

The Michigan Farmworker Project: Development and Implementation of a Collaborative Community-Based Research Project Assessing Precarious Employment and Labor Exploitation

Lisbeth Iglesias-Ríos, Diana E. Marin,
Kara Moberg, and Alexis J. Handal

Abstract

Farmworkers are among the most underserved and marginalized populations of workers despite their essential role in the U.S. food supply chain. The Michigan Farmworker Project (MFP) evolved as a collaborative, community-based participatory project among state and regional service entities, legal service organizations, and the university. The overarching goal of the project was to study the relationship of precarious working conditions and labor exploitation with occupational and environmental health inequities and social justice for farmworkers in Michigan. We employed critical race theory and community-based participatory research approaches to guide the development and implementation of the MFP. We describe the development of the participatory process with community partners and discuss implementation challenges and lessons learned from the field. Throughout the research, we reflect on how farmworkers' social and working environment goes beyond precarity, revealing labor exploitation as an important deterrent of farmworker health and well-being. Despite entrenched systems of structural oppression, farmworkers contribute to and improve our society with their rich cultural backgrounds, their work, and their resilience. The diverse composition of this community-university partnership amplified collaboration, enriched our understanding of the role of precarity and labor exploitation among farmworkers, and contributed to the study's success. The MFP will continue strengthening the community-university partnership with the goal of continuing to address health inequities in the farmworker population.

Farmworkers are among the most underserved and marginalized populations of workers in the United States despite their essential role in the U.S. food supply chain. The Michigan Farmworker Project (MFP) was developed to provide a deeper understanding of the complex working and living conditions of migrant and seasonal farmworkers, including H-2A workers, integrating knowledge of precarious employment and worker's health (Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, O'Neill, et al., 2020). The long-term goal of the MFP is two-fold: (a) to identify dimensions of precarious employment, labor exploitation, and perceptions of labor trafficking in farmworkers and (b) to relate this understanding to psychosocial, occupational, and environmental risk factors commonly experienced in farmworkers' work environments. In this paper, we share our experience of the development and implementation of the MFP, a collaborative project that used a community-based participatory research approach and critical race theory to reflect on the racial phenomena of precarious employment and health. We present the community-based collaborative processes taken,

challenges faced, and lessons learned, all situated within the current social context whereby anti-immigrant rhetoric, racism, and discriminatory federal and state policies impact Black and Brown immigrant communities.

Background

Farmworkers, who are predominantly U.S.- and foreign-born Latinos(as) (more than 80%), remain among the most impoverished populations in America—a legacy of U.S. slavery, plantation economics, and Jim Crow era—policies (Edwards & Thomson, 2010; Gold et al., 2022; Solomon et al., 2019). Historically, policies have excluded farmworkers from labor protections (e.g., minimum wage, workers' compensation, overtime pay provisions, the right to organize), exposing them to oppressive and exploitative working conditions and perpetuating patterns of structural racism, discrimination, social exclusion, segregation, and substandard living conditions (Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, Fleming, et al., 2020; Hernandez & Gabbard, 2018; Rodman et al., 2016). This lack of labor protections and the minimum

regulatory standards for the agricultural workforce contributes to workers' vulnerability to precarious employment conditions, labor exploitation, and even labor trafficking (Barrick, 2016; Barrick et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014).

Precarious employment and labor exploitation encompass "bad job features" defined by the inherent characteristics of nonstandard or informal employment (e.g., job insecurity, low wages, limited workplace rights and social protections, low control and latitude over working conditions, and hazardous working conditions; Amable et al., 2001; Benach & Muntaner, 2011; Vives et al., 2013). Labor exploitation goes beyond precarious employment in that it involves the harmful use of another person's vulnerability for one's own benefit, often resulting in labor violations (e.g., illegal deductions from workers' wages). In that sense, precarious employment can be seen as a "red flag" for potential labor exploitation and labor violations, whereby the lack or minimal enforcement of regulations and policies often drives poor working conditions. Thus, precarious employment and labor exploitation exist along a continuum of working experiences, with labor trafficking being the most extreme form of exploitation. Exploitation due to labor trafficking occurs when workers are exploited via deceptive practices, force, fraud, or coercion, severely impacting workers' health, although there is limited research with farmworkers in this area (Iglesias-Ríos et al., 2019, 2020; International Labour Organization & Walk Free Foundation, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Research on the work environment's impact on farmworker health shows that occupational and social pathways associated with acute and chronic stress affect farmworkers' physical and mental health (Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Grzywacz et al., 2010; McClure et al., 2015; Ramos et al., 2015; Snipes et al., 2017). Job insecurity and the perception of job insecurity, for example, are chronic stressors that may adversely affect mental health (De Witte, 1999; Ferrie et al., 2008; Sverke et al., 2002; Vives et al., 2013). Long and irregular working hours are associated with depressive state, anxiety, poor sleep quality, and coronary heart disease (Burgard & Lin, 2013; Sparks et al., 2011; Sverke et al., 2002). Isolation, racism, and discrimination are also psychosocial factors that pose significant risks to farmworker health (Areguin & Stewart, 2021; Donlan & Lee, 2010; Hiott et al., 2008; Lewchuk, 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2016; Snipes et al., 2017). Given these potential health effects, it is crucial

