilocano) between August 2021 and January 2022.

The study questionnaire asked about several facets of farmworker health, including working conditions, labor protections, physical health, women’s and reproductive health, mental health, COVID-19, use of preventive health services, health insurance and access, and health behaviors.

We are also launching a [Farmworker Health Study Data Dashboard](#) which will allow users to view results along certain areas of interests.

Some of the major findings include the following:

Healthcare Insurance, Health Access and Utilization

- Forty-nine percent (49%) reported being without health insurance.
- Forty-three percent (43%) reported having visited a doctor’s clinic in the past year, and thirty-five percent had been seen by the dentist.
- Only sixteen percent (16%) had ever been screened for skin cancer, and twenty-one percent had ever been screened for colorectal cancer.

Health

- Over one-third of farmworkers reported that their health was “fair” (31%) or “poor” (5%).
- Between one-third (1/3) and one-half (1/2) of farmworkers reported having at least one chronic condition. Diabetes (20%), hypertension (19%) and anxiety (10%) were the most common.
- Forty percent (40%) suspected or confirmed being infected with COVID-19. Among those who had a positive test for COVID-19, forty-one percent said their health was still not back to normal.

- Thirty-seven percent (37%) were diagnosed by a physician with obesity, of whom sixty-six percent reported trying to lose weight.

Mental Health

- Nineteen percent (19%) of respondents reported feeling nervous or anxious, fifteen percent (15%) reported feelings of uncontrollable worry, and fourteen percent (14%) of workers reported feeling depressed or hopeless.

Women's Reproductive Health

- Among farmworker women who had given birth, fourteen percent (14%) reported having had a preterm birth; fifteen percent (15%) reported having a baby with low birthweight; and five percent (5%) reported a pregnancy outcome with birth defects.

Social and Economic Rights

- Fifty-nine percent (59%) did not qualify for Unemployment Insurance benefits.
- Fifty-four percent (54%) reported marginal, low, or very low food security.

Housing Conditions

- A large majority (92%) were renters, and many encountered household problems such as cockroaches (29%), rodents (17%), rotting wood (16%), mold (14%), water damage (13%), and water leaks (12%).

Working Conditions

- Almost one in five (19%) experienced not being paid wages they earned by an employer.
- Forty-three percent (43%) reported that their employer “never” provided a heat illness prevention plan as required by Cal OSHA; eleven percent lacked consistent access to clean drinking water at work, and fifteen percent did not receive the minimum number of 10-minute rest breaks under law..
- Nearly one-third (32%) claimed they had “always” lacked but needed respirators when working in agriculture, such as for wildfire smoke or using pesticides.
- More than one-third (36%) of farmworkers said they would not be willing to file a report against their employer for non-compliance with standards, such as workplace health and safety or wage and hour provisions. Of those who would be unwilling to file a report against an employer, sixty-four percent said they would be unwilling to file a report due to fear of retaliation, such as job loss or deportation.

This study suggests the need for a deeper look at current policies, laws and practices in agricultural workplaces, as well as greater and more targeted public investments in the physical, economic and social wellbeing of farmworkers. Policy recommendations include the following:

- Expand farmworker access to the economic and social safety net.
- Expand farmworkers' healthcare access.
- Continue to invest public resources in protecting workers' rights.
- Invest public resources in agricultural development that raises industry work standards, particularly as it relates to technological development.

A community advisory board (CAB) of twenty-six organizations informed every stage of this two-year research project, from research design to data collection. Ten CAB organizations and two clinics conducted data collection. These included: Californians for Pesticide Reform, Campesinas Unidas Del Valle De San Joaquin, Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN), Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Central Valley Empowerment Alliance, Inc. (CVEA), Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), Líderes Campesinas, Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project Training Occupational Development Educating Communities (TODEC) Legal Center, United Farm Workers of America (UFW), Vo Neighborhood Medical Clinic, Valley Voices, and Salinas Valley (UCB CERCH & Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas).

"Agriculture is a demanding job, requiring working long hours under difficult working conditions," said Dr. Paul Brown, UC Merced Professor of Health Economics. "Our study provides a snapshot into the health of these workers, as well as highlights the challenges that workers in California face in getting access to good, high quality, and affordable healthcare."

"Agriculture is one of California's most vital and productive industries, yet many of its workers experience profound challenges in maintaining their health and wellbeing. This report provides valuable data that should inform policy development advancing the health and wellbeing of agricultural workers," said Dr. Edward Flores from UC Merced Community and Labor Center.

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