Documenting working experiences of agricultural workers in California

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Abstract

Over 800,000 Latina/o agricultural workers are employed in California every year, of whom approximately 400,000 are estimated to be undocumented immigrants. We convened 19 focus groups (FG) between July 2019 and January 2020 in various regions of California to gather information from Latina/o agricultural workers on social stressors. The participants' narratives focused extensively on working conditions. This paper analyses these narratives and examines working and living conditions, as well as the combined effect of profound deprivations within most significant social domains. Agricultural workers in California characterise their working conditions as little better than slave labour. Systematic abusive practices and exploitation, discrimination, marginalisation, and lack of opportunities were overwhelmingly present in their narratives. Sleep, family, education, economic and health deprivation, as well as housing, food and work insecurity, social discrimination, and institutional racism compound one another to generate a systematic form of oppression that makes social mobility virtually impossible. Efforts to expand and protect labour rights have been inadequate and major improvements are needed to provide basic civil rights.

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Introduction

The food and agriculture sector contributes approximately $1.1 trillion to the US gross domestic product annually (USDA, 2021; Arcury, 2011). In total, the US agriculture sector needs between 1.5 and 2 million hired workers every year. California accounts for one third to one half of all US agricultural workers, with roughly 800,000 agricultural workers employed per year. About 8 in 10 agricultural workers in California were born in Mexico, and virtually all are of Latina/o origin, with an annual mean and median income in the range of $20,000 - $24,999. Approximately half of these workers are undocumented immigrants (Omelas et al, 2022). Low wages, physical demands, and occupational hazards make agricultural jobs hard to fill. In 2019, 56% of California landowners reported being unable to find enough workers in the past five years (FWD.us, 2021). Transnational movements of people to fill unwanted jobs in agriculture, combined with restrictive immigration laws and the political climate in the US (Medel-Herrero, et al, 2021), have resulted in a significant number of authorised and unauthorised immigrants being vulnerable to abusive practices in the workplace (Jasso, 2021; FWD.us, 2021; Smith-Nonini 1999. Griffith and Kissam 1994).

Various forms of labour exploitation and abusive practices against agricultural workers have been reported, including labour trafficking (Belser, 2005) and child farm labour (Quandt et al, 2022). Despite the tremendous contribution of this community to the US economy and the demands of agricultural worker organisations and scientific organisations (Goldman et al, 2021; Farmworker Justice, 2022) to improve living and working conditions (Irani et al, 2021), workplace exploitation and abusive practices have been largely ignored (Littenberg & Baldwin, 2017). Historically, the contribution of this community to the economy has not been sufficiently recognised. On the contrary, Mexican-origin communities have been blamed and stigmatised for centuries in the US and the discrimination and historical racism suffered by them (pillars to understand the processes of marginalisation) are still very present in the US today. An increase in racism and hate crimes against Latina/o agricultural workers has been reported recently (Medel-Herrero et al, 2021).

Literature review

Substandard access to medical care, along with housing conditions and food insecurity, are overwhelming present in the literature on agricultural workers in the US (Postma & Ramon, 2016; Heine et al, 2017). Systematic literature reviews, however, point out the lack of research pertaining to agricultural workers' labour and wage conditions (Svensson, 2013). These working conditions largely explain the substandard living conditions, lack of medical coverage and poor educational levels of hired agricultural workers in the US, a country that offers little protection to the most disadvantaged populations. The US is the only high-income country that does not guarantee health coverage (Gunja et al., 2023). The combination of poverty with lack of access to health care and education, among other crucial social domains, could help explain vicious cycles of poverty and marginalisation that last for generations (Perry, 2006).

We follow in the footsteps of those few researchers who have investigated intergenerational marginalisation and the cycle of poverty (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009; Martin, 2000; Garrity & Martin, 2018). We contend, as they do, that the study of processes of marginalisation suffered by Latina/o agricultural workers not only helps to better understand the barriers this population faces and how deplorable living conditions are perpetuated for generations in this specific community, but also prevents them from being blamed and stigmatised (Bletzer 2004). Understanding the processes of systematic marginalisation requires analysis of the structural barriers and determinants that prevent people from participating economically, socio-politically and culturally (Gatzweiler et al. 2011), and that are not well understood in this community (Baah FO, et al. 2019), largely composed of Mexican-origin immigrants (Omelas et al., 2022). According to Castaneda et al. (2015), scientific literature on the health and well-being of immigrants is mainly focused on individual behaviours and the culture of immigrants, and usually neglects structural determinants. Moreover, studies focused on structural determinants are usually limited to immigrants' health (specifically access to health services)

and rarely cover other ways in which marginalisation and structural barriers have an impact on immigrants (Castaneda et al., 2015). For example, there is little peer-reviewed research on the role of governments and social discrimination in maintaining deplorable working and living conditions (Gee et Ford, 2011; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Villareal, 2010) for agricultural workers. Legal status and isolation play a core role in discrimination against members of this community, and help explain their vulnerabilities (Svensson et al., 2013; Jasso, 2021; FWD.us, 2021; Smith-Nonini 1999. Griffith and Kissam 1994). Holmes (2007) described how agricultural work is segregated along an ethnicity-citizenship-labour hierarchy in the US, producing suffering and illness, particularly among undocumented workers. Lack of social support and communication barriers increase threats and limited reporting of violations of workplace health and safety laws (Clouser et al., 2018; Horst and Marion, 2019; Snipes et al. 2017). Summers et al. (2015) have described how isolation exacerbates structural vulnerabilities, including poor access to health and social services.

It is important to understand how forms of discrimination in different social domains combine and potentially mutually accentuates one another (Fleming et al 2017), especially in communities experiencing deep deprivations. This is an important research gap that needs to be addressed to better understand why deplorable living and working conditions are perpetuated for generations, and why this community continues to be neglected and ignored (Mendez et al, 2020; Culp & Umbarger, 2017). This paper examines structural determinants that help explain the processes of marginalisation suffered by this community, with a focus on the combination of profound deprivations within most significant social domains. A deep understanding of this community led us to hypothesise that this population suffers from a combination of intense deprivation in all major social domains, including school, family, workplace, and government support. Our study helps to explain why poverty and marginalisation are perpetuated for generations.