to understand determinants of health within the social structure of the working environment, such as precarious employment and labor exploitation, to improve farmworkers' occupational safety and health amid the complex social, structural, and policy issues that affect this population.

Our goal in this paper is to describe the MFP's origins and implementation processes, and we present the multilayered approach to participative actions, challenges, and opportunities that guided this collaborative research with a highly vulnerable agricultural working population. The ultimate goal of this research is to advance scientific knowledge on occupational and environmental health inequities and social justice.

Critical Race Theory and Community-Based Participatory Research Principles as Foundations for the Study of Precarious Employment and Labor Exploitation with Farmworkers

Critical race theory (CRT) and community-based participatory research (CBPR) share a primary commitment to social justice and action that challenges power-structural systems and institutions that contribute to health inequities in our society (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Salter & Adams, 2013; Wallerstein et al., 2017). As such, both CRT and CBPR are well suited for social epidemiologic research with the historically marginalized and oppressed population of farmworkers.

CRT is a theoretical framework that focuses on how race and power intersect to perpetuate the dominant group's higher status and advantages (Salter & Adams, 2013). Historical structural and institutionalized racism in the form of discriminatory labor laws and policies shaped by corporate power and lobbying groups exemplifies the strong, enduring influence and impact of race and power on the American agricultural system and its workers (Guild & Figueroa, 2018; Perea, 2011). Practices of structural and institutional racism continue to be manifested by purportedly color-blind policies that have racist intent or consequences and severe intergenerational effects (Jones, 2000; Krieger, 2014; Viruell-Fuentes, 2011). For instance, the historic Social Security Act, a system of federal old-age benefits and unemployment compensation, excludes agricultural workers, most of whom are individuals from minoritized communities, including Latinos(as) and African Americans (DeWitt, 2010; Stoesz, 2016; Wingrove-Haugland & McLeod, 2021). The exclusion of agricultural and domestic employees can be understood as part of a pattern

of racist exclusions enacted in the major New Deal-era statutes to preserve the quasi-plantation style of agriculture that permeated the segregated Jim Crow South; its continued existence is an example of how structural racism is produced and perpetuated in society (Perea, 2011).

Current revisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act have not extended overtime rules to farmworkers or ensured that all receive the federal minimum wage (Canny, 2005; U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). The National Labor Relations Act continues to exclude farmworkers from the right to organize or form unions to better their employment conditions (Andrade, 2002; National Farm Worker Ministry, 2018).

Racism and xenophobia have driven not only labor law but also immigration law in the United States (Lee, 2019; Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Provine & Doty, 2011; Vargas et al., 2017). Immigration policies are the main mechanisms through which Latin(as) are excluded and racialized through discriminatory criminalization, incarceration, deportation, and a wide array of social factors related to restrictive employment opportunities, discriminatory housing practices, residential segregation, and predatory or limited access to credit and consumer markets (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015; Bailey et al., 2017; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Massey & Pren, 2012). These racist and anti-immigrant policies perpetuate exclusion and oppression of minoritized communities and contribute to social, economic, and health inequities in farmworkers compared to the general worker population (Goodman, 2017; Morey, 2018). From this perspective, CRT provides a theoretical framework to guide empirical research on the impacts of precarious employment and labor exploitation on farmworker health and well-being (Catanzarite, 2000; Gee & Ford, 2011; Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, Fleming, et al., 2020; Jones, 2000).

