

# FEAR, IMMIGRATION, & DISCRIMINATION

Health Outreach Partners



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According to migrant health professionals, farmworkers commonly experience fear due to the complex and arduous life circumstances that they face each day in the United States. Despite this, many individuals working in migrant health do not fully understand the causes and nuances of fear as a barrier to health care for farmworkers. In the following pages, HOP synthesizes key findings around fear, immigration, and discrimination from its national needs assessment.

This fact sheet is a component of HOP's *Breaking Down the Barriers: A National Needs Assessment on Farmworker Health Outreach*, a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis on the needs of farmworkers and farmworker outreach programs in the U.S. Please visit [www.outreach-partners.org](http://www.outreach-partners.org) to obtain a PDF copy of the report.



Photo courtesy of Community Health Centers of the Central Coast, Inc.

## What Factors Contribute to a Climate of Fear Among Farmworkers?

### FINDING 1: THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASE IN ANTI-IMMIGRANT POLICIES AND ACTIONS

- Health centers reported an increase in the frequency of raids and roadblocks initiated by local law enforcement agencies and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).
- Some states have introduced legislation denying undocumented immigrants the right to obtain a driver's license.
- Many federal immigration officials recruit and train local law enforcement officials. These officers are then encouraged to use their authority to inquire about documentation status in some regions of the United States.
- More health centers are facing stringent funding restrictions that deny or limit the provision of health care services to undocumented individuals. Additionally, some states are penalizing providers that serve undocumented patients.

"...fewer farmworkers were using the transportation services. Many farmworkers feared that the health center van could not guarantee their safety in case of being pulled over by immigration officials."

– Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

"Recent immigration policies have had a chilling effect on migrant workers . . . There have been raids on farms and meat packing production plants. The general sentiment in the state is that the population is not wanted. As a result, the health center has seen decreases in [clinic] numbers over the years." – Health Center Administrator, Telephone Survey Notes

### FINDING 2: MANY FARMWORKERS SUFFER FROM INTIMIDATION AND MISTREATMENT BY EMPLOYERS

- Many farmworker participants believe they do not have basic human rights because they lack documentation. They think they must tolerate mistreatment in order to continue living in the United States.
- Several participants mentioned that employers have threatened farmworkers with loss of wages, loss of work, or deportation if work is missed or if a farmworker openly objects to unfair work conditions.
- Some farmworker participants discussed instances when employers were non-compliant with Workmen's Compensation laws and Occupational Health and Safety Administration laws.

## Breaking Down the Barriers: A Deeper Look into...

“My cousin was struck by lightning in the fields and died...and then there was the bill... they asked us [the family] to pay for it... we were told that the farmer was going to pay for it but no, that did not happen. Just this past week, I received a letter letting me know that they were going to send the bill to the credit service. They [the hospital] are charging us almost \$11,000 for my cousin who died.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

“Like they said, we do not have many benefits...It is because of the fear of immigration. Where I am working, there is a foreman there, and he scolds us. He says it does not matter if people go to Legal Aid. They [the foreman and grower] intimidate you so you do not speak up for yourself. For this reason, farmworkers just back off.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

“And it’s because they [the farmworkers] saw that they were spraying the fields and everyone started to feel bad. And they told the foreman. And the foreman ignored them...and I said to the farmworker, ‘why don’t you do something?’ and he said... ‘No, they [the foreman and grower] don’t pay us any mind or if we say something, they are going to fire us.’”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“She was from Oaxaca. And she died of heat stroke; they didn’t give her water. How is it possible that in this country a pregnant girl died, and because there is not water? It is an unbelievable thing. But it happens.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

### FINDING 3: FARMWORKERS REPORT INEQUITABLE TREATMENT AT HEALTH CLINICS

*Note: the information below does not refer to a particular group or type of health clinic, but rather health care in general.*

- Some farmworker participants encountered mistreatment when accessing health care services, including being completely ignored or criticized during medical encounters.
- Many farmworker participants experienced mistreatment when accessing health care, regardless of their immigration status.
- Farmworker participants referenced situations where they were presumed to be undocumented because of their occupation or their ethnic background.
- Many farmworkers reported negative experiences with front desk staff at health care facilities. It was mentioned that these staff sometimes lack cultural sensitivity and customer service.
- Health center staff mentioned that negative experiences at health clinics circulate quickly throughout farmworker communities, further contributing to access issues.