Material and Methods

We conducted a qualitative study as part of the CAWS Project (Medel-Herrero et al., 2021), a multicentre study project aimed at better understanding stress and social stressors in agricultural workers and their families. Following approval by the UC Davis, Institutional Review Board (IRB), we convened 19 focus groups (FGs) involving 130 participants (95 women, 35 men) to gather information about social stressors and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies experienced by Latina/o agricultural workers and their families. Data collection was carried out between July 2019 and January 2020, during the last year of the Trump administration and a few months before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. FGs were carried out in Northern California (FG 1-6), the San Joaquin Valley (FG 7-12), and the Sacramento Valley (FG 13-19) where agriculture is a predominant industry. Participants were adults (+18), and the vast majority were agricultural workers (125 out of 130); 5 participants were not agricultural workers, but family members of agricultural workers (Table 1). Participants were not directly asked for their legal status as this could be perceived as invasive and threatening. Instead, legal status was inferred from the narrative when possible. All participants were residing in the US permanently. Therefore, no H-2A temporary agricultural workers were interviewed.

Co-investigators and staff from non-profit community-based organisations serving agricultural workers in the study areas facilitated the recruitment of participants. A convenience and snowball sampling method [Emmel, 2013] was used to recruit FG participants. This consisted in members of non-profit community organisations providing brochures and in-person oral information about our study to those farmworkers who approached their facilities in the weeks prior to the interview. Additionally, these potential participants were asked to contact other potential participants to spread the word and inform them about our study.

The FGs were conducted by two Latino researchers, male and female, in non-work settings, including public libraries, motels, and offices of community non-profit organisations. Participants were paid $20 in compensation for their time. All participants were Spanish speakers. Each FG session was audio recorded and later transcribed in Spanish (Table 1); a selection of statements that were most significant to the study goals were then translated into English and are included in this article.

Table 1. Characteristics of focus group (FG) sessions

	Area	Date	Number participants	length of interview (minutes)
FG 1	Northern California	July 2019	5 (M=0, F=5) *	26
FG 2	Northern California	July 2019	6 (M=1, F=5)	38
FG 3	Northern California	July 2019	4 (M=2, F=2)	15
FG 4	Northern California	August 2019	7 (M=1, F=6)	58
FG 5	Northern California	August 2019	8 (M=3, F=5)	47
FG 6	Northern California	August 2019	9 (M=0, F=9)	43
FG 7	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	5 (M=0, F=5)	45
FG 8	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	3 (M=3, F=0)	46
FG 9	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	5 (M=4, F=1)	35
FG 10	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	4 (M=1, F=3)	26
FG 11	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	5 (M=1, F=4)	60
FG 12	San Joaquin Valley	October 2019	4 (M=1, F=3)	33
FG 13	Sacramento Valley	November 2019	10 (M=5, F=5)	34
FG 14	Sacramento Valley	November 2019	10 (M=2, F=8)	42
FG 15	Sacramento Valley	November 2019	11 (M=2, F=9)	48
FG 16	Sacramento Valley	November 2019	9 (M=2, F=7)	54
FG 17	Sacramento Valley	November 2019	4 (M=0, F=4)	49
FG 18	Sacramento Valley	January 2020	9 (M=3, F=6)	54
FG 19	Sacramento Valley	January 2020	12 (M=4, F=8)	56
Total			**130 (M=35, F=95)**	**809**

* M=Male, F= Female

Two open, broad questions were used to begin exploration of social stressors in agricultural workers: "How has the current administration's immigration policy, including the DACA program, affected you and your family?" and "What factors contribute to creating stress in agricultural workers?" These questions were broad enough to engage participants in discussion of a wide range of topics. While participants were not asked questions on specific themes, moderators were free to inquire more deeply into topics that arose during the FG sessions.

The interviews were conducted by a PhD researcher with specific training and experience in social sciences and a graduate student. Because labour abuse and exploitation were a prevalent subject in all FG sessions, this paper focuses on participants' discourse on this specific topic. Thematic analysis, a common form of analysis in qualitative research [Braun & Clarke, 2021], was carried out to explore explicit and implicit meanings in the transcripts of the FG sessions. The researchers closely examined the transcripts to identify recurrent topics that emerged during the sessions. Such topics were labelled with a code and grouped together by theme. Multiple codes and themes captured perceptions and recurring experiences (Table 2). Qualitative analysis software (QDA Miner Lite) was used for thematic analysis.

Table 2. Categories and codes used in text analysis

Category 1: Working conditions, abuse, and labour exploitation	Category 2: Lack of opportunities
• Working conditions and labour exploitation • Verbal/physical abuse and dehumanization • Economic and health deprivation • Work-life balance, family deprivation	• Discrimination • Increasingly hostile behaviours against the Latina/o agricultural community

Table 2. Categories and codes used in text analysis			
Working conditions and labour exploitation			149
	Working conditions		85
		Work schedules, working hours	29
		Physically demanding job	18
		Bathrooms	10
		Access to water	14
		Lack of work and seasonality	14
	Labour exploitation		64
Verbal/physical abuse and dehumanization			20
Barriers to health and social support services			104
	Social support / participation in federal programs		40
	Health Services and Healthcare		64
Mental health, stress and fear			108
	Mental health issues /suicide		75
	Fear		18
	Psychological stress		15
Legal status			78
	DACA		53
	Work permit		18
	Not being able to leave and then return to the USA (no DACA)		7
Work-life balance, family deprivation			47
	Unexcused absence from work		10
	Double workload		19
	Family deprivation, lack of time to share with family/children		18
Discrimination and little appreciation			188
	Increasingly hostile behaviours against the Latina/o agricultural community		38
	Racism and hate incidents at schools		14
	Hate crimes /hate violence		14
	Racism from the government, administration		9
	Racism in the workplace		7
	Racism others		106

Results

Table 3 describes the demographic characteristics of participants in FGs 7-19. Demographic characteristics were not collected for FGs 1-6 due to an error in the planning of data collection. Participants were distributed relatively equitably among the different age ranges. Women (69.2%) and those born in Mexico (75.8%) accounted for nearly three quarters of the sample. Relatively few participants reported speaking fluent English (24.2%) and having done academic studies after the age of 18 (18.7%). Most participants had significant experience in agricultural work (77.9% had spent 4+ years in the fields) and few (9%) had arrived in the US for the first time within the previous 9 years (2010-2019).