Moreover, our research approach is guided by CBPR principles insofar as it is explicit in recognizing and empowering community knowledge, building capacity, and taking actions to identify, understand, and address the root causes of systemic health inequities (Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR has a number of fundamental characteristics: (a) it is participatory in nature; (b) it is cooperative; that is, it engages community members and researchers in a reciprocal process to which each contribute equally; (c) it involves a co-learning process; (d) it develops community capacity; (e) it empowers participants to increase

control over their lives; and (f) it achieves a balance between research and action (Israel et al., 1998, 2005, 2008; Schulz et al., 1998). Specifically, our research is informed by the evidence and approaches developed over the past several decades by colleagues working with agricultural communities and farmworkers using CBPR (Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Eskenazi et al., 2003; Farquhar et al., 2013; Flocks et al., 2001, 2018; Quandt et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2017). This work has laid the foundation for the importance and benefits of employing CBPR with a population of workers who experience a disproportionate burden of precarious working conditions and poor health and who are often excluded from decision-making processes regarding research and interventions in their workplace and communities.

In this paper, we present our experience with the development and implementation of the MFP, which evolved organically as a collaboration between an ethnically and racially diverse group of farmworker service organizations and researchers. We employed CBPR principles throughout these processes for several reasons. This was the first time that the university team had developed collaborations with community partners and with the farmworker community in Michigan. Therefore, it was essential to work in a participatory manner from the beginning stages of the study planning through the study implementation. Developing collaborations and trust with community organizations early in the process allowed for trust building, a step that was crucial to approaching this marginalized population and conducting the research in a contextually meaningful way. Trust building also facilitated communication with the farmworker community, expanded our understanding of the social and working context for these workers, and helped identify resources to better reach farmworkers in Michigan. Throughout early conversations with partners, it was clear that both community partners and researchers perceived the research as critical and relevant. Therefore, the research questions for the MFP were initially posed by the investigators and discussed, revised, and adapted in collaboration with community partners. We employed a flexible partnership approach to the research, with a strong and shared commitment to equitable engagement of community partners in most of the aspects of the research process.

The collaborations with community partners provided a deeper understanding of potential structural factors driving precarious employment

and labor exploitation among farmworkers in Michigan. This collaborative process was enriched by the diverse set of skills, community resources, and knowledge exchanged with community partners to develop and conduct the MFP. Finally, CBPR can enable successful and impactful dissemination of findings, which is pivotal for addressing the complex social issues surrounding farmworkers through programmatic and policy approaches—an important goal for the team.

CRT thus provided a transdisciplinary theoretical framework for our research, which was complemented by a participatory approach guided by CBPR principles. Both frameworks are grounded in social justice and facilitate an understanding of how the subordination, oppression, and marginalization of farmworkers is maintained by precarious working conditions and labor exploitation. Both encompass an explicit focus on action and social change. Given the historical and complex social processes and policies that have contributed to the creation and maintenance of health inequities among farmworkers, integrating CBPR and CRT principles into the development and implementation of the MFP was critical and foundational for our work.

The Journey of Developing and Implementing the MFP

1. Bridging Research Interests: Structural Determinants of Health in Social and Occupational Epidemiology

The agricultural industry has a strong presence in Michigan (Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development, 2019). The most recent enumeration study estimates that Michigan has approximately 96,000 migrant and seasonal workers, including their family members, and about 11,000 positions each year certified through the H-2A visa program (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). H-2A farmworkers are nonimmigrant foreign workers who come to the United States with a temporary H-2A visa to perform agricultural labor of a temporary or seasonal nature (Farmworker Legal Services, n.d.; Larson, 2013; U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

At the end of the summer of 2018, Lisbeth Iglesias-Ríos (LIR) began informal conversations with farmworkers, advocacy organizations, community leaders, migrant outreach workers and farmworkers. These preliminary discussions helped foster relationships with individuals and organizations that serve farmworkers. Through this process, we documented stories and anecdotes

and gained knowledge of the social context and working environment of farmworkers in the state of Michigan.

LIR also began communicating with Alexis J. Handal (AJH) about developing a project together to address the scientific gap in occupational and environmental epidemiology on the integration of upstream and structural determinants of health, such as precarious employment and labor exploitation in vulnerable workers. Currently, the dominant scientific paradigm in occupational health mostly follows an individual risk factor approach that focuses on ensuring safety and reducing occupational hazards through behavioral change and educational interventions to the exclusion of social and structural phenomena (Flynn et al., 2021). Our research, in turn, proposes precarious employment and labor exploitation as structural determinants of worker health and well-being (Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, Fleming, et al., 2020; Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, O'Neill, et al., 2020).

2. Creating a Common Vision among Community Partners and Researchers: Establishing Collaborations

Establishing community collaborations and partnerships is essential to co-creating a common vision to address complex health and social problems and ultimately translate evidence into real-world social change. Throughout this paper, we refer to the community partners as legal service organizations (Michigan Immigrant Rights Center [MIRC] and Farmworker Legal Services [FLS]) and state and regional entities (Office of the Migrant Affairs [OMA], Migrant Resource Councils [MRCs]). These organizations are actively involved with the farmworker population of Michigan and in the communities where the workers reside.