“Even crossing legally, I didn’t know the rights that we have in this country when I arrived. But now I do and it doesn’t matter. You are not treated adequately, whether you are legal or not legal. There is a lot of discrimination, a lot of racism.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

“I left in tears just from seeing how they [health clinic staff] treat you. And I said, ‘Where are the rights in this country?’ ...I worked in a hospital in Tijuana and I was never treated like that... To see the doctor behave as he did, as if what you are saying does not interest him. He’s [the doctor] going to give me what he wants to give me. I left in tears.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

“What else is there to say or do; we need these clinics for low income people, but we [the farmworkers] ask that they [the clinic staff] just think about us a little, because there is a lot of discrimination. For me, it is one of the main issues [in accessing care].”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

### FINDING 4: FARMWORKERS FEAR THE FINANCIAL COSTS OF TREATING A HEALTH CONDITION

- Some health center staff believe that farmworkers are reluctant to learn about their true health status because they are afraid to face potential consequences of their medical conditions.
- Nearly half (48%) of health center respondents ranked “cost of care” as a significant barrier to care.

“Farmworkers don’t want to recognize that they may be ill. Fear of knowing that they have a chronic disease or infection is fearsome for some individuals.” —Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“They [the farmworkers] don’t want to face their health issues due to costs or because of their fear.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

## What are the Health Consequences of Fear Among Farmworkers?

### FINDING 5: FARMWORKERS ARE OFTEN AFRAID TO ACCESS HEALTH CARE SERVICES

- The discriminatory climate towards immigrants is persuading many farmworkers to forgo health care services.
- A few health center staff cited that undocumented farmworkers often do not have safe transportation options. Many do not risk driving without a license or the possibility of encountering a roadblock.
- Many farmworkers reported being afraid of employer retribution. They feel that they may lose their jobs or be deported.

“Farmworkers are afraid of being deported and unwilling to take a chance and will forgo appointments.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“... A lot of the police departments and sheriff's departments are having deputies and police officers trained by ICE, and they [ICE] has been given the authority to ask an individual for documentation, so they [the farmworkers] are hit with a double whammy when they are stopped. They [farmworkers] don't have a driver's license, and then if they don't have legal status in the United States, they are detained and ICE is called.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“They [the farmworkers] are afraid the growers will fire them or call immigration officials if they miss a day or two of work.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“There are a lot of bills being passed. The SB529 is the one that has really impacted our outreach outcomes, it's the driver's license bill...now a person is not able to get a driver's license without proper identification, and if you are found to be driving . . . without a driver's license, they will seize your vehicle. So now, even though our outreach efforts are there, and we are getting them registered and we are getting referrals to the physicians, the clients aren't going to the appointments.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

### FINDING 6: FARMWORKERS OFTEN FEEL THEY CANNOT TRUST HEALTH CLINIC STAFF

- Many farmworkers reported being unfamiliar with or not trusting health center staff. Some believe that the health clinic has ulterior motives. This lack of trust is often fueled by misinformation circulating within communities.
- Some farmworkers reported that they lack knowledge about the U.S. health care system. Much skepticism and cautiousness exists, especially among undocumented farmworkers.
- Some health center staff revealed that undocumented farmworkers often question their safety and security when accessing services in an unwelcoming community.

“You see when you're talking to farmworkers, they're kind of scared. They're listening to you, but maybe don't believe you. Their arms are crossed; they're looking around – maybe thinking immigration is coming or something.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

“The problem is that everyone is afraid because of what happened . . . they have taken people, immigration has taken people; so there are many illegal people without health services.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

“Sometimes farmworkers don't want to participate because they are wondering what we [outreach staff] are doing there, they think ... ‘are they doing an investigation, a study on me? Is everything that they ask maybe lies?’ They [outreach staff] are not sincere.”