Table 3. Characteristics of the participants in focus group sessions 17-19 (FG 7-19)

Age	18-29 30-49 50-69 Missing*	22 (24.2%) 35 (38.5%) 22 (24.2%) 12 (13.2%)
Gender	Male Female	28 (30.8%) 63 (69.2%)
School-leaving age	1 <13 2 14-18 3 19+ Missing	22 (24.2%) 39 (42.9%) 17 (18.7%) 13 (14.3%)
Country of birth	Mexico US El Salvador Missing	69 (75.8%) 13 (14.3%) 2 (2.2%) 7 (7.7%)
Spoken English	Not at all / Poor Intermediate Fluent Missing	37 (40.7%) 21 (23.1%) 22 (24.2%) 11 (12.1%)
Years at agricultural work	1-4 5-9 10+ Missing N/A **	19 (22.1%) 10 (11.6%) 48 (55.8%) 9 (10.5%) 5
Year of first entry into the US	1968-1989 1990-1999 2000-2009 2010-2019 Missing N/A (US-Born)	12 (15.4%) 21 (26.9%) 27 (34.6%) 7 (9%) 11 (14.1%) 13
Had left the U.S in the last year	Yes No Missing	18 (19.8%) 63 (69.2%) 10 (11%)
Total		**91**

* Number of missing cases.
** Not an agricultural worker but a family member of an agricultural worker

Labour exploitation and abusive practice

Study participants described their work experiences in the agriculture industry. These included long hours of strenuous work in adverse weather conditions, supervisors pushing workers to go beyond their physical capabilities, significant physical and psychological stress, and sleep deprivation. Although the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 initially excluded both agricultural workers and domestic workers, updated requirements for minimum wage now apply, as do both federal and California state requirements for water and workplace sanitation (Farmworker Justice, 2022). However, participants reported often being denied the statutory breaks, as well as access to water and shade areas and use of the toilets at the workplace. In addition, they reported not being provided with protective equipment or access to workers' compensation insurance, and being neglected when an accident occurred ("I hurt myself and the supervisor had no health insurance"; "we told the supervisor [I injured my eye while pruning and it became infected] and he ignored it").

Quote_#1 "It is their duty to give us glasses to cover the eyes, because it is very dangerous. When the branches are very large and you get crouching, you can prick them in an eye. And what do they do? They sometimes say, -Okay, we are not paying [workers compensation, a required no-fault medical insurance for work-related injuries] because, it was your fault- ... and the supervisors bring them [the glasses] in the trucks, huh... they do not want you to use them. .... I have heard that they say that the fewer expenses, the better" FG15 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley

Other recurrent issues in the participants' narratives include deplorable hygiene conditions at work, leading to infectious diseases and health expenses that are unaffordable for these workers and increase their financial stress.

Quote_#2 "And they barely let you go to the bathroom. And the bathrooms are very dirty ... To be OK with the supervisor or whoever, people put up with it. And that is very stressful for everyone, especially for women. Sometimes there is paper, sometimes not. The bathroom is too dirty. They do not care. And it is even worse in summer. It looks like it's going to explode! because they are full. Sick and tired! I go in and when I come out [feel] like vomiting, because it is very disgusting. Mhmm .... Sometimes I put up with [not going to the bathroom] until I get home. On two occasions I had to go to the hospital because I had an infection in the urine, in the bladder, because I did not go to the bathroom. Twice I went to the hospital, here. ... The first time they didn't let me go to the bathroom, and I put up with it all day, but at night I couldn't wait any longer. And then my husband had to take me to the hospital, and I got a bill [from the hospital] of $18,000. -Honey-, I said, -the world is over-. I wouldn't even pay that fortune by being reborn. You can't [urinate] in the field..., because there are many men [around]. And you get sick" FG15 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley

Participants are often paid in cash off the books by field owners/supervisors. The prevalence of an informal economy leaves workers vulnerable to labour exploitation. A wide range of informal economy-related workplace abusive practices were described by the participants, including income theft ("A week, $630. They did not pay me ... kneeling, cleaning the onions like this";"the contractor draws money from each envelope"), stolen hours, unpaid overtime and "under the table" payments to supervisors to get the best job positions, among others.

Quote_#3 "That stresses me out... the one who gives the gift..., the one who pays a certain amount... If you pay them, I think $100 or $200, the supervisor gives you a position on a machine [a desired position] It causes stress ... Why? I say, if I know how to do that job, why don't you give it to me? Why do I have to pay for it?" FG11 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. San Joaquin Valley

Participants also reported humiliation, verbal and non-verbal mistreatment ("They shout at you, humiliate you";"they don't let you speak. Imagine all day without speaking"), harassment, ridicule, and intimidation.

Quote_#4 "a supervisor told a man who was lame in one foot - why do you stay here? I need people who do not fail -. You know what he said? - I'm going to take you to immigration -. There are very abusive people who do that, threaten poor people with [reporting them to] immigration". FG8 Mexican-origin male, 50-65 years old. San Joaquin Valley.