The community-university partnership consisted of a bilingual and multicultural team. AJH and LIR are fully bilingual (English and Spanish) with bicultural identities (Ecuador and Mexico, respectively), and other colleagues from the university were either Latino(a) or had high proficiency in Spanish and working experience in Latino communities. Three of the community partners were Latino(a), with two of them raised in farmworker families—one who had worked with his parents in the fields. Another community partner was a White woman with more than 10 years of experience working with farmworkers. The migrant outreach workers who supported recruitment and implementation efforts were former farmworkers or had family members

working in agriculture. The diversity of the team enhanced the collaboration of the partnership and promoted rich discussions when developing the project, throughout implementation, and during the analytical process.

As noted previously, in addition to establishing collaborations with community organizations, we also held informal discussions with farmworkers to help us better understand their situation. Farmworkers were not invited to participate in the study as formal community partners for two main reasons. First, Michigan has a limited history of community-university participatory research with the farmworker community; therefore, building trust with partners and farmworkers alike was essential. We recognized that stronger and more culturally appropriate relationships needed to be developed with the farmworker community given the lack of these partnerships historically, and that was not feasible with the funding and time constraints of this study. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the community-university partnership was concerned about the potential of workplace retaliation against participating farmworkers given the nature of the research, particularly in the context of heightened anti-immigrant sentiments toward the farmworker community. Aware of the vulnerability of these workers, the community-university research team prioritized their safety.

LIR began her initial inquiry by identifying key actors from local- and state-level organizations that work with farmworkers. Her first informal conversation was with an attorney (DM) who became a supervising attorney at the MIRC in 2019. The conversation ignited a mutual interest in developing a study to understand the labor conditions of farmworkers in Michigan. LIR subsequently connected with the Interagency Migrant Services Committee (IMSC) and the OMA. The latter delivers public benefits and coordinates services to farmworkers through the IMSC and MRCs, while the IMSC is a statewide forum for agencies, including agribusiness representatives, to convene strategies, information, and services for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. OMA operates through the regional MRCs that facilitate outreach services for farmworkers and their families under the scope of the mission of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS).

Throughout the establishment of LIR's initial relationships with these entities (OMA, MRCs, and IMSC) and attendance at subcommittees (e.g.,

policy and advocacy, housing, child task force), we gained a more comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by farmworkers, identified key actors, and learned about current community initiatives. Then, OMA and the MRCs facilitated LIR's visits to agricultural worker housing sites with their migrant outreach workers, who were former farmworkers themselves. The outreach workers showed LIR places where farmworkers and their families receive services (e.g., migrant health clinics, migrant head start facilities, exterior of packing plants) as well as various agricultural housing units where workers reside during crop seasons. The information learned during this trip was crucial to the development of research materials, including interview questions for the project, and logistics. It also provided valuable contextual information about farmworker conditions.

Soon after, LIR met the managing attorney (KM) from FLS, who had cochaired the Policy and Advocacy Committee from the IMSC. KM had extensive knowledge of farmworker laws and worker conditions in the state. She and LIR discussed the idea of the project and potential collaboration. Relationships with community partners began to solidify as LIR continued her informal participation in the IMSC and subcommittees, and a genuine and mutual interest in establishing a research collaboration emerged. The partners considered the university team to be an asset in conducting research with farmworkers, as lack of data on this population was identified by partners as a barrier to the public and policy-makers on the issues faced by farmworkers in Michigan. For the university research team, having the expertise and support of these community partners was key to developing and implementing the MFP.

3. The Value of Establishing a Partnership and Collaboration between Community Partners and the University: Building on the Strengths and Resources

In June of 2019, the university research team was invited to present the project during a statewide outreach training event organized by OMA. For the first time, the MFP received the public endorsement of the director of OMA, which was crucial to allow the university research team to network and build trust with MDHHS outreach workers from MRCs and various other organizations serving farmworkers. OMA gave its support to researchers despite the fact that the MFP was not funded yet, which showed trust in and commitment to the university research team.

After obtaining funding, the MFP's first endeavor was a qualitative study that aimed to identify dimensions of precarious employment and labor exploitation as well as participants' perceptions and knowledge of labor trafficking by assessing participants' working environment, including occupational, environmental, and psychosocial exposures; living conditions; and gaps in service provision to the farmworker community.

