



Center for Worker Health

Wake Forest School of Medicine

POLICY BRIEF

COVID-19: Knowledge, Risk Perceptions, and Preventive Behaviors of Latinx Farmworker Families in North Carolina

Summary

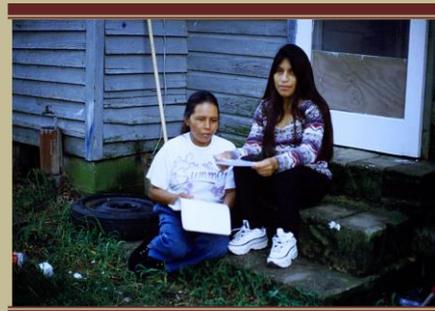
The COVID-19 pandemic poses substantial threats to Latinx farmworkers and other immigrants in food production and processing. Classified as essential, such workers cannot shelter at home. Therefore, knowledge and preventive behaviors are important to reduce COVID-19 spread in the community. Respondents for 67 families with at least one farmworker in North Carolina completed a telephone survey in May, 2020. The survey queried knowledge of COVID-19, perceptions of its severity, self-efficacy, and preventive behaviors. Detailed data were collected to document household members' social interaction and use of face coverings. Knowledge of COVID-19 and prevention methods was high; COVID-19 was perceived as a severe threat to health. Farmworker families perceived that they had limited potential to prevent COVID-19. They reported practicing preventive behaviors, emphasizing social avoidance more than personal hygiene. However, detailed social interaction data showed high rates of inter-personal contact at home, at work, and in the community and very limited use of masks. Despite high levels of knowledge and perceived severity for COVID-19, these farmworker families were engaged in frequent interpersonal contact that could expose community members and themselves to COVID-19. Structural changes in housing and employment are needed that will allow these families to apply their knowledge of COVID-19 and prevent further infection.

Why does it matter?

COVID-19 is a new and highly infectious disease; it causes higher rates of death than other respiratory infections and the long-term health consequences are unknown. It has exacerbated and highlighted longstanding health disparities in minority communities. Scientific understanding of COVID-19 and its prevention has evolved rapidly. It appears that personal preventive behaviors such as maintaining physical distance from others, wearing masks, and reducing overall social interactions are important. Latinx farmworkers, though considered essential workers, may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. They are likely isolated from public health messaging due to language barriers, have limited access to healthcare including COVID-19 testing, and experience rural isolation. Many are ineligible for unemployment or other government benefits. Crowding in their housing, work transportation, and workplaces puts them in close contact with each other, increasing the potential transmission of infection among co-workers, their families, and the rural communities where they live. Assessing the current knowledge of COVID-19 among farmworker families and the extent to which they practice preventive behaviors is important for understanding the level of risk this group experiences and for identifying additional protections that are needed.

What did the researchers do?

In May 2020, researchers completed a telephone survey of 67 women from Latinx farmworker families in North Carolina. The survey interview addressed farmworkers' knowledge of the causes, prevention, and consequences of COVID-19. It also collected detailed information on family members' recent social interactions and use of masks at home, at work, and in the community.



Research for this policy brief is reported in: Quandt SA, LaMonto NJ, Mora DC, Talton JW, Laurienti PJ, Arcury TA. COVID-19 Pandemic among Latinx Farmworker and Non-farmworker Families in North Carolina: Knowledge, Risk Perceptions, and Preventive Behaviors. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2020, *17*, 5786.

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What did the researchers find?

Knowledge of coronavirus and the disease COVID-19 is very high among women in farmworker families.

- All women had heard of the virus and knew that it was a respiratory disease caused by viral infection.
- A majority of women (94%) knew that there was currently no cure or vaccine for COVID-19.

Knowledge of how to prevent COVID-19 is also extremely high.

- All respondents were able to identify as effective 7 preventive measures highly promoted by public health messaging: frequent handwashing, using disinfectants on surfaces, staying home when sick, covering a cough, avoiding close contact with people outside the family, avoiding crowds of people, and wearing a face mask.

Reported prevention of COVID-19 focuses on avoidance more than personal hygiene behaviors.

- Women reported avoiding travel to areas infected with COVID-19, avoiding eating outside the home, staying home when sick, avoiding close contact with people who were sick, avoiding crowds of people, and wearing a face mask in public.

Farmworker women hold contradictory risk perceptions of COVID-19.

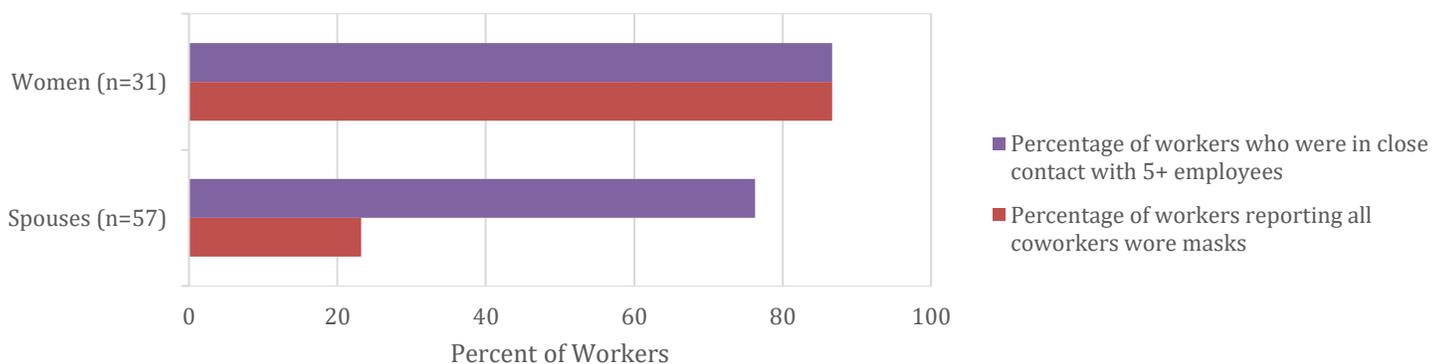
- 43% believed they were less likely to get COVID-19 than other people in their community.
- However, 97% also stated that they were unable to protect themselves from COVID-19 as well as others.

Household behavior: Large households, frequent community interaction plus minimal use of face masks.

- Household size was large: up to 6 adults and up to 7 children
- Almost half (46%) of the families reported having adult visitors at their house, and 42% reported that children had visited their house in the past week.
 - Only one respondent reported that her visitor wore a mask.
- 39% of respondents, 40% of their children, 39% of their spouses, and 44% of other adults in the house were reported to have visited someone else's house in the past week.
 - No respondents or their household members wore a mask during their visits.

Preventive behavior at work: Women reported more use of masks than men.

- Both women and their spouses worked in close contact with other workers.
- Women reported that their spouses and spouses' coworkers frequently removed their masks due to heat.



Conclusions

Women in farmworker families have accurate knowledge about COVID-19 and the best measures they can take to prevent it. Despite this, the women in this study did not feel confident in protecting themselves and their families. Their families' high levels of social interaction and low levels of mask-wearing suggest that, despite knowledge, their living and working situations do not allow them to practice what they know is necessary to protect their families either at home or at work.

Farmworkers, like many low income populations, are forced to live in crowded households, in low quality housing, often in dense neighborhoods (e.g., trailer parks, apartment buildings). They work in essential jobs that force them to be in close contact with other workers. Until society addresses these structural issues, knowledge of COVID-19 prevention cannot be used. Education alone is not the answer. Without structural change, the society that considers them essential workers puts them in a position that will continue to keep rates of infection high and endanger the health of these families.