Quote_#5 "It happened to me that there was nothing to do at the moment ... - throw away the garbage that you have already collected and put it back together. I do not want to see you stop for a minute -... I felt like an animal, discriminated against" FG14 Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley

Direct spraying with pesticides were among the most excruciating abusive practices in the participants' narratives. This serious hazard has been reported for decades and yet it continues (Lee, 2020; Rogaly, 2021), despite being proscribed by US Environmental Protection Agency regulation (EPA Worker Protection Standard) as well as California state law (Reeves & Schafer, 2003; Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, 2020). These working conditions and severe abusive practices in California reflect the failed efforts of the State of California to guarantee workers' most basic rights.

Quote_#6 "The plane spraying us ... and they tell us: -No, it's not poison, it does not hurt you-. But do you think it does not hurt us? If it were not poison, they would not spray it, right? When you breathe you feel like it burns here [pointing to the throat and chest]" FG11 Mexican-origin male, 30-49 years old. San Joaquin Valley

Sexual harassment, perhaps the most aggressive and intolerable form of harassment, was also present in the participants' narratives. ("I come to work; I do not come to fuck"). Harassment, strenuous working conditions, excruciating abusive practices (such as spraying workers with pesticides), lack of hygiene, and low wages have potentially devastating consequences. These working conditions instil fear, cause anxiety and a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness, and contribute to weakening the already battered physical and mental health of these workers. Moreover, impunity for owners' failure to comply with the law, and the impunity with which workers are abused, unquestionably have devastating effects on workers' morale, self-esteem and ability to respond to these deplorable working conditions.

A persistent narrative about poverty, financial stress and uncertainty, together with the ever-present fear of deportation and of job loss ("they can fire you. Where are we going to look for a job?"), help to explain the impunity with which the supervisors or owners of the fields act, thus perpetuating labour exploitation and deplorable working conditions.

> *Quote_#7 "You are afraid… of not being able to feed your children. Then it is also one who accepts that they send you to do the work and pushing you as if we were donkeys. …one ends up dying faster, because of stress, because at work they are pushing you a lot. With all that you have behind, one is just dying faster. And you live in fear always and in the uncertainty. What is going to happen? What will happen? What's going on tomorrow?" FG19 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

When defending their right to health and safety, workers regularly face intimidation, harassment, and retaliation. Out of fear, participants often do not report inadequate conditions and violation of labour and safety laws to the authorities, and are consequently left without protection ("You are afraid… what they want you to do is advance at work, and not to complain";"People are all afraid to talk about their rights","The laws are fine, but they are not being applied ... and if you talk… -Goodbye-, they say"). Unsurprisingly, powerlessness and lack of a voice to defend their rights were overwhelmingly present in the FG sessions ("one feels stressed because one has no voice or vote";"-you are nothing for me, nothing but a number-, he told me";"They know that one is there out of necessity, and they abuse").

As illustrated in Quote# 1, 2, 8 and 11 and below, labour laws, work-related policies, and government agencies, even when present in the fields, do not ensure their basic rights.

> *Quote_#8 Yes, [toilets] were clean a week, they even smelled perfect. But for the next week, they [Cal/OSHA personnel] were already out of the fields and the bathrooms remained the same [dirty]" FG19 Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Undocumented workers are the main victims of this system that is unwilling or unable to protect them, leaving them to be perceived by owners and supervisors as a source of vulnerable, cheap, disposable and easily exploitable labour.

> *Quote_#9 "The supervisors know that one has no papers ..., more than once they also scare them. No, they do not give them the conditions they deserve, water, shade ..., ... they abuse and use that power they have. Because they know that they are not legally here" FG13 Mexican-origin male, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

> *Quote_#10 "If they know that you do not have papers, they take advantage of it, they tell you, -where are you going to? … You do not have other options-" FG01 Mexican-origin female, unknown age. Northern California*

Success in reducing or preventing work-related abusive practices and exploitation depends in part on the ability of workers and the active participation of the host government in asserting their rights. As illustrated above, participants' narratives suggest a lack of legal support regarding most basic rights, including protective equipment, workers' compensation insurance, access to statutory breaks, access to water, shade areas and toilets at the workplace, [Quote_#1] and payment for overtime [Quote_#2]. They report verbal and non-verbal mistreatment and harassment, including sexual harassment [Quote_#4], intimidation, and direct

spraying of pesticides on workers[Quote_#6]. This suggests persistent neglect by the government to address these ongoing problems, to protect these workers' rights, and to empower this community, compounded by an informal economy and an ever-present dread of deportation (see Quote #4, 14-19, 27).

> *Quote_#11 "[The supervisor that shouted at us a lot ... -talk to Cal / OSHA-… for those who have documents it is easier [to report] ..., but for those who have no papers [reporting] is harder]" FG19 Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

According to the participants' narratives, these abusive practices are the norm; only exceptionally do workers receive humane or decent treatment from the owners / supervisors ("there are ones who are good, because it has happened to me"). Participants reported that harsh working conditions made these jobs undesirable for other social groups ("I've never actually seen an American person in the fields"; "You don't see many Americans in the sun"), whereas their own limited job options forced them to perform unwanted jobs (Quote#_7,10,12) and to endure harsh working conditions in the fields.

> *Quote_#12 "If there was a bit of equality, it'd be different. Because one could get jobs that are better paid, and not necessarily in the fields" FG17 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

As illustrated above, a predominantly informal economy in agriculture, abusive working practices and conditions, the lack of enforced legal support, the impunity of the owners, the legal status of participants (which is a social construct, the result of political decisions), intimidation and fear, lead workers into situations of helplessness and vulnerability. The picture that emerges regarding participants' working conditions and abusive practices is disturbing, to the extent that participants make references to slavery and inhumane treatment ("We are not anyone's slaves", "and there they bring a riding-whip: -back, back-, and -hurry up, hurry up-", "[My aunt] was watched over with binoculars, ... as slaves"), often accompanied by an assertion of human rights ("we are human beings. They cannot treat us like this"; "we have a right to be respected and be treated like human beings", "I sometimes think they see us as animals").