The study included in-depth interviews with 35 female and male farmworkers and 21 stakeholders in the state of Michigan. The interview questions were developed based on indicators of labor exploitation developed by the theoretical and practical experience of the *International Labour Organization Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour* (SAP-FL; International Labour Organization et al., 2017), the validated multidimensional Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES) developed for salaried workers by the Employment Conditions Network-EMCONET (Amable et al., 2001; Benach et al., 2014; Vives et al., 2010), and the Employment Precarity Index developed as part of the longitudinal survey Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO; Lewchuk, 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2016). While there is overlap on some constructs in both scales (EPRES and the Employment Precarity Index), the scales primarily focus on salaried and urban employed workers, categories that do not necessarily represent the work and social context of farmworkers in the United States. However, we used these scales to guide our understanding and conceptualization of precarious employment.

To address farmworker needs, we also asked about their access to and experiences with services and community resources. This was important to assess, as both farmworkers and stakeholders offered insightful solutions. Following our theoretical framework of CRT and CBPR, the interviews were centered on the stories and voices of the participants and actively invited them to explore the topics of precarity and labor exploitation.

The partnership with OMA was key for the success of this first study, as it facilitated the collaboration of migrant outreach workers from MRCs in the regions where farmworkers were recruited. The university research team also developed a collaboration with a summer migrant outreach coordinator of a nonprofit organization that actively referred participants and provided office space for us to conduct interviews in that area.

Through these community collaborations, the university research team was able to find appropriate

and safe places to conduct the interviews close to workers' homes and workplaces. Community partners helped identify various stakeholders who we were able to recruit and interview. We defined stakeholders as individuals and organizations actively engaged with the farmworker community through health care services, advocacy, policy, community service, and educational services. Some of these stakeholders were former farmworkers or came from farmworker families themselves.

In keeping with CBPR principles, all community partners provided feedback on the various grant proposals written by the university research team to secure funding for the MFP. All the research materials, including the informed consent, discussion of logistics and recruitment sites, and research instruments, were collaboratively reviewed with community partners. Community partners provided insightful information and perspectives that facilitated the development and implementation of the MFP in ways that the university research team would not have been able to anticipate. For example, the university research team initially wanted to conduct focus groups with farmworkers. One of the community partners raised concerns about confidentiality and retaliation against workers from employers, as some farmworkers shared living quarters with crew leaders. In addition, there were concerns that focus groups could include crew leaders or individuals who have some supervisory role, which could put the other participating workers at risk. Following these suggestions, the university research team changed the methodological approach and pivoted to in-depth individual interviews instead. Community partners actively participated in analytical sessions of the data, during which we collectively analyzed transcripts, identified emergent themes, reviewed codebooks, and interpreted results.

Cognizant of workers' vulnerability and the topics discussed in the study, our collaboration with our legal community partners—highly experienced attorneys from two of the main statewide nonprofit organizations that work with farmworkers—was essential. The university research team developed an emergency plan in collaboration with community partners and with university legal counsel in the event of immigration raids or situations of retaliation against workers. Community partners were also critical during the implementation of the project as issues arose in the field. The university research team was able to facilitate referrals of some farmworkers

in need of legal, social (housing and food needs), and health care services through our community partners. Across many levels, community partners' contributions helped the university research team to be more sensitive and mindful when working with the farmworker community and to improve the development and implementation of the MFP.

4. Building Capacity with Migrant Outreach Workers from MRCs: Collaboration and Contributions of Field Migrant Outreach Workers

The process of building capacity involved a multilayered approach to participation and engagement. Three MDHHS migrant outreach workers from the collaborating MRCs provided key informational and logistical support. MDHHS migrant outreach workers and the summer migrant outreach coordinator worked closely with LIR and provided information about the location of agricultural housing sites, traveled with LIR to visit agricultural working sites, shared anecdotes of situations encountered with farmworkers, facilitated the identification of key actors and organizations in their communities to recruit participants (i.e., farmworkers and stakeholders or community leaders), and provided support to recruit potential participants. Some of the outreach workers, including the summer migrant outreach coordinator, had strong ties in their home communities, and, in some instances, they knew the crew leaders of the agricultural housing sites we visited and owners of the farms. These connections facilitated trust and openness from workers.

Interviews with farmworkers were conducted in the evenings at migrant head start facilities, a nonprofit organization, and a church. LIR conducted interviews with stakeholders in their private offices, a public library, and the home of one community leader. For these interviews, outreach workers provided contact information for potential participants, and LIR recruited participants and scheduled the interviews. Some of the interviewees (farmworkers and stakeholders) also volunteered contact information for other potential participants.