—Migrant Health Professional, Community Forum Transcripts

### FINDING 7: A PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT EXISTS DUE TO LIVING WITH FEAR AND ANXIETY

- Several farmworker participants mentioned experiencing fear and uncertainty that leads them to live in a constant vigilant state. This type of lifestyle produces stress that is negatively impacting the mental health status of farmworkers.

“The fact that you go out and you do not know if you are coming back home, because of the raids, what if they catch you or what if you don't have anything to eat tomorrow or you do not have a job. All of these things affect you and make you feel depressed. There is anxiety in your life ... the children see how they have to move from one place to the next because there aren't any safe places; those [realities] are affecting the family's mental health. I do not see mental health services for farmworkers, [services] are focused on the physical health... on diabetes, on obesity but we are forgetting that our mental health is being affected.”

—Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Parent/Advocate, Focus Group Transcripts

## Discussion

Farmworkers struggle with fear, immigration, and discrimination on a daily basis. The findings listed here reflect a deep-rooted challenge to farmworkers accessing care, one that will not be overcome easily. Understanding the causes, manifestations, and results of this fear, however, is a responsive first step for health workers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that approximately half a million unauthorized workers currently exist within the U.S. agricultural industry, more than any other sector in the country. Regrettably, some vigilant and vocal communities throughout the United States have emphatically opposed the influx of undocumented immigrants, creating a resounding national backlash. In many instances, this anger has prompted government officials to take a forceful political stance towards undocumented farmworker communities. Immigration prosecutions now make up well over half (54%) of all federal filings, for a total of 91,899 cases in 2009, an all-time high (Trac Immigration, 2009). The resulting climate of fear continually pushes undocumented farmworkers deeper into the shadows of our society, escalating the barriers to health care that these communities face.

Due to the vulnerability that undocumented status creates, there is frequently an unjust imbalance of power between farmworkers and their employers. When these instances occur, an employer or contractor may harmfully leverage their power, subjecting workers to inequitable treatment. Employers are faced with few negative repercussions for their actions because of limited labor inspections. In an environment such as this, it seems unlikely that farmworkers will be consistently given critical occupational health and safety information.

Farmworkers find themselves in tenuous positions as a result of this hostile climate. The possibility of encountering immigration officials or being threatened by an employer taxes the mental health of farmworkers. They live with the constant fear and anxiety of losing their jobs or being deported back to their country of origin. Many farmworkers have endured emotional, physical, and financial costs in order to immigrate to the United States. Because they sacrificed so much already, these farmworkers live with the psychological burden of managing the daily risk of deportation. In a climate of fear such as this, it is no surprise that farmworkers find it hard to trust health center staff, or any institution for that matter. Even farmworkers with legal permission to work in the U.S. encounter discrimination from community members, sometimes within the health care environment.

These factors, along with other findings in *Breaking Down the Barriers*, have created a perfect storm that is keeping an estimated 80% of farmworkers from accessing the health services they need. Comments from farmworker participants resoundingly indicate that they do not think they have the choice to receive health care. As grim as this may be, it creates a sound opportunity for health organizations to meet this challenge head on by continuing to break down these barriers. Outreach staff are on the front lines where farmworkers live, work, and congregate, and can make major strides in building trust, dispelling myths, and linking them to the health and social services that they need.



Photo courtesy of Community Health Centers of the Central Coast, Inc.

## How Can You Help Alleviate Fear In Farmworker Communities?

The following are actions that your health center can take to address and alleviate fear in farmworker communities. For additional assistance with implementing these strategies, please contact HOP at [www.outreach-partners.org](http://www.outreach-partners.org).

- Take the time to observe and learn about fear and immigration issues within your local farmworker community.
- Provide a safe forum for farmworkers to talk about the fear and anxiety they experience.
- Enhance communication and listening skills to build trusting relationships with the farmworker community.
- Build or participate in a farmworker-focused coalition to help advocate on behalf of the farmworker community.
- Partner with appropriate agencies to offer farmworkers education on their legal rights.
- Nurture positive relationships with employers and help advocate for farmworkers in the work place.
- Participate in a cultural humility and sensitivity training.