The lack of job opportunities, miserable wages and unacceptable working conditions described above lead to deplorable living conditions. Participants' narratives on working conditions linked references to inhumane treatment and slavery not only to labour exploitation and abusive practices in the workplace, but also to deep deprivations, including economic, health and family deprivation.

Economic and educational deprivation

The participants' narratives overwhelmingly reflected day-to-day economic deprivation and poverty impacting the most significant social domains and basic needs, including food and shelter ("how many people aren't sitting on the corners asking for money? ...and working here [in the fields]"; "almost the whole month [working] just to pay the house rent. And how are you going to eat?"), education ("one of the two, you either give them studies or feed them"), and access to healthcare services for themselves and their families (Quote# 2,22,23,25), among other things ("now I'm helping my parents a little, if they didn't have my support, it would be difficult for them").

> *Quote_#13 "Here there are many people who may have to sleep even on the street... if you go looking for a house to rent, anyone here will tell you -yes, I have-, it's $500 or more. But, go see the house that they will give you to live in, and see if there is hygiene over there or if there is something fixed…, everything is a pigsty, it's a dump" FG8 Mexican-origin male, 50-69 years old. San Joaquin Valley*

Agricultural temporary work and income gaps from seasonal work were pressing concerns ("All the little money you could have earned [during seasonal work] you need to spend it later for the house rent, food, bills"). Poverty and deplorable living conditions were linked in participants' narratives to a lack of opportunities and, ultimately, to discrimination, institutional racism, stigmatisation, and negative social perceptions of this community. Participants frequently reported experiencing intense forms of racism as well as ethnic, origin-related, gender, age, language, legal and social status-related discrimination, suggesting that this community had to deal with a combination of discriminatory behaviours on a day-to-day basis. Many participants repeatedly

stated that age discrimination prevented them from finding new jobs in the agricultural industry. Intersecting discriminated social identities (such as origin, gender, and age in the quotes below) contributed to amplifying one another, creating cumulative disadvantages and vulnerabilities:

> *Quote_#14 "Even in the field they discriminate against you. ... I was looking for a better job, a job on the machines, in the grapes. And there is sexual harassment. They don't want to hire you because you're old. We went there, me and my daughter, and I went in first. I was fired in a week to give my daughter a job. And those are the machinists. They discriminate against you. I applied two, three times a year, and nothing. They don't have a job; they don't have a job. You know they do have jobs, because when I apply, they don't give me a job, but if my daughter applies, she is young and pretty, they give her a job" FG16, Mexican-origin female, 50-69 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Importantly, discrimination against these workers and their families was perceived to have worsened in recent years. Participants' narratives suggest that the US administration's racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric reinforced and encouraged immigrant and minority stereotypes, stigmatising this community and negatively shaping social perceptions.

> *Quote_#15 "They are convinced that what the administration tells them, well, Trump and his people [is true], that 'those people [immigrants] are stealing our jobs and they're taking away our welfare, food stamps, well, everything'... and it's a lie that they've created" FG03, Mexican-origin male, unknown age. Northern California*

As a result, hate incidents and fear significantly increased after former president Trump was elected ("they now are racists in the open because they feel supported by everything that the president says"), legitimating anti-immigrant sentiment and practices ("they judge us all, that we're all criminals"). Importantly, as perceived by the participants, an intentionally harmful immigration policy ("He [President Trump] is seeking by all means to harm us") led agricultural workers to decline participation in public programs and access to healthcare.

Importantly, the study participants, especially the women, focused their narrative on the impact that discrimination and living conditions have not only on them, but on their families, specifically their children. As illustrated below, the reported increasing fear, racism and hate incidents clearly have a potential impact on the health not only of these workers, but also of their families.

> *Quote_#16 "Many people stopped asking for help, SNAP assistance, welfare, because they see there is a threat that you would be a public charge and instead, they stop getting [the support] because of fear. They will be sick and not go to the doctor because, oh, they are afraid that they will have a public charge put on them and they won't be able to gain residency one day. And because of that people instead stay sick in their home. Or if their children are US citizens… they will not even ask for MediCal now. Because the children even now, supposedly, it will affect them if they ask for MediCal for their US citizen child" FG10, Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. San Joaquin Valley*

Additional obstacles to social mobility were identified in the participant's narratives, including education (e.g., Quote#12). Concerns about the US administration's attempts to rescind the DACA program and how these concerns impact children's academic achievement and future job opportunities, as well as a rise of bullying and hate incidents in schools that participants attributed to the anti-immigrant rhetoric, were recurrent topics during the FG sessions.

> *Quote_#17 "Our children are also scared… my son would give up. He'd say 'Well, I'm never going to get a license, I'll never do anything, because I don't have…'. But when that [DACA] program came it was like a light for thousands of students and then suddenly again now the threat" FG11, Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. San Joaquin Valley*

> *Quote_#18 "Yes, the hate that…the parents that support that man [President Trump] are transmitting it in their children, and they [the children] express all that hate in the school and are worsening everything" FG17, Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Overall, participants linked poverty with lack of opportunities and discrimination. Economic deprivation

prevents this community from accessing quality education and reaching university studies, in a country with little social support for the most disadvantaged. Discrimination (including threats to cancel DACA) and marginalisation that significantly impacted their education in different ways, including racism in educational centres and hate incidents, emerged during the FGs sessions. Additional structural obstacles impacting children's academic achievements, including psychological stress (particularly psychological stress attributed to their family's legal status concerns and living and working conditions) and lack of expectations of job opportunities, were reported by the participants themselves. Participants felt that such deprivation of labour opportunities and basic rights (among others, the right to decent treatment at work and a living wage, the right to decent housing, education and nutrition in a community that suffers high rates of food insecurity) were fuelled by experiences of prejudice. Significantly, some participants asked interviewers to film them at work as a way to challenge stereotypes, invisibility, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. These experiences and structural barriers were perceived as marginalising not only present but also future generations, effectively destroying any prospect of social mobility.