LIR also visited an agricultural labor camp across several months with the summer outreach worker from one of the counties in which recruitment was conducted. LIR developed trust with workers by participating in various activities, such as collaborating with a program that brought food to farmworkers, participating in the Catholic mass delivered by the priest at the agricultural housing site, and volunteering in mobile health

clinics for the workers. These activities allowed LIR to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics between workers (including those with H-2A visas) and crew leaders. Informal day-to-day encounters provided invaluable content and context for the project that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain.

For instance, between scheduled research interviews, LIR visited agricultural housing sites and drove around the area to locate packing plants and farmworker housing, informally talking with many farmworkers both outside their apartments and in gas stations, taco stands, Latino stores, and public laundromats. During one of these trips, LIR and the outreach worker stopped in an apple field where only the crew leader was present. She informally talked with the crew leader about the type of farm, his role as a crew leader, and the types of skills, risks, and demands to the worker when picking apples. This conversation improved our understanding of the role of H-2A workers compared to seasonal and migrant workers, which ultimately helped guide our research questions and some of the themes for the instrument.

All the farmworkers interviewed, with the exception of one, were from Mexico. All the migrant outreach workers were Latino(a) and bilingual (English/Spanish) and understood the culture of farmworkers, as some of them were former farmworkers or were Mexican or of Mexican descent. This was an important asset for the study that facilitated recruitment and the working relationship with LIR, who, as mentioned previously, is bilingual and Mexican.

Migrant outreach workers received a protocol and a script in English and Spanish to conduct recruitment activities. We used a role-playing exercise to rehearse recruitment of participants, and we delivered all materials and training activities in a standard way to the migrant outreach workers to assure consistency of recruitment. The community-university team was highly impressed by the commitment and professionalism of these outreach workers, who understood the value of the MFP for the farmworker community in Michigan.

Research Implementation Challenges

This research journey brought unique implementation challenges, as is common in any CBPR endeavor, particularly research involving vulnerable populations and specifically farmworkers (Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Eskenazi et al., 2003; Israel et al., 2005; Salvatore et al., 2009). At a critical time in the data collection, we encountered

leadership changes in one community organization that impacted our access to the location where we were going to conduct the research interviews. The team faced several challenges finding alternative locations in rural and isolated areas, including administrative barriers from community organizations, a lack of trust with new partners, a need for additional documentation (e.g., a church required insurance for personal liability), a lack of access to facilities during off hours (evenings and weekends), and insufficient funds to compensate community organizations. In some instances, even if funds were available, organizational policies did not allow for compensation. As an alternative, some of the project's funds were used to buy school supplies for farmworkers' children. Additionally, we organized a clothing and basic needs donation drive with the UM School of Public Health and with external individual donors.

Another challenge we faced was many partners' lack of time to commit to the project given their other normal work responsibilities. For instance, migrant outreach workers are employed by MDHHS and thus were unable to be compensated for their additional time and collaboration. This was an added burden for them as they not only supported recruitment activities but worked long hours with LIR visiting agricultural housing sites and staying late into the evenings and on weekends until interviews were completed. While these hours counted toward their outreach work, they did not count toward overtime payment.

At the university level, accommodating administrative and university requirements and policies regarding working with community organizations was complex, particularly when it came to compensating organizations or individuals that provided access to their facilities. For instance, the university requested setting up one of the migrant outreach coordinators and community partner organizations in the administrative system as vendors, which would have involved obtaining tax information and preparing invoices every time we used their space. While we were able to resolve this issue with university administrators, this situation highlights the challenges that are often met when conducting research guided by CBPR principles.

Another important challenge at the administrative level involved the administration of grant funding. The funding for the MFP was significantly delayed and was made available almost at the end of the agricultural season. This delay put

a burden on the collection of data because it meant that the team had a very short window of time for recruitment before the farmworkers were to end their work for the season.

Even though the team knew that contractors or growers could potentially be alerted about the project given the sensitive nature of the research, the team was successful in working with the crew leader of an H-2A labor camp, and workers were excited to participate. Recruiting H-2A workers is extremely difficult because of their long working hours and the lack of autonomy they have when working and living in agricultural housing sites. After months of developing relationships with the workers in a particular H-2A labor camp and with the crew leader, LIR was able to interview two H-2A farmworkers. Unfortunately, the next day, when LIR returned to continue the interviews, she was notified that she had been reported to the contractor, who instructed the crew leader not to allow farmworkers to participate in the research. This situation was a setback for the research, as we had invested a lot of time and effort into developing trust with this particular group of H-2A workers. Having a female researcher (LIR) communicating with workers (H-2A) was potentially perceived as a threat for the contractor and crew leader. This situation reflects the dynamics of power and control exerted over the workers and shows their hidden nature and vulnerability.

Both the university research team and the partnering organizations had to overcome initial skepticism and lack of trust as well as administrative hurdles placed on the project. The collaborative partnerships solidified and strengthened over time, which helped the team deal with research challenges.

In sum, lack of resources, time, and funding; institutional and organizational constraints; lack of trust and respect; the importance of ensuring community participation and influence on goals, values, priorities, and perspectives at all stages of the research; and different cultural values and styles of communication are all common challenges identified in CBPR projects, particularly those that involve the farmworker community (Arcury et al., 1999; Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Eskenazi et al., 2003; Flocks et al., 2001, 2018; Israel et al., 1998; Quandt et al., 2001). As noted in the examples provided in this section, the MFP, like other CBPR projects with the farmworker community, has different layers of complexity that reflect the challenges of conducting research with a marginalized population.

Lessons Learned and Importance of Community-Based Participatory Principles and Critical Race Theory

Despite the challenges faced, the MFP has been successful because of its community-based participatory approach. Without a doubt, working with community organizations, including community leaders and former farmworkers—migrant outreach workers—was key to the MFP's success. The CBPR approach facilitated a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives between community partners and university researchers. This collaborative interaction and the multilayered approach to participation and engagement shaped the research process overall and helped us anticipate potential ethical challenges and risks for farmworkers.

Our collaborative and multilayered approach aligns with previous CBPR research with farmworkers. PACE (Preventing Agricultural Chemical Exposure Among North Carolina Farmworkers) evolved from several layers of community engagement and participation described by the authors as consultation, strategic planning, implementation, and translation, which helped to provide a more complete picture of the farmworker community context in North Carolina (Arcury et al., 1999, 2017; Quandt et al., 2001). The Together for Agricultural Safety (TAS) project, a community-based social marketing project to reduce the adverse health effects of pesticide exposure among farmworkers in Florida, used a similar model to depict the involvement of the community and level of intensity of partnership activities. The multilayered collaboration in the TAS project involved effective and equal relationships whereby partners grew in their knowledge of one another and in their knowledge of the challenges faced by farmworkers (Flocks et al., 2001). The MFP, like PACE and TAS, employed CBPR principles to develop a multilayered and flexible framework that was crucial in facilitating the shift from emphasis on individual risk factors to an appreciation of the complex social realities of farmworker communities.

An important aspect of this type of research is the establishment of trust, as discussed by other researchers who used CBPR approaches with farmworkers (Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Eskenazi et al., 2003; Flocks et al., 2018). Establishing trust was a critical component of developing and implementing the MFP. LIR, given her background, was able to relate to the workers and understand the social challenges they faced back in

Mexico. The diverse makeup of the research team and partnering organizations allowed the research to be conducted in a way that acknowledged core Latino cultural values (e.g., respect, familism) and maintained linguistic and cultural competence (e.g., in informal conversations with workers, when conducting formal interviews, and in the data analysis process), which greatly facilitated trust with farmworkers.

The CHAMACOS (Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas) study (Eskenazi et al., 2003), a community-university partnership established to study the health effects of environmental exposures among pregnant women and their children, emphasized community involvement in all aspects of the research and aimed to build trust by bringing different constituent groups (e.g., farmworkers and growers) together for open conversations about the development of the research. Much like the research and social context in which we started the MFP, CHAMACOS began its CBPR process by building trust with the community, as the Salinas Valley had never before been the site of a public health research project, and trust was essential for engaging the farmworker population. The experience of CHAMACOS, similar to ours, recognized that having bilingual and bicultural staff with a personal and/or family background in farmwork greatly helped to establish trusting relationships and support the enrollment of participants (Eskenazi et al., 2003). The experience of the MFP and CHAMACOS differed from the initial development of the PACE project, in which cultural, racial, and ethnic differences were notable; the academic partners of PACE were predominately White and English-speakers, while their community partners were Latinos(as) and Spanish-speakers (Quandt et al., 2001).

While the experience of LIR as an “insider” lent a level of accessibility to the MFP, it also meant that LIR had to consistently evaluate her objectivity and any bias that could affect the research. The MFP bicultural and bilingual team recognizes that is important to reflect on our own personal backgrounds and positions of power, oppression, and privilege as individuals and academics, particularly when working with marginalized populations, in order to effectively position ourselves to address health inequities.