> *Quote_#19 "youth have dreams. And, with the negativity or the discrimination that is seen in the migration policies…. Um, I feel that invites more violence… I'm old now but the youth, um… no... it's like they lose track more easily and still some can go…they feel like, frustrated, and they're inclined more towards drugs, alcohol" (FG16, Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Women deserve special attention within this large and diverse community. Some gender-specific work-related issues were identified. As mentioned above, some participants experienced workplace sexual harassment (e.g. Quote #14). Moreover, according to the participants themselves, women have fewer job opportunities in agriculture than do men ("In winter there is no work, or suppose that there is, but it is mostly for men"; "You find nothing but temporary jobs because there is no work for women"). Additionally, gender gaps in sharing household responsibilities persist in this community. Therefore, as illustrated below, in addition to long hours of arduous work under harsh conditions, women participants frequently described having a double workload of agricultural work and domestic duties, being responsible for significant amounts of unpaid household labour and caregiving.

> *Quote_#20 "I have my mom who works in the field. And I see how she arrives from work very tired. It is a stress ... she gets up at two o'clock, three in the morning to do everything in the house, ... and be on time by the time they tell her they're going to pick her up. ... she is not aware of it, but the people around her are... women make food, wash, clean... they do everything. ...after they get up at three in the morning, they arrive at five o'clock in the afternoon ..., they still must do things in the house ... obviously she gets stressed. Because sometimes they are also stressed at work, that maybe supervisors are not treating them well, they are not giving them enough time to rest, or to take their lunch and ... in a certain way they get stressed at work, they have stress in the house ... it's as if it were a circle that goes back ... and it is so much that sometimes even people explode, of so much stress" FG18, Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Work-life balance and family deprivation

The study participants were Latina/o men and women at the bottom of the social hierarchy, for whom family support was crucial. Lack of workplace flexibility and basic public policies regarding, for example, affordable childcare and paid leave, to support the realities of working families' needs, were frequently reported by the participants.

> *Quote_#21 "We have a job that is not well paid. We look for a babysitter, leave half of your check with the babysitter. ... go to work so many hours and leave half for gasoline and the babysitter. And they do not take care of the children like we do" FG14 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Migrant or immigrant workers without local extended family support reported extreme difficulty coping with inadequate paid sick leave or flexibility in the workplace. Therefore, inadequate work leave was a big concern for participants, both scheduled leave ("You come back home at 5 and at 5 they close the offices where you must do some paperwork... if you insist…, they fire you") and unscheduled leave ("If this person feels bad..., bring another worker tomorrow"; "If the child gets sick ... okay, there is no work for you anymore"). As the

quotes below illustrate, difficulties in obtaining sick leave led participants to stay away from health centres for personal or family care (including childcare), significantly impacting workers' psychological distress and their family's health.

> *Quote_#22 "You get lots of pressure in the workplace. Sometimes not even during an emergency they give you [work leave permission]. ...my child has autism ... he has [therapy] once a week, but they do not give us work-leave" FG13 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

> *Quote_#23 "And they must understand us a little bit. ... particularly when there are parents who have special-needs children" FG15 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley*

As illustrated in the quotes above, issues related to children with cognitive disabilities and their needs for additional care emerged as a frequent topic during the FG sessions. Furthermore, the recurrence of this theme during the sessions suggests a high prevalence of children with cognitive disabilities in this community, which in the scientific literature has been linked to pesticide use (Todd et al, 2020). Autism and other cognitive disabilities in children are associated with significant forms of disability. Furthermore, the lifelong disability of these children constitutes a clear form of deep deprivation in most significant social areas (from health to education, through work, family and emotional life) from the earliest ages.

Severe time constraints were a major work-life conflict impacting this community, as reported during the FG sessions ("waking up the babysitter to give her the baby at 3:00 in the morning and get back home event at 9-10 at night"; "[Workers] only see them at night when they are sleeping.... Both children and parents suffer!"). Participants were fully aware that parental deprivation has potential consequences on schooling ("you do not have time to sit and tell them, -Let's see, did you do your homework? How can I help you?"), health ("Do you think you are getting home in the mood to cook healthy?"), and children's behaviour ("many [working] hours and you do not have time for the children ... they call our attention, sometimes, with bad behaviour"; "the gangs take advantage of it... Sometimes they even hit the children to push them to get into the gangs"). Parental deprivation led children in these families do less well from early in life, contributing to the marginalisation and vulnerability of future generations.

Family deprivation was especially pronounced among undocumented participants isolated from their loved ones and support networks (e.g. Quote #27).

> *Quote_#24 "people come [to the US to] improve their lives, but many people leave their relatives there. They have been here for years. The gentlemen and ladies leave their children, and… When do they see them? From there [the field] I make my money. I already paid the coyote, and I am sending [the children some money] every quarter or every month, but when will you have a physical interaction with your children?…[I am] just trying to improve their situation in Mexico" FG03 Mexican-origin female, unknown age. Northern California*

Health deprivation

As illustrated in some of the quotes above (e.g., Quote 2,6,7), participants were fully aware that discrimination, psychological stress, poverty, poor hygiene and harsh working conditions are real hazards that have a devastating impact on workers' physical and mental health ("How many people have died in these fields!"; "It is going to end your life, the [psychological] stress"). Heat stress, pesticide use and sleep deprivation were reported by participants as major hazards and causes of occupational fatalities ("And there is a lady who died pregnant by the heat [stress]", "get up early, and then drive [the car] one or two hours"; "you work on a tractor and you can even fall asleep, because you did not sleep [enough] at night").

Lack of access to healthcare services was also a recurring topic (Quote# 2,22,23,15), leading to significant problems even in California, a state with expanded medical aid (MediCal) and mandatory workers compensation coverage. Moreover, as mentioned above, increased fear of participation in public programmes and healthcare

services worsened health deprivation (Quote #16).