Interviews were often charged with emotional content and difficult situations for research participants; conversations touched on dehumanization, unfair treatment and

disempowerment, racism, and discrimination. Farmworkers often made comments that were reminiscent of colonial indentured servitude. One male migrant farmworker remarked:

When you are not useful to them [referring to growers], they threw you away like a banana peel because you are not useful to them. He [the grower] wants his production, that you do the work, and if you are not one of the people that follows what they want, they fire you.

The invisibility of these workers coupled with oppressive mechanisms such as the historical and continued lack of labor and social protections has kept farmworkers segregated and at the margins of society. Our research shows how this marginalization restricts the lives and opportunities of farmworkers and their families. It may also contribute to fatalistic behaviors and resignation whereby it is difficult for workers to even consider the possibility of a better life. Yet we found that farmworkers were proud to share the performance of their work and felt pride, responsibility, and loyalty to the growers. In our conversations with them, farmworkers shared their wisdom, knowledge, strength, and resilience to confront and survive complex lived experiences. Despite the difficulties workers faced, they verbalized optimism and hope for bettering their lives and providing better opportunities for their children and families. Building capacity through empowerment and inclusion of farmworkers in policy decisions and regulations pertaining to their working environment is key to addressing health inequities in this population.

Initial Translation and Dissemination Outcomes of the MFP

While data analysis and manuscript development is ongoing, the team has been able to publish a policy brief and a paper that was time sensitive given the COVID-19 pandemic as part of our commitment to the translation of research to action (Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, Fleming, et al., 2020; Handal, Iglesias-Ríos, O'Neill, et al., 2020). Community partners provided feedback and revisions and fully supported these publications, which has further strengthened our collaboration. As the MFP has started to receive some media attention (Handal & Iglesias-Ríos, 2020; Jackson et al., 2020; Kuchnicki, 2020), the team has been using these spaces to disseminate preliminary findings

regarding the precarious working conditions and labor exploitation practices affecting farmworkers in Michigan. The MFP will continue evolving with community partners and work toward obtaining additional funding to continue this work.

Conclusions

Adopting a CBPR approach to research has supported a strong interdisciplinary collaboration that has built capacity and trust with the farmworker community. To our knowledge, no studies have been written about CBPR development, processes, and research implementation with farmworkers in the state of Michigan. The MFP includes research experiences and components found in other CBPR projects with farmworkers that are key to participatory research, but it also offers a novel perspective on the multidimensionality of precarious employment and labor exploitation in farmworkers. Incorporating the vision of community partners, the MFP was developed to address these important drivers of health inequalities in farmworkers beyond a narrow focus on specific exposures and outcomes of environmental and occupational health. Precarious employment and labor exploitation as it is presented in this paper has not been integrated as such in public health research with farmworkers.

The deep vulnerability and marginalization of farmworkers makes CBPR an essential approach, as it allows academic teams to build on the strengths and expertise of community partners to address the complex issues faced by farmworker communities. This important point has been highlighted by colleagues who have conducted CBPR projects with the farmworker community over the past several decades (Arcury & Quandt, 2020; Bradman et al., 2009; Eskenazi et al., 2003; Flocks et al., 2001, 2018; McCauley et al., 2001; Quandt et al., 2001). Using CBPR principles allows for a more cohesive and collective approach to research that positions community and farmworker contributions, skills, and knowledge as equal to those of researchers. Using a CBPR approach allowed for the successful completion of the MFP's first study and will permit the team to continue building capacity and maintaining a sustainable relationship with community partners and the farmworker community as the research program continues to advance.

Using CRT encourages us, as researchers, to transcend the discourse of racial inequities and to engage with the complex weaving of structural factors and the social vulnerability of workers

that condition and contribute to precarious employment and labor exploitation. Both CRT and CBPR allowed for the establishment of a culturally sensitive, social justice–focused community–university collaboration that considered the complex historical and current social and economic forces that produce and reinforce health inequities among farmworkers. Ultimately, we intend to continue expanding the MFP so that farmworkers’ lives and working experiences are understood as a matter of human rights and social justice—not only for them as workers but also for us as a community and society.

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About the Authors

Lisbeth Iglesias-Ríos is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. At the time of this writing, Diana Marin was a managing attorney at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center. Kara Moberg is a managing attorney with Farmworker Legal Services. Alexis J. Handal is an associate professor in the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.