> *Quote_#25 "We had no money to pay the insurance. And I was going to get an insurance just for the child, not for me, and for him it was $1,400 a month. Our house rent was $1,000. Either we paid insurance, or we paid the house rent. So, we lasted almost a year without any type of medical insurance. I went to MediCal, and they did not give it to me" FG16 Mexican-origin female, 18-29 years old. Sacramento Valley*

Mental health and psychological distress were prominent topics throughout the narratives (e.g., quote#2,3,5,7,17,19,20,26,27) Participants expressed an understanding of the link between constant uncertainty and instability, lack of control over their lives and a sense of vulnerability, and their own and their families' mental health ("I got frustrated and was about to. . . I went, yes, I went to receive therapy because I didn't know what else to do";"I have two daughters and I have both in… therapy because of the same thing, the stress"). The use of psychoactive drugs to treat discomfort and to continue working was also described. The use of these types of drugs can potentially lead to substance abuse and addiction, which in turn has a devastating impact on major social areas (including family, work, income and health, to name but a few).

> *Quote_#26 "You need medicine… a medicine that gives you the strength to work harder. Or an energy drink…it's stressful…With some people [around] on medication…if you're not on medication…they [supervisors/owners] want you to have the same job performance as the ones on medication. … you cannot... It also stresses me out a lot to think that at some point I'm going to have a serious illness or injury and not be able to go to...Well, I wonder if I'll be able to go to the doctor, right? ... how am I going to pay all that money? And that stresses me out… or when you have been injured at work or whatever, you're not going to give the same work performance…" FG19 Mexican-origin female, 30-49 years old. Sacramento Valley.*

Many participants were immigrants escaping violence and extreme poverty, who then were frustrated by the hostile behaviour and poor living and working conditions in the US (e.g., Quote# 11, 17, 20, 26). This feeling was especially intense among those undocumented participants who had family members in Latin America and were unable to visit their home countries in the event of a family emergency – a source of deep tension and psychological distress. Several participants reported (usually while crying) experiences in which the death of a relative occurred or death was imminent, and they were unable to go to their country of origin to say goodbye because of their inability to re-enter the US.

> *Quote_#27 "Well, we cannot visit our families. Here we are just like enslaved. Work, work and just leaving the money here. Because what you work, well, here it stays" FG14 Mexican-origin female, 18-30 years old. Sacramento Valley.*

In summary, participants reported profound deprivation in the most important social domains. Furthermore, there are strong links between social domains, as each of them can potentially influence progress in the others. Therefore, economic deprivation, lack of formal education, family deprivation, and health deprivation all contribute to amplifying one another, creating cumulative disadvantages and vulnerabilities. For example, education is a strong predictor of health; less educated people report worse general health, more chronic conditions, and more functional limitations and disabilities (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Therefore, reported structural barriers to achieving basic and higher educational levels are expected to have an impact on participants' health. In turn, poor health is also expected to affect job opportunities and career achievements. For example, poor mental health of farmworkers' children (a recurring theme in participants' narratives) will affect their academic achievements and future employment opportunities. Economic deprivation and malnutrition are also important predictors of poor health and academic performance. Bullying can lead to physical and mental health problems. Inadequate work leave was a major concern for participants and had a potential strong impact on access to healthcare for themselves and their children. Parental pesticide use significantly increases cognitive disabilities in infants and children, including autism disorders. Parental deprivation has potential consequences on children's schooling, behaviour and health. These are just a few examples, there are countless links between different social domains that could be applied to the study participants.

Discussion

Participants provided a disturbing picture of systematic exploitation and abusive working conditions that they characterised as having profoundly adverse effects on themselves and their children. They described a labour system that relies on the precariousness of workers and their vulnerability, to exploit them. Some social problems reported here are not exclusive to the Latino community. As Kelkar (2016) suggests, the preservation of different pools of economically disadvantaged non-white labour at the bottom of the social hierarchy corresponds to a long historical process built on discrimination and distorted social perceptions that continues to manifest fully today.

Participants described profound deprivation in the most significant social domains. Labour exploitation, economic deprivation, health deprivation and lack of medical attention, among others, cause this vast community (more than 800,000 workers plus their families) to live in appalling conditions in California, one of the richest states in the world. Among the most devastating findings of this study are the participants' descriptions of the harm being done to their children due to their absences for prolonged work in the fields. The fear of losing future immigration rights precludes even US-citizen children from accessing healthcare and food support, and racism and anti-immigrant experiences are increasing in schools. The numerous comments by participants about children with special needs raises grave concerns about both social deprivation and pesticide exposures known to produce developmental harm (Todd et al, 2020). The deprivation of education and family care of the participants' children guarantees the availability of this cheap and vulnerable workforce in the future and perpetuates the racialisation of the labour force over generations (Rogaly, 2021; Kelkar, 2016). The anti-immigrant policies to intentionally discourage immigrants from participating in federal programmes for underserved communities, fostering racism from the US presidency itself under the previous administration (Medel-Herrero et al., 2021), exacerbated the lack of voice in the social and political arena and obstacles that prevent community members from reporting abusive labour practices. Oppression and sexual exploitation remain widespread. Consistent with our results, qualitative studies show that the vast majority of women in this population suffer sexual harassment, threats of rape and rape, and are fired after filing complaints (Kim et al, 2016; Waugh, 2010). Consistent with previous studies, our study participants also reported food and housing insecurity, deplorable housing conditions (Postma & Ramon, 2016, Heine et al 2017), sleep deprivation and a wide range of abusive practices. Extremely poor workplace conditions and quality of life have led social scientists to talk about the US agricultural industry employing modern forms of slavery (Kelkar, 2016; Perea et all, 2011; Rogaly, 2021; Wurth, 2018). Consistent with these authors, a number of participants used the term "slavery" and made references to inhumane treatment to describe their working conditions.

The narratives suggest that living and working conditions have not improved in recent years, but rather have remained stagnant or worsened in some regards (for example, participants reported an increase hostile behaviour against them in recent years). Participants' references to an increasing role of the state in coercion and oppression (Medel-Herrero, 2021) are significant. Our findings, consistent with a rise of anti-immigrant public discourse and draconian immigration policies (Medel-Herrero, 2021; Edwards & Rushin, 2018; USCCR, 2019) revealed a worsening of public support and workers' willingness to access public services and healthcare. In addition, some forms of agricultural labour exploitation and abusive practices have been reported for decades and yet continue (Lee, 2020; Rogaly, 2021). As an example of illegal and unacceptable treatment, participants reported direct contact with pesticides from aerial application, a practice proscribed by Federal regulation and California State law (EPA Worker Protection Standard; Reeves & Schafer, 2003; Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, 2020). Ongoing efforts to improve regulations and legislation have faced significant barriers (Farmworker Justice, 2022). The conditions in California reflect the failed efforts of a relatively progressive state government to address challenges in the agricultural industry today in the US. As agricultural workers in other US states, such as Florida and Texas, have fewer legal protection than those currently provided in California (Oxfam America, 2018), the labour situation in those states could be even worse. Furthermore, although lack of documentation is a major structural cause of poor conditions, human trafficking and forced labour in Georgia and other states have resulted in deaths among agricultural workers who were H2A visa holders (U.S.

Department of Justice, 2022)

Limited social ethical responsiveness to agricultural workers' living and working conditions is built on distorted understanding of our past and present history (Gonzalez, 2019). Changing social perceptions and addressing structural barriers are important. Efforts to increase visibility and raise awareness about these workers' situation include union and other initiatives based on consumers' choices to protect workers' rights. The United Farm Workers (UFW), a national union founded by the late Cesar Chavez and based in California, unites traditional labour organisation with community-based and consumer actions, focuses on both legislative reform and executive enforcement, and emphasises the dignity and the ability of each person ("Si se puede") (UFW). Additional examples include: a recent temporary boycott of strawberries by consumers in Greece that achieved a fair labour labelling certification system to attempt to improve working conditions; the successful campaign by the Immokalee Workers to have consumers demand fair practices for agricultural workers; and the Equitable Food Initiative, among others (Andreas, 2017; Castrejon, 2018; Burkhalter, 2012). These efforts are central to an ecological framework that incorporates national legislation as well as state and local enforcement efforts engaging workers themselves.

Study strengths and limitations

In general terms, samples and data collected for qualitative studies, including focus groups, are not representative of the entire study population. Although we did not reach the most vulnerable workers (including victims of human traffic, child workers, and indigenous populations) [Zawojska, 2016; Palumbo, 2018], the methods used succeeded in recruiting a group of individuals willing to share extremely sensitive information, for which we are grateful. The disproportionate inclusion of women in this study (69.2% of participants), while not representative of the workforce as a whole (women comprise about one fourth of the Californian agricultural labour force [Medel-Herrero et al., 2018]) may have enhanced our ability to understand gender-related issues in the workplace and impacts on families. Women agricultural workers are a crucial resource for families and for the rural economy, but they are traditionally discriminated against as key contributors and their living and working conditions are especially unfavourable. Agricultural women are frequently sexually harassed, bear the majority of the household and childcare workload, are overrepresented in seasonal and part-time jobs, and are often paid less than men for the same work (FAO 2011). The overwhelming load carried by women affords a better understanding of the impact of working conditions on the family. In our FG sessions, women showed keen interest in discussing the impact of racism and working conditions on their children, while this topic barely came up among men, who provided very little information about their children. The female perspective has many advantages, such as bringing to light the compound labour and sexual exploitation of women that are documented in the study. Although the study of the female perspective was not our objective in the present study, it is a fascinating and very important topic to which we would like to dedicate an article in the immediate future.

Overall, the FG is a widely used method to gather the social narrative in qualitative research. Listening to other participants is generally very motivating and constructive when the study participants create their own narrative. Moreover, as we used unstructured interviews to conduct our FGs, the two interviewers did not have a set list of topics to address or predetermined questions, but instead only two broad initial questions, as described in the Methods section. This ensured that the narrative was produced by the interviewees without interference from the interviewers. The group discussion, not the interaction between interviewee and interviewer, had the leading role in the emerging narrative. Some disadvantages to using FGs have been reported, and could be present in our study: for example, some participants may not feel comfortable expressing their opinion in front of others or may feel pressured to conform to the group consensus. The two moderators facilitating the FG sessions tried to create an atmosphere where participants felt welcome and safe, and encouraged all participants to participate in the discussion. The limitations and advantages of FGs have been described extensively in the literature [Morgan & Krueger, 1993].

Conclusion

There are over 800,000 agricultural workers out of a population of 39 million in California alone, to which must be added a difficult-to-estimate number of family members, affected by poverty and discrimination. This is a vast population living and working in dreadful conditions. Nearly half a million Californian agricultural workers are undocumented immigrants. The political and social construction of the "illegality" of undocumented immigrants constitutes an essential pillar to sustain the informal economy, marginalises these workers, and justifies their exploitation. Not surprisingly, the need for immigration policy reform has been repeatedly cited for decades (Castaneda et al., 2015; Medel-Herrero et al., 2021). An intersectional and holistic approach to understanding oppression and discrimination has been recommended (Nador, 2020; US EEOC, 2018). Our study suggests that economics, health, education, family deprivation, political and social discrimination, lack of freedom, isolation, and invisibility combine and compound one another in this large community, generating a structure of vulnerabilities, a systematic form of oppression that makes social mobility virtually impossible. A desperate need exists to improve labour and human rights for these workers. Consumer-driven interventions, unionisation, community-based worker engagement, and structural changes to immigration and labour laws are needed to advance civil rights.

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